

REVELATION

Elliot N. Dorff

REVELATION IS NOT THE DAILY CONCERN of the modern Jew. It is not a central factor in his identification as a Jew, and it does not motivate him to act in any specific way. If anything, the subject makes him uncomfortable. He knows that the Bible maintains that Moses and other prophets received revelations, but this only heightens his sense of alienation from the religious part of his Jewishness. He associates claims to revelation with the uneducated and the unbalanced, and so Judaism is diminished in stature for him to the extent that it relies on revelation.

I too deny some parts of the traditional concept of revelation and withhold judgment on some other parts. But I want to claim that certain elements of the doctrine can and should be affirmed and that those elements are sufficient to forge our link with our tradition while yet accounting for our problems with the belief.

The claim to revelation generally involves an assertion that there are truths and laws which God imparted to human beings on specific occasions. The mode of communication can vary, but the most trustworthy revelations are those in which the message is clear and public and the recipients are alert and intelligent.¹ Some revelations contain information that we can confirm through reason and normal sense experience, and some consist of moral exhortations. The content of such revelations does not raise significant philosophical problems, but we still have questions about the mode of communication: we want to know why it was necessary to use revelation to transmit these truths or morals,² and we need to determine what kind of phenomenon revelation is in the first place. Other revelations proclaim truths or laws which reason neither affirms nor denies, and some contain assertions that contradict our reason and experience. Both the content and the mode of transmission of such revelations are problematic, and consequently they raise the question of authority most poignantly. Specifically, why should we believe and obey these revelations in

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¹ Maimonides (*Guide for the Perplexed*, Part II, chaps. 40-45) culls together the various modes of prophecy used in the Bible and assigns them degrees of veracity.

² Saadia Gaon (*Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, Prolegomena, sect. 4; chap. III, sect. 1 and 3) treats this issue well.

addition to, or in place of, the truths and norms that we learn through reason and sense experience? If we are taught that we should because their source is God whose knowledge and authority exceed man's, we may ask, in addition to any questions about God, how can we know that the purported revelation is in fact the word of God—especially since other cultures attest to conflicting revelations?

All of these problems, so common to the philosophic discussions of the Middle Ages, have been exacerbated in modern times. One factor is the increased intercultural contact of the modern period, for other cultures have conflicting ideologies and codes of practice which, in some instances at least, seem rather wise. The most important factor, however, has been the phenomenal triumphs of reason in the last several centuries in many fields of endeavor. These successes make one wonder even more about the necessity and authority of revelation.

is judaism possible without revelation?

BECAUSE OF THESE FACTORS, many Jews would like to evade the issue altogether, but that is not so easy. Judaism may well be a civilization, in Mordecai Kaplan's terms, but religion is the heart of that civilization, as Kaplan has himself stressed; hence, to identify Jewishly without ties to the Jewish religion is to fasten upon peripheral elements while ignoring the center. When we examine the Jewish religion, however, we find that revelation is at its core. Creation and acts of redemption like the exodus from Egypt are important manifestations of God's existence and activity in biblical theology, but the revelation of God to the Patriarchs and Moses is unquestionably the primary reason for believing in Him and in His special relationship to the Jewish People. It is also the principle justification for obeying the biblical commandments; the Torah does mention several rationales for Jewish observance,³ but by far the most pervasive one is simply that God commanded us to act in a specific way. This becomes stronger in Rabbinic literature: the Rabbis maintained that a person who acts in accordance with the Law out of a sense of being commanded is more meritorious than the one who performs the same act without being commanded to do so, and they said that a Jew should not try to

3 These include, negatively, human punishment for violations (e.g., Exodus 22); divine punishment of a physical nature (e.g., Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28); excommunication (e.g., Leviticus 20:4-5); and the sense of defilement that results from certain acts of disobedience (Leviticus 20:22, 25; Numbers 35:33-34). Positively the Bible encourages obedience through: promises of economic, political, and military success (e.g., Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28) and good reputation (Deuteronomy 4:6, 10:21); the challenge to imitate God (Leviticus 19:2, 20:7-8); reminders of our past and present social relationship with God and the debts we owe Him for His past favors to us (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:32-40, 6:20-25); the assurance that the commandments are inherently wise and recognized as such even by outsiders (Deuteronomy 4:6-8); and invoking our moral obligation to keep the promises that we made in forming a Covenant with God (Exodus 19:8, Deuteronomy 5:1-4).

