

*Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology*

By Michael Fishbane

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The twentieth-century Protestant theologian and university professor Paul Tillich took seriously the criticisms of religion made by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. While many of his contemporaries ran away from the stench of God's death or waged defensive wars against God's critics, Tillich refused to impulsively fight or flee. He thoughtfully gazed upon the rubble of religion before him, this ground zero strewn with shards of once-adored icons, torn-up texts, and broken ideologies. In his masterpieces *The Courage to Be* (1952) and *The Dynamics of Faith* (1957), Tillich tried to articulate a theology that was not opiate, cowardice, or illusion. He drew from his vast knowledge of philosophy, the history of religion, and Christian thought—and from the depths of his own faith—to present an approach to religious language and ritual that could inspire one to open her eyes to the complex challenges of being, to encounter wholeness in conflict, and to doubt and question with conviction. Tillich died in 1965 as a professor at the University of Chicago, and his theological writings continue to stir Protestants and non-Protestants, academics and non-academics, to this day.

In 2008, Michael Fishbane of the University of Chicago made a comparable and no less ambitious attempt within the realm of Jewish theology. In the field of candidates to conduct a contemporary rethinking and reinvigoration of Jewish theology, Michael Fishbane is as good a candidate as any. He is, on one hand, a renowned scholar of the Hebrew Bible, Jewish exegesis, and Kabbalah, and on the other hand an eloquent writer whose publications reflect wisdom and care. Half a century after the publication of Tillich's classics, the academy has arguably grown more skeptical of such introspective works, particularly in the field of religious studies. This resistance to subjectivity is certainly understandable and, to an extent, necessary. However, thinkers like Tillich and Fishbane inspire one to consider the possibility that academic scholars are in a unique position to make especially sagacious and insightful contributions to theology. After all, few individuals in the world have fluency with both the internally normative elements of religious traditions and the philosophical and epistemological challenges made to those traditions.

Fishbane is acutely aware of modernity's challenges to theology, writing that, "the mirror of the world reflects back to us our willful epistemologies, our suspicion of values, and the rank perversities of the human heart." (ix) He recognizes that the classic approach to Jewish theology is no longer viable. The heavyweights of pre-modern Jewish thought tried to reconcile Jewish texts with their own generation's hegemonic philosophies, but today's intellectual arena cannot support such endeavors. First, Fishbane explains, there is the "absence in our times of one coherent or compelling worldview." (9) Second, in the currents of globalization and multiculturalism, "we are affected by diverse sources of cultural value and memory," (10) so efforts to harmonize scripture with disparate paradigms would appear to be pointless at best (imagine a university student's Bible, wedged between works of Rumi, Einstein, Foucault, and the Dalai Lama). Third, it is difficult to justify or legitimate any discussion whatsoever about divinity in the wake of Kant's philosophical revolution and modernity's dramatic lowering of "the metaphysical ceiling" (11).

For many modern individuals, the reasons to give up and move on from theology outweigh the reasons to roll up one's sleeves and reformulate it. Perhaps the *raison d'être* of *Sacred Attunement* will elude those who feel no need to seek meaning beyond the wonders of nature, philosophy, art and human beings. This book is deeply relevant, however, for the less satiated and more spiritually antsy reader. One who appreciates those awesome elements of life but also senses that there is more to these phenomena than we can readily grasp, who craves tastes of that which produces and permeates all moments, who thirsts for intimations of the one in the many and feels a need to integrate such an awareness into everyday life—such a seeker cannot help but take some interest in theology, despite its inevitable shortcomings. It seems that theology will never completely go out of style. Fishbane's project proves to be worthwhile for many of us.

Fishbane identifies the need for a new theological breakthrough, but one that is fundamentally different from past breakthroughs in Jewish thought. It cannot be a new idea, concept, or theoretical framework. For Fishbane, the thrust of today's theology cannot be any *thing* at all. It must be so vast and life-size that it transcends and includes all things and thoughts. It must be a quality of awareness more than a state of mind, an invitation more than an answer. Fishbane's project, therefore, faces a severe challenge: to communicate through language that which is beyond language. He acknowledges the possibility that "language can never mean what it says or even quite reach its object," (ix) but Fishbane remains cautiously committed to words. Alluding to the nature of God in rich prose throughout his book—that "great circumscribing vastness," (129)

the “most primal Depth (beyond the Beyond of all conception),” (34) “a throbbing of divine everlastingness” (109)—he presents a theology that is permanently unfinished and open-ended.

