A Conversation with Lawrence Kushner

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(W.N.) *Since we're meeting just a few days before Rosh Hashanah, when rabbis are busy writing their sermons, I'll begin by asking what you're thinking about these days, and what you're planning to talk about.*

(L.K.) What's on my mind is that maybe the only way to salvage religion is to go beyond the old idea of a God who is beyond and above. More and more, I think God is the name we give to our sense that everything is connected to everything else. Now that doesn't guarantee you happiness, but it does give you an inside shot at meaning.

I believe that this was the inherent heresy of Hasidism: If God is everything, and everything is God, that turns a lot of classical religious language on its head. It suggests that most of us have been taking the idea of

God too literally. I don't think we can talk any more about God commanding, or rewarding and punishing.

Why do you say "any more"?

Most of the old religious imagery explaining such things as prayer, creation, or evil, is heavily based on a vertical metaphor in which God is "up there" and we are "down here." When we speak of God's being in heaven, some people start to think God really lives up there. Others will tell you that's not true, but when they start doing religious stuff, they act as if it were anyway.

So religious teachers get caught in the middle between the idea that God is everything, and trying to talk to people who would rather go on taking the old metaphor literally. A lot of them just want somebody to hold their hands and let them hold onto third-grade theology. And if that's all they have, you don't want to smash it. A lady asked me the other day: "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Sounds like she had the wrong Kushner.

That, too. The simple answer to her question is that God was never really in that business, but by taking the metaphor literally, we thought God was. The same question comes up even more powerfully when you think about the Holocaust. But here, too, the question isn't, Where was God? The real question is: Why do human beings do terrible things? To ask why God allowed these things to happen assumes that God occasionally intervenes in human affairs without human agency. But countless events remind us that God simply doesn't work like that. God didn't die in the Holocaust, only the Deuteronomic idea of an intervening God who rewards and punishes people.

I notice you avoid using a pronoun for God.

I prefer to say "The One." It encourages us to remember that it's all God, that everything else is an illusion. Why is it, for instance, that you and I are not aware, right now, that it's all God? Or to put it another way, what do you do to wake yourself up when you're not aware of the immediacy and power and terror of God? What do you do when things seem to be operating discretely and autonomously and you inhabit a world of separation? How do you attain that higher awareness?

Does that higher awareness occur during prayer?

It depends. There are two kinds of prayer: petitionary prayer, which makes less and less sense to me, and contemplative or meditative

prayer—which is an opportunity for heightened awareness of the Divine.

Do you think that awareness is enabled or impeded by our liturgy?

For most of us, it's impeded. But if you get to a level where you've got it all memorized, and you can go on autopilot, the liturgy can function as a kind of verbal, melodic, mantra-like springboard that sets you free.

Which is presumably more difficult during the High Holidays, when the liturgy is both more complex and less familiar.

The High Holiday liturgy can be an infantilizing experience. On the negative side, it's loaded with "Our Father, Our King" and images of reward and punishment, which, if taken literally, are rarely helpful. On the other hand, those images can sweep you back to your childhood, when they were healing and important. Understandably, liberal Jews are of two minds about these prayers. It's comforting to remember a time when your parents and God were omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent. My own congregation rewrote the liturgy in gender-neutral language, but when they got to *Avinu Malkeinu,* they left it alone. The melody is evocative, and people wanted to retain some of that sense of standing before Daddy in Heaven.

Does that image have any validity to you?

Sure, if it's part of a larger picture. But the key fact of human life, as the High Holidays continually remind us, is that the future is unknown. And Judaism is unequivocal in forbidding us to deal with anyone who claims to know what is to come. The Torah is very explicit about this in Deuteronomy, chapter 18. I'm interested in verse 13, which reads, *tamim ti'yeh im Adonai Elohekha. You shall be tamim—perfect—with the Lord your God.* Rashi explains that *tamim* means we should walk with God "wholeheartedly," that we should put our hope in God and not attempt to investigate the future. If we accept whatever comes upon us wholeheartedly, that's what it means to be with God.