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convince himself that he refrains from pork because he dislikes it but should rather say to himself that he would love to eat the pork "but what can I do in view of the fact that my Father in heaven has forbidden it?"⁴

Revelation is thus at the very heart of Jewish belief and practice, and any form of Jewish identification which ignores it does so on pain of losing much of its claim to being an historically authentic mode of Jewish expression.

Some Jewish philosophers have gone even further. Thinkers like Judah Halevi and Emil Fackenheim have pointed out that reason is common to all human beings and subject to error, and they have therefore averred that maintaining a distinctively Jewish pattern of thought and action can be justified only on the basis of revelation.⁵ I think that their claim is overdrawn because Jews, after all, are people, and considerations which apply to all human beings apply to Jews as well. There is therefore nothing surprising or unfaithful about the fact that Jews throughout the ages have sought to justify their pattern of belief and action in terms of factors that are common to all people. Those elements *are* part of the reason why Jews believe and behave as they do. Moreover, Jewish historical experience also functions as part of the rationale for Jewish belief and practice, and that history is unique to Jews. Consequently, revelation is not the only support for Jewish belief and practice even if the tradition understood it to be the prime one.

The question, then, is this: can we make sense of the doctrine of revelation so as to retain close ties to the sources and center of Judaism while still accounting for our philosophical problems with revelation?

the rabbinic transformation of revelation

THERE ARE TWO PARTS TO THE ANSWER. The first is to note that the traditional doctrine of revelation within Judaism is not nearly so simple-minded as one might have supposed, that it in fact anticipated and solved many of the problems which revelation entails for the modern. Consequently, we must first clarify the traditional Jewish conception of revelation in order to specify the extent and nature of the problems that remain. Second, we must try to formulate an approach to revelation which performs the functions of the traditional conception to the greatest extent possible and yet accounts for our continuing philosophic problems with it.

The Bible claims that God spoke to Moses and the Prophets directly and leaves open the possibility of future prophets. It even allows for the determina-

⁴ *Kiddushin* 31a, *et al.*; *Sifra* 93d.

⁵ Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*, Book I, esp. paragraphs 11-43; Emil Fackenheim, *Quest for Past and Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), chap. 4.

tion of legal questions through specific oracular experiences in addition to the more normal, judiciary mode.⁶

The Jewish tradition, however, is based upon the way that the Rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash interpreted the Bible (in contradistinction to the way that Christians, Moslems and sectarian Jews understood it), and the Rabbis modified the biblical position substantially. They claimed that revelation ceased shortly after the destruction of the First Temple.⁷ They even denied authority to revelations claimed by members of their own sect.⁸ In place of prophecy, they greatly expanded the judicial powers that the Torah had mandated, and they claimed that *their interpretations were the new and only way in which God spoke to mankind*:

Rav Abdimi from Haifa said: Since the day when the Temple was destroyed, the prophetic gift was taken away and given to the Sages. —Is then a Sage not also a prophet?—What he meant was this: although it has been taken from the Prophets, it has not been taken from the Sages. Amemar said: A Sage is even superior to a prophet, as it is said: "And a prophet has a heart of wisdom" (Psalms 90:12). Who is (usually) compared with whom? Is not the smaller compared with the greater?⁹

Similarly, they asserted that ideational matters should be learned through the method of Midrash Aggadah, the Rabbinic interpretations of the nonlegal sections of the Bible, rather than through revelation: "If you wish to know Him at whose word the world came into being, then learn the Aggadah, for through it you shall know the Holy One, praised be He, and follow His ways."¹⁰

Such claims obviously raise problems of authority and consistency and the Rabbis faced those issues squarely. They claimed that they themselves held the power to determine the content of revelation:

If the Torah had been given in a fixed form, the situation would have been intolerable. What is the meaning of the oft-recurring phrase, "The Lord spoke to Moses?" Moses said before Him, "Sovereign of the Universe! Cause me to know what the final decision is on each matter of the law." He replied, "The majority must be followed: when the majority declares a thing permitted, it is permitted, and when the majority declares a thing forbidden, it is forbidden . . ."

