

**FROM OUTER FORM TO INNER MEANING  
AND BACK AGAIN:  
THE METAPHORIC IMAGINATION  
IN JEWISH LEARNING**

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The claim that the neglect of the metaphoric imagination may be the major problem of Jewish education might strike many as rather esoteric — not the most pressing or practical issue. But such a view may reflect a notion of the real that is a symptom of the very problem being posed. A vision of education which does not see the transmission of information and behavior patterns as its only end will aspire toward the expansion of man's inner life of experience, principles, and conscience. Similarly, if the practices and beliefs of religious tradition are not to find their rationale and goal in behaviorism, sentimentalism, or chauvinism, then an invisible reality of responsible spiritual and ethical values will constitute their context of significance. But this presents a serious problem for modern religious education. For the prevailing modern consciousness apprehends only a supposed matter-of-fact, common sense, immediate reality. The symbolic mode of thought is foreign to practical man.

This paper explores some aspects of a Jewish metaphoric consciousness by locating them in the universal spiritual imagination. A comparative phenomenology of the fully symbolic or sacralized worldview with the fully literal or desacralized attitude will be developed, and will lead to an argument for combining both experiences in a perception that is simultaneously symbolic and spiritual, on the one hand, and prosaic and secular, on the other.

### The Sacralized World as Metaphor

What perhaps most characterizes mythopoetic or religious man is his metaphoric imagination. Behind forms he sees meanings. Behind natural appearances he encounters spiritual values. Every external phenomenon bears him (Greek, *pherein*) to an inner reality behind or beyond it (*meta*). The Israeli poetess Zelda has written: "Every rose is an island of eternal peace."<sup>1</sup> The Midrash states: "Every blade of grass has its star in heaven."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is sometimes suggested that this ability to discern the inner value-meanings of things is what most distinguishes man from the other creatures.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the great master of metaphor, Maimonides, understood man's uniqueness and highest purpose: "The realities that have no material form are not visible to the eye, but only through the eye of the heart are they known, like we have known the Master of All without the seeing of the eye . . . . And this is what is meant in the Bible, Let us make man in our image and in our likeness — in other words, that he should have a spirit that can know and attain the values that have no material form until he becomes like them."<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Carlyle also saw man's divine likeness in his ability to "extend down to the infinite deeps of the invisible" through the symbolic imagination.<sup>5</sup> The metaphoric vision — whether of early man, a child, *homo religiosus*, the poet-artist, the interpreter of dreams, or the anthropologist-critic of culture and its media — pierces through outer forms and appearances to behold the significance of ultimate human value, whether emotional, existential, ethical, philosophical, political, or spiritual. In his essay on "Myth in Judaism," Buber describes mythic consciousness as involving "a heightened awareness of experience as a signum of a hidden

1 Zelda, "Every Rose," *Shirim* (Poems) (HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, 1979), 39.

2 Genesis Rabbah 10:6, and quoted by Rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezerich, in *Maggid Davar L'Yakov*.

3 See Jacob Bronowsky, *The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978) and *The Visionary Eye* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978).

4 *Hilchot Yesodey HaTorah* 4:7-8.

5 Thomas Carlyle, "Sartor Resartus," in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 532.

connection."<sup>6</sup> All experience is potentially a "sign communication."<sup>7</sup> "The Holy One, blessed be He, has many messengers," *Vayikra Rabba* informs us and proceeds to give examples from natural events — which, when viewed with the inner eye, are messengers bearing letters from the King.<sup>8</sup> In the words of Mircea Eliade, "For religious man, nature is never only 'natural'; it is always fraught with a religious value."<sup>9</sup> And according to Jacques Maritain, for the poetic spirit "[every] object is *significant* of something else than itself[,] . . . is a sign at the same time as it is an object . . . . Some sense animates it and makes it say more than it is . . . . Art always supposes a moment of contemplation of a sense animating form . . . . Poetry is the spirit which . . . in and through the density of experience, seizes the secret *meaning* of things and of itself."<sup>10</sup>

"The spirit seizes the secret of itself" — for the metaphoric eye sees its universal inner self reflected in the particular external forms it apprehends. The metaphoric-dreamer sees an identity or connection between himself and whatever he encounters. Personal associations, memories, and hopes are aroused.<sup>11</sup> In the veins of the leaf I see the blue branches of my own hand. In the story of Jacob's struggle with the angel, I read about my own personal struggles and the struggles of Everyman. And in the ritual eating of unleavened bread I taste my own incompleteness and striving for renewal of that which has turned sour in me. For the metaphoric imagination "the world [possesses] a quality of transparency."<sup>12</sup> Behind every tree there are messenger-angels,

6 Martin Buber, "Myth in Judaism," in *On Judaism by Martin Buber*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 97.

7 See Martin Buber, "Dialogue," in *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

8 *Leviticus Rabbah* 22:3.

9 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), 116.

10 Jacques Maritain, "Concerning Poetic Knowledge," in *Aesthetics Today*, ed. Morris Philipson (New York: World Publishing Company, 1961), 238, 240.

11 See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

12 Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 116–117. See also Johan Huizinga's historical study of symbolic consciousness, in *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1981).

like dreams waiting to be interpreted, like letters waiting to be opened.

What letters of correspondence do natural disasters, such as a flood for example, deliver to the metaphoric imagination? Natural disorder evokes the threat of existential and moral chaos. The story of Noah depicts the flood waters reaching the top of the mountains and covering them. In other words, the heavenly storehouses of water and the floodwaters covering the earth meet, returning the world to primordial chaos. This meeting is in contrast to the waters' separation — as well as the many other divisions — accomplished by the creative divine will at the Beginning. Failing to honor and imitate that will, the men of Noah's time plunged their society into confusion and chaos — where there is no moral distinction-making, indeed, no distinction making of any kind.<sup>13</sup> Thus, rather than sending out expeditions in search of Noah's ark, we should be searching for the forces of social and moral irresponsibility, injustice, violence, and nihilism that threaten us, and seeking ways to combat them. As in the Rabbis' discussions of Noah,<sup>14</sup> we should be seeking to define the righteous man who cares for the world — so we can send out an expedition to search for him within ourselves.

Should we teach the biblical Creation drama as a primitive cosmography? Or launch instruments into outer space to seek out the source of that biblical light which preceded the sun? This is a problem only when a literal-minded, material, objectivist, historical, scientific interpretation is applied. A figurative-minded, literary, artistic, existentialist, value-oriented approach leads to a different kind of reading.

"Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak said to Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman: Because I have heard you are a master of *aggadah*, perhaps you can tell me: where did the light come from? He said

13 On the symbolic significance of chaos and distinction-making, see Robert Alter, "A New Theory of Kashrut," *Commentary*, August 1979; and Ruth Fredman, "An Ordered Universe," *The Passover Seder* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1981).