He calls his new breakthrough “the consciousness of natality, the spring of beginnings that comes with a reborn mindfulness.” (ix) For Fishbane, the primary task of theology is not to describe God, but to guide people to “God-mindedness” in the world. Theology is a spiritual practice in and of itself. It must be more than “a mere cluster of speculative abstractions and traditional assertions—of cognitive or conceptual value at best.” (108) Theology must begin on the ground, so to speak, with an embodied awareness of the natural world. To intimately behold entities and events in their phenomenal intricacies, as they change and unfold in each fleeting moment, is to encounter, for lack of a better word, *God*. In a bold subordination of theological language to that which it should accomplish, Fishbane states, “God is a cultivated presence and theology its handmaiden.” (40)

Mindfulness—unconditional openness to behold all that arises in one’s environment and consciousness—is foundational in Fishbane’s theology. One cannot gain insight into supernal heights without earthly rootedness; one cannot bypass sensory experience in efforts to penetrate into the depths of being. “Here below, in the vast phenomenal world, the project of theology must begin with a wholly natural attitude to the things and happenings of experience. There is no other way.” (12) Fishbane unequivocally maintains that “theology and life go hand in hand.” (109) Solitary saints and reclusive mystics are at a dramatic disadvantage, since one who does not earnestly pay attention to the beauty and pain of her relationships, surroundings, and responsibilities, cannot know God. Fishbane promotes “a theological position of vigilant attentiveness.” (59)

Such mindfulness requires great conviction and courage. We have powerful, visceral impulses to recoil from disturbing emotions, thoughts and social realities. “The present theology attempts to stare all this down,” Fishbane writes (xiii). One’s capacity to “stand firm in this divinely wrought vastness” (59) and “sustain the full brunt of what occurs at any time, without sliding into simplicities or reducing complexities” (168) reveals a very real, sublime wholeness that is far removed from the illusory, comforting deity that modern critics have rightfully criticized. The uncensored contents of consciousness may be overwhelming, but to deny them is to sever oneself from holiness. As Freud declared in *The Future of an Illusion*, “Nothing ought to keep us from directing our observation to our own selves.” One cannot simultaneously seek an infinite divinity and neglect aspects of life.

While mindfulness is a prerequisite of Fishbane’s theology, it is only the beginning. Radical attentiveness in itself may enhance one’s sensations and perceptions, but it does not necessarily enhance how one behaves, engages, or responds. For Fishbane, a theology that is blind to such concrete concerns is insufficient. In his thought, the word “attunement” stands for a sort of active mindfulness. “This is the double-faced nature of attunement: it involves both perception and performance. Accordingly, theology is not merely a type of thinking but also a type of living.” (xii) Fishbane asserts that one’s relationship to the divine is inextricably connected to acts of interpretation—how one perceives, understands, draws meaning from, and responds to the details of texts, people, and phenomena. Hence, the name he gives to his project: *hermeneutical theology*. The essence of hermeneutical theology is that one’s interpretations of texts (primarily scripture) and one’s interpretations of life are mutually enriching processes that co-cultivate God-mindedness.

Despite this emphasis on mindfulness, Fishbane doubts that there is any such thing as “pure” mindfulness, naked and without history. In the spirit of Heidegger and Gadamer, he holds that all consciousness involves verbal and hermeneutical constructions. Language, he writes, is “our most primary rationality, giving our minds their most basic mindfulness.” (15) Furthermore, Fishbane’s aim is not to develop a universal theology, but rather a distinctively *Jewish* theology that is rooted in maximally universal realities. The question he faces, then, is how a human being can live fully in the elemental world when rational access to that world is filtered through the lenses of hermeneutical consciousness. And, more specifically: how can one engage with all the particularities of life and Judaism, and at the same time connect openly and wholeheartedly with the pre-conceptual, infinite vastness called God?