They rejected pleas for consistency, claiming that *both* the opinions of Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel were "the words of the living God" although they disagreed.¹² They obviously needed to come to a decision in legal issues, but

6 E.g., Leviticus 24:10-23; Numbers 15:32-36; 27:1-11; Jeremiah 17:19-27. For the judicial mode, cf. Deuteronomy 17:8-13; cf. Exodus 18 and Ezra 7:10, 25-28.

7 *Sanhedrin* 11a; cf. *Numbers Rabba* 14:4.

8 *Baba Metzia* 59b.

9 *Baba Batra* 12a.

10 *Sifre* to Deuteronomy 11:22.

11 *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 22a; cf. also *Baba Metzia* 59b and *Tanna d'Be Eliyahu Zuta*, chap. 2.

12 *Eruvin* 13b.

such decisions were based on majority rule and not on a denial of the revelatory authenticity of the minority opinion. In nonlegal areas, where a decision was often not required, they tolerated even greater inconsistency. Both the coherence and the authority of the tradition derived from the fact that Rabbinic laws and concepts were based upon the accepted, revealed text of the Torah:

Lest a man should say, "Since some scholars declare a thing impure and others declare it pure, some pronounce a thing to be forbidden and others pronounce it to be permitted, some disqualify the object while others uphold its fitness, how can I study Torah under such circumstances?" Scripture states, "They are given from one shepherd" (Ecclesiastes 12:11): One God has given them, one leader (Moses) has uttered them at the command of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He, as it says, "And God spoke all these words" (Exodus 20:1:). Do you then on your part make your ear like a grain receiver and acquire a heart that can understand the words of the scholars who declare a thing impure as well as those who declare it pure, the words of those who declare it forbidden as well as those who pronounce it permitted, and the words of those who disqualify an object as well as those who uphold its fitness. . . . Although one scholar offers his views and another offers his, the words of both are all derived from what Moses, the Shepherd, received from the One Lord of the Universe.¹³

In sum, the Rabbis greatly restricted the role of revelation in Judaism and modified the understanding of its operation as well. Only First Temple figures could be accepted as recipients of a genuine revelation. After that time, no report of a revelation would be recognized. The process of midrash replaced revelation—or, better, became the new mode of revelation—and the authority of the content of any given midrash depended upon its acceptance among the Rabbis and within the Jewish community generally.¹⁴

remaining problems with revelation

SUCH A CONCEPTION OBVIOUSLY SOLVES many modern problems concerning revelation. Jews no longer need to analyze the claims of purported modern prophets, with all the attendant difficulties in distinguishing between true prophets and charlatans and the discomfort of giving credence to apparently unbalanced people. Since the Jewish tradition rules out such prophecies from the beginning, it also escapes the chaos that continuing prophecies would introduce into the legal system and theology of Judaism. On the contrary, the Rabbinic use of midrash as the new form of revelation seems to provide a rather clever way of balancing the conflicting needs of divine authority and continuity on the one hand, and rationality and flexibility on the other. It bases the authority of tradition on the one accepted text of public revelation, the Torah, and it applies the combined communal wisdom of each generation to that text in order to discover its import in modern times.

¹³ Numbers Rabba 14:4.

¹⁴ Cf. Megillah 2a, Moed Katan 3b, Gittin 36b, Avodah Zarah 36a.

