

## Can We Excommunicate God?

*April 30, 1965*

*The title of this sermon reflected Rabbi Beerman's willingness to ask provocative questions of his congregation—and of his own theology. He used the opportunity to express his support for a Reform rabbinic colleague, Sherwin Wine, who left his congregation in Windsor, Ontario, in 1963 to form a new temple in Birmingham, Michigan. At the heart of this initiative was the decision to excise the word “God” from the community’s liturgy, a move that brought cascades of condemnation down on Rabbi Wine, including from prominent Reform colleagues. Wine would go on to establish the Society for Humanistic Judaism in 1969 as a reflection of his belief in the power of secular Jewish culture.*

*Beerman, for his part, affirmed that the guiding spirit of Reform Judaism was intellectual autonomy and the resistance to fixed dogma. He further noted that leading Protestant thinkers such as Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the Englishman John Robinson bore a similar spirit by fearlessly inquiring into questions of God’s existence. Intellectual integrity demanded this spirit of inquiry, Beerman suggested. So too, he argued, did the impulse to overturn oppressive racial and sexual hierarchies, as he made clear at the end of his sermon.*

This evening has to do with controversy. If nothing else has tutored me, coming from Leo Baeck Temple would have served the purpose. I have become no stranger to controversy, and I have learned along with you the obvious truth: when argument enters a household, reason is usually the very first to be offended and to take its leave. This seems to be a universal principle. Now all of this happened while we were away from you. While we were walking the streets of Jerusalem, where life is tranquil and the only excitement is an occasional burst of gunfire

a few hundred yards away at the Jordan border, there were some fearful noises being made in the American Jewish community over a controversial rabbi in Birmingham, Michigan. Two of our senior colleagues, Rabbi Solomon Freehof and Rabbi Jacob Weinstein, both of them distinguished leaders and teachers and deeply revered and respected by all of us, delivered themselves of denunciations of young Sherwin Wine and his congregation. Rabbi Freehof, in somewhat melodramatic fashion, is quoted as having said: "We must protect the Jewish community against this deception which will draw in innocent children and unsuspecting elders." Rabbi Weinstein contended that "there are certain inarticulate premises in every tradition . . . God is the major premise of Judaism. A synagogue without God is only a meeting place, and a rabbi who rejects the term because it is not precisely defined, becomes an ethical culture leader." "Excommunication," Rabbi Weinstein continued, "is not in the spirit of Reform Judaism. Rabbi Wine should not be defrocked, but he ought to have enough *derech erez* (good manners) to consider himself unsuited for the rabbinate. In excommunicating the term God from the Prayer Book, he has separated himself—casting off the mantle woven by God-intoxicated men who for three thousand years have flung into the very teeth of adversity the battle cry 'I will live and declare the greatness of my God.'" Other rabbis and laymen joined in the denunciations in language much more intemperate, sanctimonious and self-righteous than that of Rabbis Freehof and Weinstein. And still others rose to the defense. Rabbi Daniel Friedman, Rabbi Weinstein's assistant, was one of them. There were several here in the Los Angeles area. In New Haven, my friend Rabbi [Robert] Goldberg had this to say: "Rabbi Wine and his temple may be among the few in America to take God seriously—so seriously that they deny his existence. Yet such a move means thought and study, conviction and courage. Our people all should be reminded that such qualities in this era of conformity and self-righteousness are hard to come by—rare and precious in any age."

And then from this pulpit Rabbi Ragins, dealing with this theme some weeks ago, strongly and cogently defended and explained the right of the rabbi and his congregation to hold fast to their position and to be included legitimately and honorably within the framework of Reform Judaism. We may not be ready to follow the path they have chosen, but the freedom of Reform Judaism, its abhorrence of fixed creed and dogma, leaves the conscience of the individual as the ultimate seat of authority about the content of his Judaism. This is a right not vested in any established tradition. We left such orthodoxies behind us when we chose to accept the daring and treacherous path of individual freedom. We have staked our honor on the mind of man in quest for a truth not fully realized rather than on the mind closed, fixed, determined, an obedient servant of that which has been received. We are not always pleased with the consequences of adhering to our affirmation of freedom but we are surely not ready to trade that displeasure for the horror of that tyranny over the mind, that obscurantism which would result from the abdication of the freedom for which we have so desperately struggled.