When you're facing an unknown future—and the future is always unknown—you have three options. First option: everything is fated, it's all meant to be. In other words, predestination.

The second option is free will. Here the future is allegedly wide-open, and is shaped only by our deeds. In order to preserve our free will, God voluntarily steps back, as it were, and refuses to intervene. But this only poses a larger problem. If God never intervenes, then God is effectively irrelevant. Or maybe God intervenes every now and then, although nobody has yet been able to discern a coherent pattern—assuming there is one. Which means we're stuck in a situation where sometimes we're free (when God doesn't intervene), and sometimes we're not (whenever God does). But since there's no way to know when God does or doesn't, our condition is absurd.

The choice between these two options has led many thoughtful people to reject the idea of God altogether. But that would mean life is meaningless, a cosmic crap shoot, and I don't accept that.

I believe there's a third option. Suppose we say that instead of controlling everything, or making an occasional intervention, God *is* everything. In Yiddish, *Alles is Gott:* The entire glorious, horrible, holy, terrifying wondrous mess we call creation is a continuous manifestation of the divine. Even our sense of independence and autonomy is part of that whole, and therefore "meant to be." In this model, we are neither puppets of fate nor masters of free will. Everything is the way it's supposed to be. We enter each new day wholeheartedly confident that everything is somehow a manifestation of the Divine.

Which leads to a certain acceptance.

Well, it certainly doesn't mean we have to like it, or that we shouldn't try to change it. But it does mean that we accept our present situation "as if" it were tailored by God for us personally. We find ourselves saying, "I'm not sure why this has been given to me, or why this has been torn from me, or why this is happening to me, but I acknowledge that somehow it is a manifestation of God."

Not necessarily a comforting thought.

No, there's not much consolation here, which is why I wouldn't say this within ten blocks of any hospital. But I believe it's a theology of hope. It removes our chronic worry that everything is meaningless, because at any given moment things are the way they're supposed to be. This is the old Yiddish notion of *bashert*—it's meant to be, intended.

We also have the popular Talmudic saying, "hakol bi-yidei shamayim hutz mi-yirat shamayim. Everything is in the hands of God except the fear of God."

Which isn't free will at all. But if you believe in free will and also in God, how do you know which is which? Whoops, wait a moment, did God just do that? It's kind of silly. But what if God is All? At any given moment,

everything is a manifestation of the Divine. You might not like it, and sometimes you might hate it. Somebody dies, and you'd say, I guess that's the way it's supposed to be.

God simply is. God is my parent who just died. God is the sadness. And God is also the hope.

How is that different from the first option?

In the first option, God is up there puppeteering. In this model, God simply is. God is my parent who just died. God is the sadness. And God is also the hope. In this way, you get to the point where you realize that you yourself are present in the Divine. It doesn't make the pain go away, but at least it takes the edge off. There is always the possibility of meaning.

Karen and I were up in the Pacific Northwest not long ago, waiting to catch a ferry in Anacortes, Washington. The guide book advises you to get there early, so we arrived two hours in advance—just moments after the previous ferry had left. The man in the car in front of us was furious; he had missed his boat by five minutes, so now his vacation was delayed by two hours—until the next boat. Not only did he miss the boat, but he had the misfortune to be standing next to a theologian. "Dammit!" he said. "If I had only left home three minutes earlier, I would have made it."

"No," I said, "you wouldn't have made that boat. You would have been stuck in traffic or had a flat tire. You weren't supposed to make that boat. Something else would have delayed you. That boat just didn't have your name on it."

"Oh," he said, startled for a moment. "Thanks, I feel better."

Because things happen for a reason?

Well, it's tempting to lapse into the other kind of theology, that God did this to teach you something. That's not what I mean. But because everything can lead you back to everything else, everything can also be an opportunity to learn. The way one ought to believe is to walk like Yaakov: *batom*. Wholeheartedly.

I don't recognize that word. Are you sure it's in Genesis?