There are, nevertheless, two remaining problems that modern Jews have with revelation. First of all, the authority of the tradition still rests primarily on a rather mysterious experience at Sinai. Do we believe that such a communication took place? If not, how do we justify continued commitment to the ideas and norms that are traditionally based on belief in that event? Moreover, how are the interpretations of the Torah offered by rabbis in each generation the word of God and not simply the considered judgment of a group of men, however intelligent and well-meaning? So we still must face issues concerning the mode of revelation.

Second, we must answer questions regarding its content. On the basis of revelation, are we prepared to accept assertions and rules of conduct that our reason and experience do not require? What about those which seem contrary to our reason and experience? If we are not willing to accept either or both of these categories of truths and norms on the grounds of their revelational source, what is left of the doctrine of revelation, and in what sense are we affirming it?

a modern jewish approach

IN WHAT FOLLOWS, I shall attempt to formulate a view of revelation which both accounts for our modern problems with it and preserves much of the Jewish tradition. I will not be able to retain the complete sense of assuredness that the tradition had in the accepted revelation at Sinai, but I will try to make sense of the nature of revelation and locate the sources of its authority. In other words, I will face the problems even if I will not solve them completely.

I do not know what happened at Sinai. I accept the arguments of modern biblical scholars to the effect that the Torah itself is not a direct transcription of events at Sinai but rather represents a compilation of sources from a variety of time periods and places. Moreover, even if the Torah were a direct recording of the words spoken there, it would be a record by human beings according to their own understanding of those events, and that limits its credibility. As William Temple has pointed out,¹⁵ classical theories of revelation claim that we can gain especially authoritative knowledge about God and His will through a direct revelation from Him, but all of the major religions (even the fundamentalist ones) assert that that revelation must be *interpreted*. As soon as one says that, however, one has lost the claim to special authority that the revelation was supposed to afford because its interpretations will inevitably represent a *human* understanding of its contents. The Rabbis tried to get around that by asserting that at Sinai God revealed everything that all future Prophets and

¹⁵ William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1934), Lecture XII, pp. 304-18; reprinted in John Hick, ed., *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., Second Edition, 1970), pp. 271-81.

Sages were to say in interpreting and applying the text,¹⁶ but they admitted that even scriptural verses were capable of many interpretations and that the content of the Oral Tradition was no longer clear beyond dispute and indeed had not been so from the time of Hillel and Shammai.¹⁷ So we are back where we began: even if the tradition originated with an initial revelation at Sinai, we have in hand only human interpretations of the content and import of that revelation—and a flawed record of those interpretations at that.

These considerations lead me to the following position:

1) I would want to claim that man's moral, intellectual, and aesthetic *faculties* should be viewed as a touch of the divine within man because those faculties distinguish man from the animals.¹⁸

2) I would also want to claim that the structure of the world is an objective base which sets a limit to possible alternatives in thought and practice and which serves as a criterion for the evaluation of any philosophic or moral code; and since I hold that the world was divinely created in the sense that its creation involves powers beyond our control, I would be willing to say that God informed us about Himself and the world and gave us the Law in an *indirect* way, i.e., by creating the world in such a way that certain formulations of thought and practice fit the pattern of creation much better than others.

3) I would aver, however, that the specific *content* of man's theological ideas and codes of practice is of his own creation and hence is subject to error and change. I would agree with William Temple's analysis¹⁹ that revelation occurs in events *which human beings interpret to be revelatory* of truths or norms of conduct, and therefore any event could be a source of revelation, although some may be more impressively so than others. I would also want to stress that, within Judaism, it is the Jewish community of the past and present which decides which events are revelatory and what the content of that revelation is, and that this communal check prevents revelation from being simply the figment of someone's imagination.

4) In line with this, I would interpret the Oral Law as many do in the Conservative movement, i.e., as the common law tradition that accompanied the Written Law and gave it flexibility and vitality. As such, the tradition purporting that God gave the Oral Law at Sinai simply means that many of the

¹⁶ *Megillah* 19b; *Yerushalmi Hagigah* 1, 76d; *Exodus Rabba* 5:9, 28:6, 42:8; *Tanhuma Buber, Ki Tissa*, 58b.