I suppose members and rabbis of congregations thought the land would have been less perturbed if Rabbi Wine had kept his opinions within the borrowed walls of his own temple. Surely Rabbi Wine is not the first rabbi to have doubts about the Jewish idea of God, nor am I. But his doubts have led him to an attempted kind of semantic purity. He and his congregation agreed that they must be openly honest about the confusion which the word God evoked in them, and rather than be confused, they preferred to eliminate the word altogether.

Their confusion about God and their elimination of God language should have come as no surprise to any educated and informed religionist. Our shock, our surprise, is, in a sense, a mark of the poverty and ineffectualness of theological discourse in our time. The theologians of our time must obviously operate in a very secluded and isolated realm. Having neither killed nor molested nor stolen anything worthwhile, having waged no cruel wars far from home, nor organized sit-ins or marches to dramatize their plight, and having been exiled to an occasional early Sunday morning or Sunday afternoon on television—the word has simply not gotten out—we have been passing through a time in which the old forms of belief show a structural fatigue or hardening of the arteries, and new forms of belief are struggling for some kind of definition. Churches and synagogues are apparently the last places on earth to become aware of this. They have only rarely been a place where people gather to think and feel seriously about God and man. Theologians at least try. For 200 years they have been arguing with one another endeavoring to relate the methods and results of science with regard to the world in which we live, to the inherited notions of God and man. The Michigan congregation has eliminated language about God from its prayer book. In so doing they have taken the theologian seriously.

Why all of this? We obviously cannot go into all of the reasons this evening. But first of all let us understand that we have been living through a time in which there are few intellectual frames of reference in which the idea of God is particularly advantageous. This was not always the case. The word God, the idea of God, had an honorable status in the intellectual schemes of the great philosophers of the past—Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Spinoza and others. No major philosophic system of today seems to find God particularly useful. This death of God, as the theologians call it, or this eclipse of God, has been a terrible burden for the theologians to endure. Christian thinkers in particular have been very troubled and sensitive to the demands they feel have been imposed upon them—to construct a relevant, intelligible contemporary theology. The Bishop of Woolwich, John Robinson, has almost succeeded in popularizing this theological discussion in his book, *Honest to God*. The Bishop is also concerned that the traditional concept of the deity has no meaning for modern man. Using popular language he says that the Bible speaks of a God “up there” and a three-decker universe consisting of the heavens above, the earth beneath, and the waters under the earth. That all of this was outmoded by contemporary cosmology; that the mental image of an old man in the sky has

been gradually replaced, and instead of a God up there, we then accepted a God “out there.” But that now even *this* image has lost its validity; hence the danger that man has and will discard entirely the belief in God. Drawing on the works of two significant Protestant theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a courageous German martyr who was hanged by the SS and whose *Letter and Papers from Prison* created a stir when they were first published in the early 1950s, and also on the works of Professor Paul Tillich, Bishop Robinson transposes God from the heights to the depths. It was Tillich who said, enigmatically for many: “The question of the existence of God can neither be asked nor answered. If asked, it is a question about that which, by its very nature is above existence, and therefore the answer, whether negative or affirmative, implicitly denies the nature of God. It is as atheistic,” Tillich contends, “to affirm the existence of God as it is to deny it. God is being itself. God is not a being.” So too with the Bishop. It is not the God up there or out there for him. He concurs with Tillich. He finds God as the very ground of all being—the ultimate reality—all language about God is in the realm of the symbolic.

As for Bonhoeffer, his work suggests that he was much more radical. The fragments of his thinking which have been made available and which have been having such a profound effect on theological thinking indicate that he too had misgivings about the traditional theistic intellectual apparatus. He said that the idea of God and the word God are dead. That the supernatural and characteristic theological use of the word God cause[s] troubles. He felt that the word God could be abandoned. He advocated a religionless Christianity even as he, like so many of us, cultivated the discipline of Bible study and prayer. He said that “the God who makes us live in this world without using Him as a working hypothesis is the God before whom we are ever standing.” Daringly and subtly he wrote: “God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without him.”

I am suggesting then that what has happened in Birmingham, Michigan, is but an expression of a larger theological quest as it has filtered into Judaism. That what it really involves is the confrontation of the contemporary religious thinker with the massive power of secularism. He knows that man is concerned with the here and the now, the tangible—that he pays only lip service to the transcendent. And he feels a compulsion, to be, in the words of the Bishop, honest to God and honest to himself.