No, it's in Proverbs, 10:9. In Genesis, Yaakov is described as *ish tam*, a simple man. By the time you get to Proverbs, the concept takes on an additional meaning—wholehearted and secure: "One who walks wholeheartedly walks securely." So I'm no longer upset about missing the boat. I got mixed up and thought I was running things, but I've just been reminded again that I'm not.

All of this is part of a teaching I'm working on, and like most of my sermons, it's addressed to me. You know you're on the right track as a preacher when you realize that you're writing the sermon to yourself. I looked at the word *batom* and it occurred to me that my father's nickname was Tom. I was telling myself that I should walk "with Tom." Then I started to remember what it was like to be a little boy with my father, who used to protect me.

Which brings us back to your earlier life. Where do you come from?

I was born in 1943 in Detroit, the older of two boys. During the war, my father was in the Navy, stationed in Australia, and I didn't meet him until I was almost three. He was a quiet man, uncomfortable with emotions. After his first heart attack I took him away overnight to a little inn. Over dinner I said, "Dad, I've never told you this, but I love you." He said, "You'll hate yourself in the morning." That humor was how we were close. His hero was John Wayne.

Do you remember meeting him for the first time?

I don't know, really. I've been told about it so often that I'm not sure. We all went down to Michigan Central Depot, where my mother, who hadn't seen her husband for two and a half years, was holding this toddler—me—whom he had never met. For him it must have been strange, having an instant kid.

What did he do for a living?

All sorts of things. Before joining the Navy he worked for Sears, in downtown Detroit, where he did the window displays. He was also a sign painter. In the 1930s he was the trainer for the Detroit Lions football team. He liked to say that in those days they had twelve men on the team—eleven on the field, and an extra in case somebody got hurt.

After the war he sold appliances at Sears. Then he became a kind of executive *shammas* at a large Reform temple in Detroit. He had started as a volunteer, but he was so good at taking care of the shul that they hired him

away from Sears. Years later, his hobby was making little wood models of synagogues from around the world, which are still on display at the temple. When he died, there were seven hundred people at his funeral.

Quite a crowd for a reserved man. What became of your brother?

Also a rabbi. My mother, who's still alive, had surgery on her neck at the age of 85. When she came out of the operation, my brother and I were both there. The nurse said, "Rabbi Kushner?" And we both said "Yes?" "Wait," said the nurse. "You're both rabbis?" Whereupon my mother, who had been unconscious until this moment, rolled over and said, "Yes, that's my specialty." Then she fell back asleep.

What kind of Jewish home did you grow up in?

I use these words deliberately: it was a pious, observant, Reform Jewish home. We did all the things Reform Jews were supposed to do. There was never ham or shellfish in our home, but we had bacon for breakfast.

Bacon but not ham?

It wasn't uncommon in the Midwest for Reform Jews to eat bacon, but not ham. I remember my mother yelling at my father for ordering Canadian bacon in a restaurant, and scolding, "not in front of the children." It looked too much like pork. She always lit candles, and we attended Friday night services. But we also had BLT sandwiches for lunch.

Was it a classical Reform temple?

Yes, a big cathedral with stained-glass windows, and more light bulbs in the chandeliers than stars in the sky. There was a gentile choir, and the organist played low notes that you couldn't hear, but could feel in your chest. Everybody dressed up. My aunt called it *fapitzed*, which meant, I think, wearing more expensive clothes than she could afford. I had to wear itchy wool pants, which I hated. I would go with my grandfather, who always sat on the second aisle on the right in the fourth row. "*Shweigenzee*," he would tell me. "Be quiet!" I didn't understand the service, but I liked standing next to somebody big who loved me, and who told me to shut up.

So your grandfather was German?

My mother's parents were German Jews, and my maternal grandfather was a very important figure. When my father was in the war, my mother and I lived with her parents. My father's family came from Eastern Europe.

When did you decide to become a rabbi?

