

Panentheism and Monotheism in Judaism

Jordan Michels – September 2008

Most of us have been taught that Judaism is Monotheistic, perhaps the first great monotheistic religion and the prototype for the others that followed after it. We were taught that monotheism was the great leap forward from the Pantheistic world that came before and in which the early Hebrews were surrounded.

But mystics and scholars for thousands of years have pointed out is that Judaism at its core is not purely monotheistic but at its core may be more pan-en-theistic.

More precisely Judaism is not really theistic at all, as Judaism has no official theology or doctrine of belief about God, but rather focuses on how we should live, and what practices, observances and consciousness are most effective in creating that life.

Some might say our lack of an official theology is because of our love of argument. But it is more fundamental than that. The ancients understood that uncertainty and doubt are essential elements in our wrestling with God awareness.

Both Monotheism and Panentheism in their pure form have spiritual pitfalls that can become obstacles on our journey to become more holy and bring more holiness into our world.

A Jewish approach is not an attempt to prove monotheism or Panentheism right, but from a psycho-spiritual perspective see how these philosophies might complement one another. In this way Judaism can actually paradoxically utilize more than one theology simultaneously.

Monotheism is the belief that there is one God and it is separate from us. God is Omnipotent and controls the world and us.

Monotheism offers to us a god to whom we can personally connect, a god that hears us, and at least theoretically, one that we can hear.

Monotheism is emotionally satisfying. This is essential as it is only through the heart that our passion for holiness can arise.

The problem is that in comparison to this God of monotheism we are at the best small and insignificant, at the worst we are just pawns in some greater plan. There is an old Calvin and Hobbs comic where Hobbs asks, “Do you believe in God?” Calvin’s reply is, “Well, *somebody’s* out to get me.”

Rabbi David Aaron, teacher and author of Kabbalah, points out some of the problems of monotheism. He states that such an unequal relationship between God and human leads inevitably to jealousy and anger towards God. In turn these emotions result in feelings of guilt that we are unable to feel pure love of God.

We employ three strategies to reduce this conflict.

1. Denial of self where-by we experience ourselves and our lives and meaningless. We seek to fill the void with temporary highs and external entertainment and addictions.
2. Denial of God or atheism where by we no longer recognize a greater purpose and oneness to our lives.
3. Egotism, a futile attempt to make ourselves bigger on a more equal footing to God. But no matter what we achieve or become we are left with a nagging emptiness and feeling of smallness.

Panentheism is the belief that all is within God. This is not to be confused with pantheism, the idea that all is God.

Pantheism says that everything is God, and therefore exists as separate divine beings. Rav Kook expresses Panentheism with the term, *The all inclusive oneness*.

Rabbi Aaron puts it this way, *All are included within God. You and I are distinct and other than God, but nonetheless absolutely one with God. There is a distinction between the human and the Divine, but no dichotomy or separation. There is just a mysterious oneness that includes multiplicity and otherness while remaining one...*

The one universal central prayer of Judaism, the Shema in saying, *Adonai Elohenu Echad, God is one*, does not mean that there is but one God, but that there is only the One and *all* is within it.

Panentheism raises the stakes. Being a part of the One, the ecstasy of merging with the divine is very real. But in the experience of separateness we are not just small and relatively insignificant as in monotheism, but we don't even exist outside of God.

But within God, we are made of God substance and are one with the past, present, and future potential of the creation and consciousness itself. We are both participants and creators of the unfolding drama before us.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner suggests this concept of God is expressed by the tetragrammaton, *Yod, Hey, Vav, Hey. The Holy One of Being. The ineffable name of Being... A name that ... cannot be pronounced. Beheld but not spoken... With this one we do not talk. There is nothing to say.*

...the one of becoming properly doesn't even have a name... 'And they ask me, "What is your name?" what shall I answer them?' And God said to Moses, 'Ehyeh asher Ehyeh' Not the "present" and static "I am that I am"; or even the dynamic future, "I will be who I will be"; but the yet imperfect... "I am not yet who I am not yet." Here at last is the ability to imagine that we might become other than we now are... I am not yet."

Such a panentheistic notion of God also has its dangers. It is impersonal and abstract. It easily gets distorted into a pantheistic notion, where all parts of the creation are equal but separate gods which are always in danger of a battle of their strength and will.

How then do these two seemingly opposing views of God coexist and complement one another in our god wrestling.

Even our beloved Schema, our statement of oneness, contains two names for God. YHVH, the panentheistic name and Elohenu the monotheistic name.

Rabbi Kushner says, *At the beginning of religious consciousness is a God who is very much like us (or at least like we would like to be) and deals with us accordingly. With a God like this you make a covenant. This is the one called Elohim.*

Rabbi Aaron suggests that monotheism was an important evolutionary step in the teaching and transmission of Judaism. Similarly, monotheism may be an important step in our individual understanding of the divine. As we mature and become more comfortable with uncertainty concepts like *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* become more palatable.

It does not matter how sophisticated our notions, it is impossible to stand before a God we can't see and talk to God without ears. It is the personal connection, what Martin Buber calls the *I-Thou* relationship, that has the power to transform.

In this way monotheism becomes a vessel for our Jewish Panentheism. I like to put as follows. Judaism doesn't believe in God, rather it believes in the value of conversing with God.