14 See commentaries on Genesis 6:9, and midrashim, a good source for which is Louis Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909).

to him: This is to teach that the Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped Himself in His prayer shawl and the splendor of His beauty shone from one end of the universe to the other."<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman, master of metaphor, must have smiled when he gave this reply to Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak, representative of literal-mindedness. For he knew it could be understood only metaphorically — Rabbi Shimon's very problem!

While the question "how" is what interests the scientific consciousness, the poetic imagination is engaged by the questions "who" and "why." Not questions of process, but of purpose and personality.<sup>16</sup> We are not dealing with physical light here, so much as with metaphoric light — or, more accurately, so much as with the dialectic relationship between the values physical light evokes in the metaphoric imagination and the values with which the metaphoric imagination informs physical light.<sup>17</sup> The light of meaning, understanding, renewal, holiness, beauty, is the consequence of a world in which God is present, though wrapped in mystery.<sup>18</sup> Why the child's need for a small night-light? Not in order to see, but in order to feel that the darkness of fear, insecurity, disorder, meaninglessness and chaos does not win out. The night-light offers emotional and existential assurance and hope. The basic order, trustworthiness and meaningfulness of life is affirmed.<sup>19</sup>

15 *Genesis Rabbah* 3:4.

16 See H. and H.A. Frankfort, "Myth and Reality" in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (also issued by Penguin under the title *Before Philosophy*, without William Irwin's essay on the Hebrews) (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1946) and Emil Fackenheim, *Paths to Jewish Belief* (New York: Behrman House, 1960), 43-50.

17 See Ernst Cassirer's comment on the "reciprocal reflection" between objective and subjective, in the mythic imagination and his discussion of the "mythical concept of light" in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Mythical Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), II, 94-104 and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's discussion of his young pupil Emile's failure to be as moved by sunrise as his teacher is because "the splendour of nature lives in man's heart; to be seen, it must be felt," in *Emile* (London: Dent and Sons, 1974), 131.

18 Note the Kotzker Rebbe's teaching that "God is wherever man lets Him in." See Martin Buber, *Or HaGanuz: Sippurei Hassidim* (The Hidden Light: Tales of the Hassidim) (Jerusalem: Schocken Books, 1979), 433.

19 See Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1969), 54-55.

### The Desacralized World as Object

All this stands in sharpest contradiction to the prevailing modern consciousness for which there is no messenger, and if there were, he could "never, never cleave a way from himself through the throng," as Kafka put it.<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes has observed that, together with the metaphoric impulse, "religion has been washed away only to replace it with man and his empire of things. Where once . . . presided . . . angels, man stands now, his feet upon the thousand objects of everyday life, triumphantly surrounded by his functions."<sup>21</sup> Personal and spiritual values are banished, leaving what Barthes has called "the world as object."<sup>22</sup>

In this desacralized worldview nature does not speak to man. Man does not find his spiritual reflection, home, or challenge in nature, rather, "the forces of Nature are reduced to the rank of objects and Creation is transformed into a facility."<sup>23</sup> Manipulation, utilization, "the concrete itself [and the] countable" are of sole importance.<sup>24</sup> Finally, this functionalism is applied to men. They too become mere objects to be utilized and subdued by other men — and by machines.<sup>25</sup>

In the surface-oriented view of the world as object, reality is one-dimensional,<sup>26</sup> experience only "sensate" — "empirical, this

20 Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradozes*, Bilingual Edition (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 12-15.

21 Roland Barthes, "The World as Object" in *Barthes: Selected Writings*, edited and with an introduction by Susan Sontag (Great Britain: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1982), 62-63.

22 *Ibid.* Since we know today that all perception involves active meaning-construction through metaphors or models brought to experience, "the world as object" is also the result of metaphoric thinking. And as for science, it actually entails the seeing of invisible realities beyond the immediate and surface perception, and involves subjectivity, personal values, and conscience. But the principal concern of science is the physical world and its use by man. In contrast, the thrust of the metaphoric consciousness explored in the present paper has to do with spiritual, esthetic and ethical values. What is described here as the attitude of the "world as object" is the prevailing conception of this idea, not the humanistic scientific one presented by Michael Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958).

23 *Ibid.*, 63.

24 *Ibid.*, 67.

25 *Ibid.*

26 See Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

worldly, secular . . . . . pragmatic, utilitarian . . . . . epicurean or hedonistic, and the like."<sup>27</sup> It is a neutral and impersonal world. The planetary spheres not only do not make music, but the heavens declare nothing. They, like Bilaam's donkey, are dumb. There are neither scales of justice nor scorpions in the stars. There are no candelabra in our trees and no trees in our candelabra. Modern consciousness, devoid of symbols of depth, has been described by Carl Jung as rootless.<sup>28</sup> While the world as metaphor possesses "a quality of transparency" revealing significance,<sup>29</sup> the world as object is opaque. Not opening onto anything other than itself, it becomes ultimately claustrophobic and suffocating. J. D. Salinger's heroes feel faint and thirsty in this closed room without windows.<sup>30</sup> And movie-goers flock to see extraterrestrial visitors and intimate that there is meaning beyond the material clutter of our split-level convenience domiciles.

In this Dickensian world of "Facts, Facts, Facts" there is no room for the imagination, the personal; for memory, feeling and conscience.<sup>31</sup> No place for poetry. Alexis de Tocqueville defined the poetic imagination as "the search for the ideal," for that which is not actual, and for connections between "things actual but not found together." "The poet's function is not to portray reality [as it is], but to beautify it and offer the mind some loftier image." But this function, de Tocqueville observed, is antithetical to the orientation of modern democratic societies (and, we should add, modern non democratic as well), for in the worldview of these social systems "the soul's chief effort goes . . . to conceive what may be useful and to portray what is actual."<sup>32</sup>

27 Berger, *Rumor of Angels*, 1.

28 Quoted by David Bidney, *Theoretical Anthropology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 321.

29 Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 116-117.

30 J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (New York: Bantam, 1945) and *Franny and Zooey* (New York: Bantam, 1955).

31 Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969). Of course, there are different kinds of facts and truth, and the type of facts science is concerned with are different from those of poetry, and therefore do not necessarily contradict the former. However, when either one monopolizes consciousness and experience there is a problem.

32 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 483.