This question of honesty, of an honesty, which knows no inhibition, is certainly a second aspect of the phenomenon we are discussing. In a totally different setting, but relevant to the problem before us, Robert Brustein, a critic of the *New Republic*, wrote of a radical change which is taking place in the American theater. Two insurgent movements figure prominently in this change. The one movement is the revolt of the Negro. The tremendous energies behind the Negro’s drive for freedom have been poured into an enormous number of militant plays. For all the nobility of the cause itself, many of these plays have tended to be self-righteous and melodramatic.

The second insurgent movement is the sexual revolution; it too has accounted for a number of dramatic works. The plays dealing with sex seem preoccupied with the exploration of bizarre experiences. A great many of them, according to Mr. Brustein, are experimental, playful, exhibitionistic, pseudo-religious and even fake. But he believes that it is out of these faltering efforts that the important drama of the future will be created. What these plays reveal is a commitment to some kind of totalism, the totalism of absolute honesty, a complete and often terrible openness about all that one sees and feels and knows.

The current debate on theology is neither racial nor sexual, but it is occasionally dramatic and powerful. It too reveals some of the same elements: it can be playful, exhibitionistic, pessimistic, very personal. And there is a terrible sense of urgency about it, a compulsion to be honest, frank, to expose the nakedness of doubt and despair. And it too has about it a kind of militancy and shrillness. It is the honesty about that which men preserved for the private world of this reflection that has been so upsetting. By and large these notions have not yet touched the living reality of the churches and synagogues, but increasingly we are going to be forced to take a long and painful look at ourselves. Perhaps without militancy and shrillness we shall have to examine what it is that we really are. Surely it is no secret among us that only an insignificant numerical fragment of this congregation, and all liberal Jewish congregations, think about God in their daily lives. We are clumsy at prayer, if we pray at all. We certainly give no indication of believing that being a Jew is a part of a divinely established plan, that we are, as our own neo-Orthodox theologians keep insisting, a part of the covenant community, subject to a divine commandment. Very few of us have heard God speak to them, or listen to them.

What is it that we must learn from this? It is to acknowledge honestly, openly, humbly that to be here, is to be a part of a community of those who doubt the meaning of their being here, to be a part of a great fellowship of uncertainty. And though we may be afraid of this, be afraid of the consequences of our doubt, we need not be ashamed of it.

We are not alone. Our doubt is the bearer of our integrity and our dignity. It is the expression of our freedom. It is out of that doubt that we shall fashion our own perceptions of the beauty of our heritage. It is out of it that some of us will shape the meaning of our God so that if we be moved to say our God and God of our fathers—we shall know it is really ours, born of our own gust.

#### COMMENTARY BY PROFESSOR RABBI RACHEL ADLER

The Talmud loved *makhloket*, dissension. It was the engine that fueled Talmudic discourse. The rabbis interrogated each other's reasoning, assumptions, and conclusions, recording and respecting even minority opinions. But rabbinic discourse had ground rules. So does discourse about baseball. Debating baskets and penalty shots relocates you to a different conversation.

What kind of God-talk puts you outside Jewish discourse? Many thinkers push boundaries. Maimonides is a Neoplatonist; Isaac Luria describes a tree of divine emanations. For Shneur Zalman of Liadi there is no cosmos; there is nothing but God. For Mordecai Kaplan, God is a process comprising all cosmic forces friendly to human flourishing. All these views affirm something beyond the human that is holy. Each ties its belief to Jewish texts, tradition, and practices. Absent these commitments, the conversation is no longer Jewish. All moderns sometimes doubt or despair. But once you say, like Elisha ben Abouya, “There is no justice and there is no judge,” there is nothing but despair.

What makes people risk themselves for others, for justice, is not doubt but certainty, and not despair but hope. Hope and faith led Jews like Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel to march with Dr. Martin Luther King and led Rabbi Beerman to the front lines of many principled struggles. Like the prophets he loved to quote, he had a powerful sense of what made God angry. Predictably, Rabbi Beerman and Rabbi Ragins uphold Wine’s right to differ, but that doesn’t make Wine’s atheism an authentic Jewish theology or a motivation for Jewish ethics. Nor is it likely to reproduce in future generations a Judaism as lively and substantial as that at Leo Baeck Temple.