¹⁷ *Sanhedrin* 34a; *Tosefta Hagigah* 2:9; *Sanhedrin* 7:1 (*Sanhedrin* 88b).

¹⁸ Genesis 3:5 makes this point specifically in regard to man's moral faculties, and man's naming of the animals is probably an indication that the Bible intends to give divine status to his intellectual faculties as well. Moreover, since God's creative activity in the Bible is centered not only in his formation of new elements but also in his differentiation of parts of those elements from other parts and the ordering of the distinct parts, the biblical notion that man is created in God's image probably refers to any of the faculties with which man creates or makes distinctions, including his intellect, body, and aesthetic sensitivities as well as his will.

¹⁹ Cf. note 15 above.

laws of the Oral Tradition are as old as those of the Written Torah, and we have ample evidence that such is the case.²⁰

5) I would then observe Jewish Law (i.e., Jewish Law would attain its authority for me) both because it is the law of my people and because of its own intrinsic wisdom as a program for satisfying human needs and maximizing human potential in the world as we know it. That entails a concerted effort to build the feelings of community and peoplehood among our laity so that they will feel the need to observe the laws of our people.²¹ It also means that when the laws are not wise, I must be prepared to change them in consort with the rest of the Conservative community, taking due regard of the weight of tradition in the process. Similar remarks would apply to Jewish ideology: I give special attention to biblical and Rabbinic theology because it is the rubric of my people's thought; I accept the main thrusts of that theology because I am convinced by them. The only modification is that I would tolerate and exercise much more individuality in regard to theology than I would in the area of Jewish law because, as the Rabbis claimed, the function of Jewish thought (Midrash Aggadah) is to make Jewish practice appealing to the individual,²² and therefore within certain broad bounds, many theologies can be, and historically have been, considered Jewish. In both law and ideology, then, the ultimate criterion of acceptance is our own reason and experience as Jews and as human beings: I do not believe that we have ever been privy to a clear vision of God's nature or will that could substitute for those.

This means that I am rejecting ideological and moral assertions based upon revelation which contradict our reason and experience. Fortunately, Judaism's reliance on an ongoing tradition has largely eliminated such conflicts anyway, and I would be interested in furthering that process of reinterpretation in order to circumvent any future conflicts.

On the other hand, my position does not necessarily entail rejection of those truth statements and norms on which reason and experience are neutral or indecisive. On the contrary, I would be interested in affirming the necessity to abide by the rationally unnecessary rules (*hukkim*) and the decisions of the tradition in rationally ambiguous areas because those are precisely the laws which identify the Jewish group most strongly, as the Rabbis recognized:

"Observe My judgments and carry out My statutes" (Leviticus 18:4). The Rabbis teach: "My judgments" are the things which, if they had not been written, would have had to be written, such as idolatry, unchastity, bloodshed, robbery and blasphemy. "My statutes" are the things to which Satan and the Gentiles raise objections, such as not eating pig, not wearing linen and wool together, the law of halitzah (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) and the

²⁰ Cf., for example, H. Albeck, *Mavo La Mishnah*, chap. 2; M. D. Cassuto, *Perush Al Sefer Sh'mot*, pp. 180-82.

²¹ One promising suggestion for that was proposed by Rabbi Harold Schulweis in his article, "Restructuring the Synagogue," *Conservative Judaism*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4 (Summer 1973), pp. 13-23.

²² *Shabbat* 87a; *Yoma* 75a; *Hagigah* 14a; *Mekhilta*, *Beshallah*, *parashah* 5.

*scapegoat. Should you say, "These are empty things," Scripture adds, "I am the Lord," implying, "I have made decrees; you are not at liberty to criticize them."*²³

So, for example, the particular choice of animals for kosher eating is probably not explicable on rational grounds, but I would support that choice because it is the accepted practice of my people.²⁴ For the same reason, I would accept the Jewish civil code even though ample reason could be found to support other conventions. The identity and character of a society is largely a matter of its particular style, and I would not want to neglect that in affirming rational criteria for judging the content of revelation.