In his essay on "The Prejudices of Youth" Buber argues that it is not God who is dead, but our images of Him. But apart from the need for "a more genuine and more just image" — one which could open a new path to "the real God whose reality man could never shake with any of these images," or lack thereof — an even greater crisis may be the death of the imagination itself.<sup>33</sup> As Rilke put it: "The experiences that are called 'apparitions,' the whole so-called 'spirit-world' . . . have through our daily defensiveness been so entirely pushed out of life that the senses with which we might have been able to grasp them have atrophied. To say nothing of God."<sup>34</sup>

### Consequences of Literal-mindedness for Jewish Education

Given this backdrop it is easy to understand why our students — and teachers and parents — find no meaning in the expressions, forms, and practices of the Jewish tradition. The terms and descriptions for the divine and eternal, the narratives and miracles of the Bible and Midrash, and the rituals and laws of the tradition, are seen only as empty vessels that bear no messages, at least not of present significance. Indeed, for the typical modern consciousness all phenomena and experience — whether the events of nature or the cultural technologies of speech, writing, and electronic media; whether educational methods, or architecture and interior design — are seen as neutral forms of conveyance or facilitation, not as in and of themselves "silent teachers" of messages and values. Plastic and wood, for example, are seen to serve functions more or less efficiently and economically. There is, however, no awareness of the existential and even political values they convey.<sup>35</sup> The modern mind dwells in a world bereft of concept. Given such literal-minded perception how can there be any appreciation of religious categories of experience and expression?

33 Martin Buber, *Israel and the World* (New York: Schocken Books, 1948).

34 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1984), 89.

35 See Roland Barthes, "Plastic," in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1973).

### Maimonides and Metaphor

Consonant with what he saw as the defining quality of man's divine likeness, Maimonides understood metaphor as the inner or hidden meaning — having to do with the ultimate metaphysical questions — suggested by way of analogy or parable through external ordinary sense.<sup>36</sup> He considered a proper understanding of symbolic thought and language essential to a correct knowledge of religious language and life. "Know that the key to understanding everything the prophets said, peace be upon them, and the knowledge of its truth, is the understanding of the metaphors and their concerns and the explication of their language . . . for through metaphor you discern the words of Torah."<sup>37</sup> And in another passage of the *Guide*: "[concerning] the imagining of realities that God has not brought into being, the disbelief in the fundamentals of religion, the holding of faulty opinions about God and the view that the words of the prophets are false, the whole trouble that has brought this about is the neglect of that about which we have been commenting [namely, a proper understanding of metaphoric language]."<sup>38</sup>

This sensitivity concerning the relationship between the external sense of a biblical (or midrashic) passage and its inner meaning is applied to the commandments, as well. Alongside the question of metaphoric language stands the challenge of metaphoric action embodied in the commandments, or *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* (reasons for the commandments), as the two great pillars of Maimonides' work. According to Isadore Twersky, "Maimonides tried to bring about the unity of practice and concept, external observance and inner meaning, visible action and invisible experience, law and philosophy."<sup>39</sup> Thus, religious

36 On man's divine likeness, see notes 4 and 5 above. On metaphor, see Maimonides, Introduction, *Guide to the Perplexed* and Commentary to *Perek Helek*, Chapter 10 of *Sanhedrin*.

37 Maimonides, Introduction, *Guide to the Perplexed*.

38 Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 2, ch. 47.

39 Isadore Twersky, Introduction to *A Maimonides Reader*, ed. Twersky (New York: Behrman House, 1972), 18-19. See also Professor Twersky's *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), Ch. 1, 6 and 7.

behaviorism was held by Maimonides to be distant from genuine religion, if not antithetical to it. "What is essential is nothing else than that one tries to elevate his soul toward God through the Torah . . . achieving what pertains to the ennoblement of man . . . . All this cannot be secured by fasting, praying, and lamentation if knowledge and true faith are absent, because in such behavior God can be near to the mouth but far from the heart."<sup>40</sup> And again: "As for someone who thinks and frequently mentions God, without knowledge, following a mere imagining or following a belief adopted because of reliance on the authority of somebody else, he is to my mind outside the king's palace and far away from it and does not in true reality mention or think about God."<sup>41</sup>

Concerning this emphasis on symbolic significance and the inner life, both in religious language and in ritual action, Maimonides is representative of a variety of approaches at work in the orchards of *aggadah*, philosophy and *kabbalah*. Their differences notwithstanding, ultimately all three enterprises meet in their common concern with symbolism and their "common goal" of spirituality.<sup>42</sup>

### The Questions of Apologetics and the Challenge of Cultural Interplay

The concerns and methods of all three fields — *aggadah*, *kabbalah*, and Jewish philosophy — are frequently charged with the sin of apologetics, a charge that can be made against the endeavor of this whole paper. I am always puzzled by this concern, by precisely what it views as inadmissible and why. As for myself, I see no cause for dismay if we open up approaches to religious tradition by suggesting its confluence with valued experiences and ideas formally external to it; if we find common ground between Aristotle and the Jewish tradition, when this results from an honest encounter. Identification of such points of

40 From Maimonides' letter to Hasdai Ha-Levi, in Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*.

41 Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, Ch. 51.

42 See Isadore Twersky, Preface, *Studies in Jewish Law and Philosophy* (New York: Ktav, 1982) and *Rabad of Posquieres: A Twelfth Century Talmudist* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1980), 258–259.

cross-cultural contact should rather be seen as occasions for religious celebrations, for they indicate that all human wisdom derives from the same source — that what we see at work is the common “mind that God gave us” all.<sup>43</sup>

Professor Twersky writes that Maimonides’ “pervasive and indispensable” commitment to “the natural integration” of Torah and philosophy was “without any trace of self-consciousness or tinge of defensiveness . . . . Philosophy is by nature universal. Hence Maimonides . . . . need not be uncomfortable or apologetic.”<sup>44</sup> Saadya Gaon observed that since all language potentially has a conventional meaning as well as a metaphoric one, and since “the Torah was given in one of the languages,” therefore one must know when to interpret the Torah in accordance with its metaphoric meaning.<sup>45</sup> The medieval philosophers saw no need for defensiveness in their understanding of the Torah according to human categories of language and meaning. Maimonides reasoned: “The style of riddle and parable . . . is the method of truly great thinkers and since the words of the sages (and of the prophets) all deal with supernatural matters which are ultimate, they must be expressed in riddles and analogies.”<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the more we know about the universal human method of metaphor the better will we be able to appreciate the Torah’s metaphoric language.

“The interplay of Jewish and general philosophy” — whether the latter was ancient Near Eastern religions, Aristotle, the Kalam, Gnosticism, or Existentialist, — has always provided fertile ground for Jewish creativity and renewal.<sup>47</sup> The present paper attempts such an interplay, “convinced,” as Professor Twersky puts it, “of the interrelatedness and complementarity — indeed the essential identity — of divine and human wisdom, of religion and culture.”<sup>48</sup> The reciprocal illuminations this paper

43 See *Hilchot Teshuva* 5:4.

44 Twersky, *Code of Maimonides*, 87–88, 497–499.

45 *MiPerushey Rabeynu Saadya Gaon al HaTorah*, comp. and trans. with notes Yosef Kapach (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1963), 162.