I still remember the moment. I was in ninth grade, at a community-wide Reform Friday night service. I looked at all those rabbis sitting up on the *bimah*, and I thought, What a neat deal! Their job is to read and study and be good and help other people make sense of their lives. And they get paid to do this? Why wouldn't everybody want to be a rabbi? I had no idea that I was growing up in one of only eleven homes in America where you never spoke ill of the rabbi.

And before you made that decision, where were you headed?

I was a child prodigy in art. In ninth grade I asked my mother, "What if I gave up my art to become a rabbi?" She said, "Well, that would be a higher calling."

But you didn't give it up completely.

No, I still paint. And I've always done graphics and artwork.

And calligraphy, and the jacket designs of your books. A few years ago I heard you had designed a Hebrew font for computers.

I did several. I got into computers early, but I was frustrated by the fact that I couldn't use Hebrew letters. So I learned enough about computers to program them.

After you finished high school, what then?

In those days, the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati had a combined program for undergraduates with the University of Cincinnati. By the time you earned your undergraduate degree, you had also picked up a year's credit at HUC. I took the Baltimore & Ohio sleeper from Detroit to Cincinnati, where I moved into a dorm room, opened my first checking account, and registered for classes. I remember sitting at my desk, watching the cars go by on Clifton Avenue and thinking how nice it would be to be back home. But it was going to be like this for the rest of my life, so I knew I had to get used to it. I cried anyway. I had no idea that at that very moment, my parents were holding each other and weeping. It's funny how people cry when they get everything they have prayed for.

So you were still a teenager when you started your rabbinical training.

It's amazing, but as recently as the 1960s you could be admitted to the rabbinical program without knowing a single letter of Hebrew. There were Iowa farm boys in our class who learned not only Hebrew, but how to

accept food from servants. All our meals were served by white-coated black waiters. I was there all through the sixties, from 1961 through 1969.

It sounds like you followed a pretty straight path from ninth grade through ordination.

It was easy, because I knew what I wanted to do. In the middle, between undergraduate and graduate school, I spent a year at the New York campus. I wanted to study with Eugene Borowitz, and he turned out to be very important for me.

You were interested in contemporary theology?

I was interested in a theology which was human and personal, and therefore spiritual—as opposed to cerebral, logical, and theoretical. I'll never forget the time Borowitz asked a question in class, and the person he had called on faltered. Several other hands shot up, and Borowitz, in the most loving and constructive way, said, "No, give him more time, please." To me, that represented the human face of theology.

Which was exactly what you were looking for.

Yes, and when Karen and I got married, Borowitz performed the ceremony.

Where did you go after ordination?

Everyone in the class had a job, except me. And then the job of the century came along at Congregation Solel, a liberal temple on the north shore of Chicago. It was creative, literate, and above all, it thrived on controversy and political activism. Their rabbi, Arnold Jacob Wolf, had persuaded some of the wealthier members to form an independent foundation to work for the good of the temple. They decided to hire a rabbi—not an assistant rabbi, but a second rabbi for the congregation. So they endowed a fellowship for a newly-ordained rabbi to spend two years at their congregation—and to be on loan to several other groups as well.

Arnold Wolf neither wanted nor needed an assistant, which freed up our relationship. I didn't even meet him until after I was hired, but when we finally met we hit it off famously. He had a profound influence on me.

What are some of the things you learned from Arnold Wolf?

First, that you can survive in the rabbinate by telling the truth—not only in private, but also, and maybe especially, in public, no matter how embarrassing or frightening or funny your words may sound. Religious

institutions are by nature prone to self-delusion, so a rabbi has a special responsibility to avoid sweet, platitudinous, feel-good talk and to speak with the candor of blunt, everyday language.

I also learned that a rabbi must not curry favor with the prominent or the wealthy—nor, on the other hand, with the modest or the weak. Therefore: no obsequiousness, no politicking, no baby kissing.

Another thing: the rabbi shouldn't take himself or the congregation too seriously. "We are the wise men," Wolf liked to say, "—of Chelm." In an era when many rabbis wore black robes, had reserved parking spaces, confused their titles with their first names and in some cases actually had portraits of themselves hanging in the foyer, Arnold Wolf's congregation called him "Arnold." He worked without a secretary, and routinely confessed his mistakes from the pulpit.