6) The view of revelation that I have just outlined affords us the opportunity to make a serious knowledge claim for revelation. Philosophers from Descartes on have recognized that our sensations of the physical world are private to each and every one of us. As a result the mark of objectivity and truth in every area of human thought has been that a given proposition withstands intersubjective testing. Revelation is usually given to an individual, however, and hence it has been intellectually more suspect. In fact, Buber thought that encounters with God can have no epistemological value whatsoever because they are so private to the two parties involved.²⁵ Medieval Jewish philosophers tried to bolster the epistemological authority of revelation by emphasizing that the central revelation in Judaism occurred before 600,000 people, but David Hume and others have raised plausible doubts as to the veracity of the witnesses and their reports.²⁶

It seems to me, though, that the Rabbinic approach to revelation is a much more effective answer to this epistemological challenge through its strong commitment to a communal tradition. For while the Rabbis claimed that everyone standing at Sinai interpreted this event according to his own understanding²⁷ and that there could be differing opinions regarding God's revelation which are all "the words of the Living God,"²⁸ they nevertheless maintained that the revelation had to be mediated through the Rabbis so that there would not be multiple Torahs.²⁹ In other words, just as intersubjectivity serves as the criterion for objective knowledge in regard to our experience of

²³ *Yoma* 67b; cf. *Sifra* 86a.

²⁴ There are several anthropological and historical explanations for the choice, but that is a different matter. Please note that I am not here talking about the decision to restrict the animals available for eating: that may be justified rationally as a device for teaching the sanctity of life. I am rather talking about the choice of animals to permit or forbid.

²⁵ Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), chaps. 2-5; "Replies to My Critics," in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber* (Paul Schlepp and Maurice Friedman, eds. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1967), p. 692. I owe this reference and much of the stimulation for this section to Rabbi Neil Gillman.

²⁶ E.g., Halevi, *Kuzari*, Book I, paragraphs 83, 86, 88; Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, Part II, chap. 35. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X.

²⁷ *Exodus Rabba* 5:9; *Pesikta Kahana*, ed. Buber, pp. 109b-110a, ed. Mandelbaum, pp. 223-24.

²⁸ *Eruvin* 13b; cf. *Abot* 5:20.

²⁹ *Shabbat* 31a, *Rosh Hashanah* 25a-b, *Sotah* 47b.

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the physical world, so too there is a requirement in Judaism for an intersubjective testing of any reputed revelation. Thus revelation can attain a degree of objectivity and confirmation. The mode of verification of the knowledge we gain by revelation is simply whether the community and the representatives of its tradition (the Rabbis) accepted the revelation in question, and the method of falsification is through the community's rejection of the proposed revelation. This is the process of midrash, through which the community shares, interprets, modifies and either confirms or repudiates interpretations of our ongoing encounters with God. Given that process, Judaism can make a warranted claim to knowledge.

7) The position that I am taking captures much of the practical import of the Jewish tradition. The Bible itself equivocated as to whether even Moses could experience God directly.³⁰ It did claim that God revealed His *will* to Moses—a belief in which the Rabbis concurred—but the Rabbis were careful to limit the scope and authority of any other revelation, as we have seen. Instead, it was the midrash of the Sages on the Torah that was to be the basis of all Jewish law and thought. In this process, the Rabbis were interested in preserving a sense of continuity, and they certainly did not treat the Torah cavalierly or wantonly, but they were also aware of the changes that had occurred in the tradition and their role in introducing those changes. Consequently, since I too have emphasized the role of the community in determining the identity and content of revelation, and since I too would want to stress the importance of introducing new laws and thoughts as midrashim on the classical texts in order to preserve a sense of tradition and rootedness, one who operated with my view of revelation would probably treat the classical texts in much the same way as the Rabbis did.