46 From *Perek Helek* in Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, 409.

47 See Isadore Twersky, Foreword to Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) and Cynthia Ozick, “Bialik’s Hint,” *Commentary*, February 1983.

48 Twersky, Introduction, *A Maimonides Reader*, 25.

tries to generate between voices from different backgrounds and disciplines, as well as between Jewish and general perspectives, is more than a method. It reflects the very metaphoric activity being addressed, for it represents a search for hidden connections and identities, for points of contact between traditional forms and ongoing life.

### The Exile of Symbols from Life

In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey discusses how art and religion have been separated from all meaning, relegated to museum pedestals far removed from life. "By common consent the Parthenon is a great work of art. Yet it has esthetic standing only as the work becomes an experience for a human being."<sup>49</sup> In *The Child and the Curriculum*, Dewey also addresses the gap between symbol and experience: "The symbol really symbolizes — when it sums up in shorthand actual experience . . . . A symbol which is induced from without, which has not been led up to . . . is, as we say, a *bare* or *mere* symbol; it is dead and barren . . . . It is not a reality, but just the sign of a reality which might be experienced if certain conditions were fulfilled."<sup>50</sup> The similarity in title between Abraham Maslow's *Religion, Values and Peak-Experiences* and Dewey's *Art as Experience* is instructive. Maslow observes, "Rituals, ceremonies, words, and formulae may touch some, but they do not touch many [when the legitimizing force of religious community is lacking] unless their meanings have been deeply understood and experienced. Clearly the aim of educators in this realm must be phrased in terms of [the coordination of these inherited public forms with] inner, subjective experiences in each individual."<sup>51</sup> Here the descriptive work of the psychologist of religion meets the programmatic concern of the religious philosopher or mystic. Rousseau, who in his *Emile* calls for the interrelationship between psychology and philosophy, and between practice and reason, also calls for the unity of sign and

49 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934), 4.

50 John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum* (University of Chicago Press, 1902), 24–35.

51 Abraham Maslow, *Religions: Values and Peak-Experiences* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 79.

signified: "Symbols are of no value without the idea of the things symbolized. Yet the education of the child is confined to those symbols, while no one ever succeeds in making him understand the thing signified."<sup>52</sup>

Peter Berger identifies this negation of the signified, what is essentially a "denial of metaphysics[,] . . . with the triumph of triviality . . . [and with] a shrinkage in the scope of human experience [which] constitutes a profound impoverishment."<sup>53</sup> If education involves the expansion of the human spirit through the broadening of experience, then this shrinkage should concern all educators, religious educators not least among them.

### Three Functions of Metaphor

Three major potential values or functions of metaphor which enrich, if not define, the human spirit, can be identified: its meaning function, its bridging function, and its liberating function. All three are vital and profound sources for the ongoing process at the construction of healthy Jewish-human identity, as I conceive it. For all their positive values, however, these activities of the metaphoric consciousness also pose certain serious questions and dangers concerning this very identity construction which must also be addressed.

### Metaphor's Meaning Function

We have seen that for mythopoetic man the world is a "crucible of meaning."<sup>54</sup> His relationship to the world can be described as

52 Rousseau, *Emile*, 73-74.

53 Berger, *Rumor of Angels*, 75. See also Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 14: "The religious man is one who grasps his own life within a larger historical and cosmic setting. He sees himself as part of a greater whole, a longer story in which he plays a part. Song, ritual and vision link a man to this story. They help him place himself somewhere between Eden and the Kingdom of God; they give him a past and a future. But without real festive occasions and without the nurture of fantasy man's spirit as well as his psyche shrinks. He becomes something less than man . . . . This may account in part for the malaise and tedium of our time."

54 Roland Barthes, cited by Jonathan Culler, *Barthes* (Great Britain: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983), 110.

one of love, for he is like Roland Barthes' lover who, in contrast to Barthes' empirical man, "lives in a universe of signs: nothing involving the beloved is without meaning." "He creates meaning everywhere."<sup>55</sup> For Carlyle this symbolic universe ultimately opens on to a mystic vision: "Man . . . everywhere finds himself encompassed with symbols . . . . The universe is but one vast symbol of God; nay if thou wilt have it, what is man himself but a symbol of God; is not all that he does symbolical?"<sup>56</sup>

Many have commented on the profound human drive and need for meaning and transcendence which such a metaphoric imagination fulfills. When realized, the meaning function of metaphor is a strong "commitment-building mechanism"<sup>57</sup> vis-a-vis the community and culture in which it operates, and it has an important role in building and sustaining commitment to life, as studies of anomie and suicide by Durkheim and others demonstrate.<sup>58</sup>

Another potential effect of the meaning function of metaphor involves the experience of transcendence per se. Feeling part of a meaning larger than himself can imbue man with a sense of humility and respect toward the world — a sense of interrelatedness with all people, all life, with the entire planet. But transcendence can evoke a sense of exclusivist superiority and domination just as readily as it can inspire universalist sentiments of humility and respect. Myth, metaphor, and meaning — like all complex forms and systems — possess opposing potentialities: the deepest sources of beauty and good exist alongside the most powerful forces of distortion and darkness.

### The Problem of Critical Distance

Seeing spiritual meaning behind every tree can also lead to the delusive experience of "The Pagan Rabbi" of Cynthia Ozick's

55 *Ibid.*

56 Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 533.

57 Rosabeth Moss Kantern, *Commitment and Community* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

58 See Donald Oliver, *Education and Community* (Berkeley: McCutchan, 1976).

story,<sup>59</sup> as well as to the immorality and self-defeatism of apocalyptic messianism. My comparative phenomenological depiction of the mythopoetic and modern world-orientation is presented in terms of ideal types — the fully sacralized world compared to the fully desacralized. But actually each mode of consciousness contains strengths and weaknesses. The fully sacralized “attitude toward persons and things” entails an intense “emotional involvement,” while in the desacralized outlook “there is the rationalization of thought . . . imply[ing] both a cognitive attitude relatively free of emotion, and the use of logic rather than an emotional symbolism to organize thought.”<sup>60</sup> The intense empathetic participation that characterizes the mythopoetic attitude can limit, if not cancel, the possibility of relatively free human judgement and responsibility connected with self-reflective and self-regulating rational, critical thought.