Fishbane suggests that the only way to preserve a theology’s oneness and integrity is, ironically perhaps, to open it up to the dynamic dissonance of multiplicity, “the multiform diversity of life itself.” (109) To shield theology from plurality of meaning is to sketch limited portraits of God—to create new idols. Thus, Fishbane works to illuminate the interplay between contradictory elements, weaving his theological tapestry out of the warp and woof of relationships. The theological meanings of prayer, faithfulness, God, ritual, and revelation bubble up in the confluences of finitude and infinity, silence and speech, mystical nothingness (*ayin*) and worldly existence (*yesh*), the manifest and the concealed, the everyday and the numinous, cosmic “indifference to human plans and purposes” (59) and the powerful gravity of human instruction. Hermeneutical theology is oriented in terms of the spatial polarities of in/out, near/far and with/before.

Fishbane's association of holiness with the dialogical relations of opposites reflects the influence of kabbalistic notions of the creative energy generated through contrasting emanations of God. It is also reminiscent of Tillich's insistence in *The Dynamics of Faith* that faith is an act of the "total personality" and must encompass all the polarities of being. Fishbane and Tillich are both aware that a contemporary theology must reflect the motion and flux of life itself, must not become fixated on stagnant concepts, and therefore, must be able to withstand contradictions. In this way, Fishbane constructs a "living theology" (3) that "requires one to step out of the shadows of tradition and routine and say: 'Here I am; this is life as I know it.'" (2) Wholeness feeds on acceptance of fragmentation.

Fishbane's focus on scriptural interpretation as an essential practice in hermeneutical theology is this book's most impactful innovation. He treats the Torah as a microcosm of life itself, a rich laboratory for the cultivation of God-mindedness. Multidimensionality is the essence of this discourse. The Torah itself is a "threefold chord." (60) First and foremost, there is the pre-verbal *torah kelulah*, "the Torah of All-in-All," which is the entire stream of existence and possibility in the universe. "Only this Torah truly comes from the mouth of God," writes Fishbane, affirming his commitment to historical-critical scholarship, but also to his consideration of this field in a spiritual context. Then there is *torah she-bikhtav* (Written Torah), the Hebrew Bible itself, the imperfect and wondrous attempt of ancient Israel to funnel *torah kelulah* into finitude. Finally, there is *torah she-be'al peh* (Oral Torah), which includes millennia of Jewish responses—exegetical, emotional, behavioral—to the ink of scripture. When one studies scripture, one engages with these three aspects of Torah. And the practice of interpretation itself is fourfold. Fishbane draws from the four traditional modes of Jewish biblical exegesis, which constitute the acronym *PaRDeS*: *peshat* (the plain or contextual meaning of the text), *remez* (symbolic or allegorical interpretation) *derash* (theological and legal reformulations of scripture, often involving creative uses of intertextuality among all canonical sources), and *sod* (the "secret" or mystical dimension of scripture, inseparable from one's own spiritual life). Fishbane expands the normative horizons of the *PaRDeS* model of study, emphasizing how each one of these elements is significant as a mode of ethical and hermeneutical consciousness: how we read scripture influences how we listen to a lover's voice or regard a stranger's face, and vice versa. While some classical exegetes have favored one style of interpretation or posited a hierarchy of styles, Fishbane endorses a radically integrated and dynamic approach. "Not bound by the exclusive importance of any one mode of reading and thinking, or by fixed hierarchies of value, we may live with the awareness of a more complex simultaneity of meanings." (104-5) The threefold Torah, the fourfold method of exegesis and the spontaneous intermingling of all these various modes highlight the fluidity and vivacity of Fishbane's theology.

In his conclusion to *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud admits that his psychoanalytic deconstruction of religion may be mistaken. But, he argues, it is precisely his openness to uncertainty that confirms the veracity of his system. "You have to defend the religious illusion with all your might," he observes, but "my illusions are not, like religious ones, incapable of correction." Tillich's absorption of doubt into his definition of faith similarly reflects this affirmation of not-knowing. In *Sacred Attunement*, Fishbane also beautifully champions this value. "It is the task of covenant theology," he states, "to prepare a person to live with such unknowing." (170) The greatness of his theology, and what will make this book so relevant for generations of seekers to come, lies in the fact that hermeneutical theology is eternally incomplete.

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