8) Having said that, I still must declare openly that my view differs from theirs in regard to the origin and reason for the authority of those texts, and this raises two questions. First, why do I maintain the concept of revelation at all? If the term as used in Judaism normally denotes a communication of truths and norms by God to man, and if I am hedging on affirming belief in such an event and seeking instead to explain the authority of Jewish ideology and practice in other terms, then why bother to assert the concept at all? Second, have I not gone beyond the appropriate limits to the reinterpretation of the concept in claiming that what I have described is still revelation even though I admit doubts about the nature of the original experience at Sinai?

In answer to the first question, I must admit that my initial motivation for maintaining a doctrine of revelation is that it is deeply embedded in the tradition which I cherish. In and of itself, that would not suffice to commit me to the notion of revelation because where necessary I am prepared, as I have

30 Compare Exodus 34:11 and Deuteronomy 34:10 with Exodus 34:17-23.

stated, to revise ideas and laws in consort with the rest of the Conservative community, just as the Rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash did in their community on many occasions. But in this instance I prefer to retain the concept because even though for lack of knowledge I must suspend judgment as to what actually happened at Sinai, there are elements of the texts attributed to that event which induce me to attach a divine quality to them. These include their scope, their inherent wisdom and especially the demonstrated viability of the tradition which they fostered over the centuries and throughout many regions of the world. This clearly does not mean that Judaism's understanding of life is the only possible one. There are obviously other traditions which claim similar authority for their philosophies of life and which have undergone a long period of intersubjective testing, too. Judaism itself recognizes the existence of prophets and saints among non-Jews and does not require Jewish belief or practice of non-Jews, even with regard to attaining a place in the world to come. But the amazing adaptability of Jewish law and ideology does indicate to me that Jews have apparently hit upon a pattern of life and thought that fits the structure of man and nature well—so well that I doubt that it could simply be the product of human minds. Consequently, although I cannot unequivocally affirm or deny belief in a verbal communication at Sinai, I do want to claim that the Jewish tradition embodies a degree of foresight, insight and sheer wisdom which is abnormal for human beings, even especially sensitive ones, and that in this sense at least it is a revelation of divine (superhuman) truth and will.

This leads to the second question: is this near enough to the traditional notion to warrant the term "revelation," or am I abusing the term? That, of course, is a matter of judgment. Fundamentalists and those who tend toward that direction will be dissatisfied with this interpretation because it does not provide the kind of absolute assurance that they seek; on the contrary, my account demands recognition of the doubts that surround the initial event at Sinai and the complex changes that have occurred since then. It also demands judgment in responding to those changes and tolerance of a variety of opinions as to the identity of "the words of the living God" in any age. That is probably not the biblical tradition,³¹ but it is the Rabbinic tradition on which our Judaism is based. Consequently, despite the fact that my doubts about the original event are greater than those of the Rabbis, I feel comfortable in calling this an account of "revelation" because I am not denying such a communication outright and I am affirming virtually everything else that they included in their concept.

³¹ Since the Bible assumes continuing revelation, it never records decisions made by communal deliberation. On the contrary, several questions are answered through direct revelations (Leviticus 24:10-23; Numbers 15:32-36; 27:1-11); even the elders were assumed to exercise their leadership and judicial functions through the agency of the divine spirit (Numbers 11:16-29); and tolerance of other opinions was not a common characteristic of biblical kings and prophets.

Since the process of revelation is a pervasive element in our tradition, and since it serves as the principal medium for the transmission of God's authority to that tradition, we must come to terms with it, however problematic it may be. I have suggested that the Rabbinic understanding of revelation goes a long way toward alleviating our problems with it, and I have described my own adaptation of that position in an attempt to account for further questions and in order to provide an overall philosophy of revelation. My approach is clearly not the only possible one, however, and I would encourage other suggestions for treating this important element of our faith. Ignoring the issue, as we have largely done, simply will not suffice.

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