Critical thinking and responsibility are only possible when the spirits, angels, and God withdraw, at least to some degree, from the world. Thus, the divine act of *tzimtzum* (contraction and withdrawal), described by the Lurianic *kabbalah* — the partial self-exile of the divine presence — is an act of divine love for man, because it grants him his maturity, the possibility of genuine spirituality through self awareness, freedom, searching and wrestling.

Seeing meaning everywhere and in everything can preclude the possibility of dialogic encounter and clear-sighted analysis. There is a danger of merely reading into the forms and phenomena of nature and culture meanings that have no basis and resonance in the reality of the “not-I”<sup>61</sup> that is encountered.<sup>62</sup> There

59 In *Jewish Short Stories*, edited by Emanuel Litvinoff (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979). Also in *Gates to the New City*, ed. Howard Schwartz, with sensitive note by Schwartz (New York: Avon, 1983) and Cynthia Ozick, *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories* (New York: Alfred Knopf, Inc., 1986). On the dangers of messianism, see David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

60 Thomas O’Dea, *Sociology of Religion* (Prentice Hall, 1966), 81.

61 Carl Frankenstein suggests that Buber’s other encounters in the I-You relationship be termed the “not-I.” See Frankenstein’s *Keynut V’Shivayon* (Sincerity and Equality: Thoughts of a Philosopher and an Educator) (Hebrew) (Israel: Sifriyat Ha-Poalim, 1977).

62 See Culler, *Partners*, 112, on the problematics of this kind of “obsessive” and “sentimental” interpreting perception.

is something positive in the modern secular consciousness which, unlike Ozick's Pagan Rabbi, sees the world as object; a consciousness which "declare[s] . . . that we live among Things."<sup>63</sup>

Maimonides' notion of divine providence or involvement in the world — the laws of nature themselves; the body's self-sufficiency; and man's free will and potential spiritual powers — is of such crucial importance to this religious philosopher because of its implications for human freedom and responsibility, and because only in God's distance is genuine love of Him possible.<sup>64</sup> For love is not dependent on anything, but is reached freely only on account of its being true and beautiful.<sup>65</sup> If God intervened directly from behind every tree, then the love of God would be impossible, for fear of punishment and the desire for reward might motivate us.<sup>66</sup> True spirituality, then, can only come with a significant degree of distance and alienation. Not meaning everywhere and always, but also the lack of meaning, is a prerequisite for genuine spirituality.<sup>67</sup> Critical distance and scept-

63 Ozick, *Jewish Short Stories*, 263.

64 See *Hilchot Teshuvah*, 5.

65 *Hilchot Teshuvah* 10:2. Note how "Torah and commandments" is accompanied by "the ways of philosophy."

66 See *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, Chs. 23, 53 and 54. And Isaiah Leibowitz, "Din-Hashgachah-Hasagah-Ahavah" (Justice-Providence-Attainment-Love) in *Emunah, Historiah V'Arachim* (Faith, History, and Values) (Jerusalem: Akademon, 1981).

67 Roland Barthes, *Empires of Signs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) celebrates a claimed absence or minimizing of hidden transcendental meaning in Japanese culture. Barthes' concern with the dangers of "occultation" or "mystification" goes to the heart of my argument for limiting the scope of metaphor. The perception of sacred or metaphysical hidden meaning in all things means establishing a link between cause and effect, Destiny and men, God and creature "which precludes man's capacity to reason and to act freely" (p. 62). This view dangerously idealizes all personal and historical events to a realm beyond rational-critical consideration and open-ended problem solving. In contrast, the "exemption of meaning" means "no more metaphor, no more fate . . . man no longer puppet in the divinity's hands" (p. 62). Maimonides' *Shemonah Perakim* emphatically opposes those who would hold that "the Divine will is in everything . . . We do not believe this" (Chapter 8). The Divine will determines the natural order, which includes man's free will and his intellectual and spiritual potential. The specific occurrences within the natural order and within the scope of human action have, however, no metaphysical strings of cause and effect.

ticism are also part of the religious spirit exposed by Ozick:

"Sheindel, for a woman so pious you're a great sceptic."  
 "An atheist's statement," she rejoined. "The more piety, the more scepticism. A religious man comprehends this. Superfluity, excess of custom, and superstition would climb like a choking vine on the fence of the Law if scepticism did not continually hack them away to make freedom for purity."<sup>68</sup>

### The Need to Combine Sacred and Secular

We have already seen Maimonides in his simultaneous role as rationalist and spiritualist. Though usually categorized as representative of the pure ideal category of philosopher, there are passages throughout his works that are nothing but mystical, if we are speaking in terms of ideal types.<sup>69</sup> Major portions of chapter 52 in part 3 of the *Guide* are striking examples that Heschel has highlighted.<sup>70</sup> *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* is another:

God does not recognize the creatures and know them because of the creatures, as we know them, but rather because of Himself does He know them. Knowing Himself, He knows everything, for everything is attached to Him, in His Being.<sup>71</sup>

But this does not mean that Maimonides was a mystic, nor that someone else introduced these passages into the work of the philosopher. Maimonides was at once philosopher and mystic, sceptic-

68 Ozick, *Jewish Short Stories*, 268.

69 Professor Twersky suggests that we "avoid artificial reductionism; seeing Maimonides either as Talmudist or as philosopher. Students of *halakha* disengage Maimonides the codifier from the *Moreh* while students of philosophy belittle or ignore the *Mishneh Torah* and the central position of the law. Both forms of this dichotomy are distortions, for a major part of Maimonides' achievement, and his historical significance, is the integration of both. Consequently, only an integrated-holistic approach, encompassing the Maimonidean oeuvre in its totality, without blurring its diversity and tension, will be productive," *Code of Maimonides*, 96.

70 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Maimonides* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), ch. 25.

71 *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 2:10.

tical rationalist and religious pietist, critical scientist and visionary poet.<sup>72</sup>

It can even be said that Maimonides' view of religion simultaneously embraces secular and sacred attitudes. Harvey Cox, Peter Berger, and Henry Frankfort have all suggested that the roots of secularization or philosophy — which they identify with a demythologized and desacralized worldview — are to be located in the religion of biblical Israel which combines both mythology and philosophy in a dialectic tension of checks and balances.<sup>73</sup>

### The Dialogic Process of Apprehending Meaning

We may have been visited by spiritual guests who while here touched everything, thereby infusing our wine and bread and candles with divine sparks. But just how to release these sparks and what they mean is not a simple matter. As already suggested, all forms and phenomena reflect opposing potentialities from which the beholder who meets them chooses. David Bidney, theoretician of anthropology, has observed, “[symbols of depth] lend themselves to a variety of . . . interpretation[s], and their greatness lies precisely in their prolific suggestiveness for the creative imagination of the sensitive artist . . . . There is no single . . . interpretation of a given [symbolic form] . . . which is necessarily the correct one . . . . Thus . . . what one finds in [symbolic forms] . . . depends upon the content of the mind one brings to it . . . . The nature and degree of truth found . . . will

72 “The nobility of philosophic religion (*Torah-hokhma*), in which rationalism and piety are natural companions . . . is emphasized,” Twersky, *Code of Maimonides*, 513. See also Rabbi Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), which opens: “Halakhic man reflects two opposing selves; two disparate images are embodied within his soul and spirit. On the one hand he is as far removed from *homo religiosus* as east is from west and is identical, in many respects, to prosaic, cognitive man; on the other hand he is a man of God, possessor of an ontological approach that is devoted to God and of a world view saturated with the radiance of the Divine presence.”

73 Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1965). Ch. 1 distinguishes between secularization and secularism; Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967); Frankfort, *Myth and Reality*.

vary with . . . the specific intuitive insight [and value system] of its interpreters."<sup>74</sup>

The active character of interpreting the meaning of symbolic forms is well represented by the anecdote about the two men who travel a long distance to see the original "Mona Lisa" in the Louvre. Inspecting it from side to side, they finally exclaim to each other, "What do you think?! So famous a painting and I don't see anything special! It's not what they say it is!" Finally, the museum guard standing nearby approaches them. "Excuse me, gentlemen, but I couldn't help overhearing you, and thus must inform you of something. You are not judging the 'Mona Lisa.' The 'Mona Lisa' is judging you!" Rich and complex in meaning, symbolic forms challenge their beholders to see what values they bring to encounter with them. For in good part it is through the looking glass of the beholder's self that all phenomena and experiences speak.

#### Literal- and Figurative-mindedness

The investigation into *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* (reasons for the commandments) already reflects a certain distance from the symbolic imagination, which makes possible critical consideration of the meanings we wish to highlight and learn from the symbolic forms we encounter. There is compelling evidence, as Bettelheim, Evans Pritchard, and Levi-Strauss suggest, that the consciousness of early man, like childhood perception, is able in a certain way to distinguish between a symbol and what is

74 Bidney, *Theoretical Anthropology*, 301. Though Bidney takes the view that "the great myths" (I have replaced this possibly confusing phrase with "symbolic forms" also in order to extend its meaning) were understood literally by their originators, but because of their artistic character later generations can interpret them in different ways — a view I do not agree with — his view of the "prolific suggestiveness" and interpretive process vis-a-vis the symbolic forms of early man remains helpful and accurate, even if one understands these forms as inherently expressive of the kinds of existential, philosophical meanings Bidney would reserve for later generations only.

symbolized.<sup>75</sup> In other words, it does not understand symbolic forms literally without their inner meanings — an understanding that would make them not symbolic forms at all. It is not a matter of the allegorization of later generations of forms which were understood literally by earlier ones.<sup>76</sup> Literal understanding is a modern phenomenon.

The early consciousness of man, both historically and in the individual life span, is not literal-minded, but figurative-minded.<sup>77</sup> It intuitively and immediately grasps things in their figurative meaning. Though this is accomplished in a largely unconscious way, there are rare moments when it displays a conscious awareness of the distinction between the symbol and what it symbolizes. If all this is granted, then it can also be said that the early mind generally *does not* distinguish clearly between a symbol and what it symbolizes, in the sense that its grasp of symbolic meaning is largely unreflective. Another way to put this is that for the early mind (as for the dream consciousness) the distance between symbol and the consciousness that grasps it is narrow. For the consciousness that combines within it both modern and mythopoetic attitudes, that weaves back and forth between them, there is, then, a greater sense of distance between sign and signified, a distance which makes possible critical appraisal and choice concerning the meaning that results from symbolic interpretation, even as it allows for a metaphoric experience. This critical distance and judgment is of great importance. For the preservation of traditional forms may not be desirable if the rea-

75 See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1967); E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956); Howard Gardner, *The Quest for Mind* (New York: Random House, 1972), 137: "In *The Savage Mind* [Levi-Strauss] seeks to inter for all times the [then] widely accepted notion that primitives think in a childish way --- with regard to totemism, for example, that they literally believe they are animals or plants --- that they are incapable of conceptual thought or abstraction." As Bettelheim and others such as Gareth Matthews, *Philosophy of the Young Child* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) suggest, literal-mindedness may not be "childish" either.

76 Bidney, *Theoretical Anthropology*, Ch. 10 claims that it is.

77 Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942). See Bidney's discussion of Langer, *Theoretical Anthropology*.

sons and meanings that they teach us — through the dialogic encounter between their inherently rich suggestiveness and the values we bring to them — are not beautiful and just.

### The Untranslatable Character of Form

Another question that arises concerning symbolic forms is why they are needed at all once their meanings are understood. Here, David Bidney's observation that "there is no single interpretation of a given [symbolic form] which is necessarily the correct one"<sup>78</sup> already indicates a response. Form can never be successfully reduced to a disembodied essence.<sup>79</sup> Dewey wrote, "Medium says something that cannot be uttered as well or as completely in any other tongue . . . The act itself is exactly *what* it is because of *how* it is done. In the act there is no distinction, but perfect integration of manner and content, form and substance."<sup>80</sup> "In every true spiritual form of expression," Ernst Cassirer has written in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, "the rigid limit between the 'inside' and 'outside', the 'subjective' and the 'objective', does not subsist as such but begins, as it were, to grow fluid. The inward and outward do not stand side by side, each as a separate province; each, rather, is reflected in the other, and only in this reciprocal reflection does each disclose its own meaning."<sup>81</sup>

At an inter-disciplinary conference on metaphor, one of the participants suggested: "Interpretation can never come to rest. What metaphor names may transcend human understanding so

<sup>78</sup> Bidney, *Theoretical Anthropology*, 301.

<sup>79</sup> "According to Claudio Naranjo, it is time for us to be 'abandoning forms and searching for the essence that animates them, an essence which often lies hidden in the forms themselves.' One might well agree that there are a great many forms we should indeed abandon. The problem remains, however, whether one can do away with forms entirely. What then would be left? Presumably that 'essence.' Yet this mysterious entity continues to elude philosophers and gurus, along with more empirically minded investigators." Edwin Schur, *The Awareness Trap: Self-Absorption Instead of Social Change* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 11-12. Tendencies in Christianity — in Protestantism, especially — have also aimed at the isolation of "pure inwardness" or essence from outer forms and historical reality. See Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 16.

<sup>80</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 109.

<sup>81</sup> Cassirer, *Symbolic Forms*, 2:99.

that our language cannot capture it . . . . All metaphor that is more than an abbreviation for more proper speech gestures towards what transcends language."<sup>82</sup> And Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that "Explanations for the *mitzvot* are like insights of art criticism; the interpretation can never rival the creative acts of the artist . . . explanations are not substitutes."<sup>83</sup>

Roland Barthes has discussed this untranslatable character of the poetic image which he calls "the third meaning."<sup>84</sup> He describes it as "at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive," as an "emergence" that "exceeds meaning," that "carries a certain emotion" which can only be apprehended by a "poetical grasp" that transcends language. Or as Kafka intimated: parable creates a reality beyond any other kind of designation and is ultimately incomprehensible; it creates a reality that is far from being "only in parable."<sup>85</sup>

I suggest that this is how the Talmudic dictum אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו ("a biblical passage does not depart from its literal or ordinary meaning") should be understood: No biblical metaphor departs from the resonances of the form in which it is communicated.<sup>86</sup> Thus, going beyond what Barthes calls the communicative or informational level of a poetic image to its "obvious symbolic meaning" we are returned to its untranslatable or "third meaning" which does not describe, but suggests, conveying a mystery.<sup>87</sup>

### Metaphor's Bridging Function

Another function or activity of metaphor can be called bridging, of which there are several types. Perhaps the most obvious is the

82 Karsten Harries, "Metaphor and Transcendence," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 72,82.

83 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Between God and Man*, ed. Fritz Rothschild (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 183-184.

84 Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," *Selected Writings*.

85 Kafka, *Parables and Paradozes*, 11.

86 *Shabbat* 63a. And see the *Anaf Yosef* in *Eyn Ya'akov* on this text. The dictum also appears in *Yebamoth* 11b and 24a.

87 Barthes, "The Third Meaning." See also Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1933), 184-189.

bridging of the known to the unknown, an activity of ladder-raising between heaven and earth, related to the connection of the external to the inner, and of the concrete and particular to the general and abstract. "In the symbol the infinite is made to blend itself with the finite, to stand visible and, as it were, attainable there," wrote Carlyle.<sup>88</sup> אספרה כבודך ולא ראיתך, אדמך אכנך ולא ידעתך ("I have told of Your manifestation, though I have not seen You. I have compared You and named You, though I have not known You.")<sup>89</sup> Metaphoric models make apprehension of the unknown possible. This function of metaphor is also present in contemporary physics, as in the sciences of all ages. Are there molecules, atoms and neutrons, that in fact physically look and act precisely like the models scientists construct of them? Or are these rather successful "bridges thrown out to unknown shores" — one of Jung's definitions of a symbol?<sup>90</sup>

Another type of bridging accomplished by metaphoric interpretation is the narrowing of the gap between art and life, between immediate experience and tradition, change and fixity, individual and society.<sup>91</sup> This type is evident in Dewey's concern for the bridging between the child and the curriculum,<sup>92</sup> Simon Rawidowicz's depiction of the dialogic process of textual interpretation which "bridges the gap between the past and present,"<sup>93</sup> and Michael Fishbane's point of contact or meeting between text and life.<sup>94</sup>

88 Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 533. See also Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot HaKodesh* (Lights of Holiness) (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook), 1962, part 1, ch. 3.

89 From *Shir HaKavod* (Hymn of God's Manifestation), attributed to Rabbi Judah of Regensburg.

90 On metaphor in science, see Bronowsky, *Knowledge and Imagination* and *Visionary Eye*. On symbols, see "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry," in *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

91 Richard Shiff, "Art and Life: A Metaphoric Relationship," in Sheldon Sacks, *On Metaphor*.

92 Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum*.

93 Simon Rawidowicz, "On Interpretation," in *Studies in Jewish Thought*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1974).

94 Michael Fishbane, "Freedom and Belonging: A Personal Encounter with Judaic Study," in *The New Jews*, eds. James Sleeper and Alan Mintz (New York: Random House, 1971).

The bridging function of metaphor is the life-line of Jewish continuity, for "those who inherit the civilization of the past must live it in their own day; hence there can be no separation between education as inheritance and education as participation."<sup>95</sup> When this intense "bonding" produced by the activity of interpretation is accomplished, the symbolic form comes alive in an experience of involvement.<sup>96</sup> The poetic symbol, claims Northrop Frye, "tells you [not] what happened, but what happens; not what did take place, but the kind of thing that always does take place . . . [It] gives you the typical, recurring, or what Aristotle calls universal event."<sup>97</sup>

Thus, the miracle of Jonah is not having been saved by a big fish and spit out of its stomach onto dry land — if we take the story literally. These events are the external form and to believe solely and literally in them has no value, unless the celebration of the impossible and irrational is considered a value. But to believe that man can be lost and distant from God and conscience, from responsibility and compassion, and from true self and humanity; that he can sink very low, find himself in an existential and spiritual storm from which there seems to be no salvation, and yet, by a process of self-confrontation can emerge reborn, safely and securely on dry land, having matured emotionally, morally, and spiritually — is not that the most wonderful miracle, which bears great present significance for the one who believes it? And do not be astonished by this interpretation. For such readings of the Jonah story, with its archetypal motifs of sea and storm and fish, can be found in the midrash, and in the Zohar, in Ibn Ezra, and in Rabbi Isaac ben Yedaiah's thirteenth-century commentary on the *aggadah*, not to mention modern commentators.<sup>98</sup> I was once

95 Ralph Barton Perry, "Education and the Science of Education," in *Philosophy of Education*, ed. Israel Scheffler (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1966), 18.

96 Wayne Booth, "Afterthoughts on Metaphor: Ten Literal 'Theses'," in Sheldon Sacks, *On Metaphor*.

97 Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Indiana University Press, 1964), 63-64.

98 Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 53, 231-232; Ernst Simon, "Flight from God — and Return," *Commentary*, September 1953; Bettelheim, *Uses of Enchantment*, 53; Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell, 1964), 60-61 and Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language* (New York: Grove Press, 1951), 20-23.

asked by a teacher if indeed I didn't believe in "the original Cain and Abel." I do not, I replied. But if I did, what would be significant in that? I do believe in something much better and more significant. I do believe in the eternal Cain and Abel.

### The Crisis of Interpretation

Of course, there are problems in this bridging between the past and present, between the tradition and the individual. There is the problem of merely reading into the tradition, so that only the present and the individual remain, as they were before the encounter, rather than developing an honest and subtle dialectic between reading into and reading from, so that the traditional form can speak and the interpreter is changed. And there is the danger of metaphorizing or allegorizing away everything so that only some supposed disembodied spirit or idea remains, a problem to which I have already made reference.<sup>99</sup> While safety can be found in avoiding these dangers by mere repetition or paraphrase of that which we encounter, truth will not be found in such an approach. As in the story of "The Beauty and the Beast," what is true always involves dangers. Only by willingness to face them do they themselves lead us to the true goal. In Chinese the word for crisis is written by combining the character words for "danger" and "opportunity."<sup>100</sup> Symbolic forms are always in crisis — there is always the chance that they will become empty forms that cease to speak to people. The opportunity they offer for bestowing meaning can only be achieved by accepting the dangers inherent in that goal. The bravery, boldness — even audacity — of on-going interpretation has been the life-force of Judaism. The cowardly failure to interpret threatens its continuation.

### The Liberation Function of Metaphor

The final value of metaphor I want to mention is its liberating function, something of which de Tocqueville speaks in his under-

99 See also Louis Ginzberg, "Allegorical Interpretations of Scripture," *On Jewish Law and Lore* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1955).

100 Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problems and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) 62.

standing of poetry which I discussed earlier on: "The poet's function is not to portray reality [as it is], but to beautify it and offer the mind some loftier image."<sup>101</sup> Herbert Marcuse has been especially insightful about this aspect of the symbolic experience. "The truth of art [or metaphor]," he claims, "lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality . . . to define what is real."<sup>102</sup> In the poetic image there is an "interplay between affirmation and indictment."<sup>103</sup> I both recognize myself in the poetic image and am estranged from it, for it both supports and upsets, inspires and challenges. Carrying us beyond the ordinary and given reality, it "subverts" it by suggesting an alternative.<sup>104</sup> Northrop Frye also sees the guiding "motive of metaphor" in this way. Metaphor is concerned "with the world we construct, not the world we see[,] . . . [with] the world we want to have, [not with the world as it is]."<sup>105</sup>

While I agree this is a potential power of metaphor, it also possesses the opposing potential to contribute to "social illusion and delusion."<sup>106</sup> Myth, meaning and metaphor can also validate or justify particular value systems. They can rationalize given reality orientations and encourage wishful thinking. While the metaphoric imagination's "affirmation of the inwardness of subjectivity [by which] the individual steps out of the network [of the given reality]"<sup>107</sup> provides great potential for individual freedom from the conforming forces of society and culture, and for social and self-criticism, this "inwardness of subjectivity" can also lead to "self-absorption" [or is it self-negation through mythic loss?] instead of social change.<sup>108</sup> "Soon the rose-perfume and -vision

101 See note 35 above.

102 Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 9.

103 *Ibid.*, 10.

104 Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, 6 and Frye, *Educated Imagination*, 149-151.

105 Frye, *Educated Imagination*, 23, 24, 38.

106 Bidney, *Theoretical Anthropology*, 325.

107 Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, 4-5.

108 Edwin Schur, *The Awareness Trap* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976). On the problematics of mystic loss or immersion, see Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 133-134 and "What is Common to All," *The Knowledge of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

threaten to keep me from ever leaving and attending to study and prayer and work and deeds of kindness and love. So I close my eyes and withdraw, leaving the Garden Temple of my backyard in small respectful steps."<sup>109</sup> Immersed in the other-reality of the metaphoric imagination, one can escape responsibility for ordinary reality, either by simply being saturated by the other-worldly and thus psychically absent from the everyday, or by rationalizing the injustices of ordinary reality in the light of experiences and concepts taken from the other "truer" one. Ozick writes in "The Pagan Rabbi": "Our ancestors . . . would not have abandoned their slavery in Egypt had they been taught [that man can live freely in the inwardness of his spirit]. They would have said: 'Let us stay, our bodies will remain enslaved in Egypt, but our souls will wander at their pleasure in Zion.'"<sup>110</sup> Certainly the awareness that inner freedom is of equal, if not ultimate, importance, can provide the possibility and inspiration for physical and political freedom.<sup>111</sup> But it can also effect a withdrawal from genuine social and moral responsibility in this world as it is. The kind of critical awareness described earlier, that locates man somewhere between the totally sacred and totally secular world, would seem to be essential if the potentially liberating function of metaphor is to be realized.

An encounter I had recently with some Israeli eleventh and twelfth graders in a secular school may illustrate something of what I have been trying to argue. They asked me: "Do you believe in the stories and miracles of the Bible?" I asked them if they enjoyed literature. If they ever tried to interpret any of their own or someone else's dreams. If they had studied physics. Art? No. None of these. Not especially. I spoke with them a little about these different areas of human experience and expression, as well as about some Israeli popular songs with poetic lyrics. And I told them about Maimonides. "You really mean to ask me, Do you believe in the stupid stories and miracles of the Bible?" I said. "Or, in other words, you have meant to ask, Are you stupid?"

109 Steven Copeland, "In My Backyard Garden," *The Melton Journal*, Winter 1982.

110 Ozick, *Jewish Short Stories*, 265.

111 See Robert Alter, "Milosz: Poetry and Politics," *Commentary*, April 1983.

— Yes, I believe them, but according to the nature of their symbolic language. One must interpret their meanings. And I can do this at the same time as I do not believe in stupid things.” “Do you believe in God?” another asked. “If you mean, do I believe in the Wizard of Oz, then the answer is no. But if you ask if I believe in eternity, in the eternal caring spirit that can be discerned in the universe, then yes. The names we give God, even the word ‘God’ itself, and the ways we describe Him, say very little about Him, who is not a ‘him.’ But, like the physicist, only through the known can we talk about and explore the unknown that we have discerned.” “Do you believe in the Oral Torah and in the commandments?” another asked. “If you mean, do I believe in Cecil B. DeMille’s movie of thunder and lightning and a big voice from the sky, no. But, yes, I believe that our teacher Moses was someone who attained as near to spiritual perfection or awakening as a human being can. That means he was almost constantly in touch with the eternity I just spoke about. He could hear its commandments, for eternity commands commandments.”

How to bridge between symbolic forms and life, how to release the realities imprisoned in their thick shells must be a major concern of Jewish education. The fine teacher who had invited me to speak with his students concluded my meeting with them by saying that in future classes they would study the symbolic imagination in art and literature and dreams, as well as the philosophy of religious experience. Because clearly without an appreciation of symbolic language and the philosophy of spiritual forms one could not understand the approach to religious Judaism I was suggesting. “For it is not an empty thing to you, but rather your very life.”<sup>112</sup>

112 *Talmud Yerushalmi tractate Peah 1:1 and Sifre* — and Rashi — interpret this verse to mean that the Torah will be empty of present meaning if one does not interpret it creatively. If it is empty, it is “because of you.”