You can survive in the rabbinate by telling the truth–not only in private, but also, and maybe especially, in public.

And how did this go over with the congregation?

A lot of people were convinced the whole thing was an elaborate Machiavellian manipulation. They were wrong. Arnold Wolf demystified the rabbi-congregation relationship. He advised other rabbis to think of the congregation simply as the place where they worked, and not to hesitate to ask about such "mundane" considerations as the working conditions, the hours, the salary, the vacation. He would caution me against using the phrase "my congregation." As he liked to say, "I only work here. Otherwise, I'd probably daven at a little Orthodox place downtown."

He believed that rabbis didn't own their congregations and shouldn't try to run them. The congregation is owned by its members, the people who pay for it. It should never become an extension of the rabbi's ego. Arnold believed that congregants should be free to make their own decisions, and that the rabbi shouldn't even attend board meetings. He once went so far as to say that how a congregation gets and spends its money is none of the rabbi's business—and I think he's wrong about that. The rabbi's business, he

insisted—and continues to insist—is to teach Jews what he knows about how to grow in the service of God, and then get out of the way while they figure out for themselves how to make it all work.

So part of the rabbi's job is to limit his own role.

In Lurianic terms, the rabbi must practice *tsimsum*—voluntary self-contraction—which gives his congregation enough room to flourish.

Wolf has a new book out, Unfinished Rabbi, and the opening lines echo what you've been saying: "Nobody believes me, least of all my own congregation, but the fact is that I only work here. Rabbis are not, in my view, spiritual leaders, bosses, administrators, organizers, fund-raisers, or PR types. We are teachers, hired to teach and only to teach. If we really teach, we have little time for anything else." What did you learn about Judaism from Arnold?

He offered a model of how a liberal Jew can be seriously observant and even reverent. He taught me that you can speak about Torah and commandments, and that our job as Jewish leaders was not to invent our own religion—as some Reform Jews were doing, in effect making Shabbos for themselves—but to engage the tradition. This was at the beginning of liberal Judaism's return to tradition.

He also gave me permission and license to try new things. I realized, for example, that many synagogues, including ours, were simply too big, and that we were better off forming smaller, more intimate groups to do Jewish things together. So we invented synagogue havurot. Unbeknownst to one another, Harold Schulweis and I seemed to have come up with the same idea at the same time. We also started simultaneous parent-child education. As a novice, I had the advantage of not knowing what wasn't supposed to work.

If you had license to innovate, you must have failed, too, on occasion.

I tried to get Shabbos morning davenning going, but hardly anybody came.

Where did you go after Solel?

When the fellowship was up I came here, to Sudbury, and I've been here ever since. I've been offered two jobs in my life, and I've taken them both.

What was in Sudbury when you arrived?

Chaos. A congregation of a hundred households had recently been through some major battles. Should the temple be kosher? Should it be Reform, Conservative, or unaffiliated? They had affiliated with the Reform movement a year before I arrived, but it was an uneasy truce. Of the 66 members who attended the meeting, 5 had voted for Orthodox, 11 for Reconstructionist, 19 for Conservative, 23 for Reform, and 8 for None of the Above.

The impasse was resolved when someone moved that the congregation should affiliate with the Reform movement, but would retain a kosher kitchen and observe the second day of Rosh Hashanah. They then hired a twenty-eight year-old rabbi whom they hoped would be suitable.

Beth El is the most unusual American synagogue I've ever seen. How would you describe it?

First, no plaques. No matter how much you give, your name can't be anywhere.

Because plaques are vulgar?

And more important, because not having plaques makes us a classless society. Not only no plaques, but no public recognition for big givers. Now, at long last, we need a new building, so we'll be putting this principle to the test.

Why is the principle so important?

If you acknowledge publicly how much money people give, you can't avoid creating a hierarchical social structure. If nobody knows you gave the money, you and the next person are equal. If you asked me today to name our big givers, I couldn't tell you who they were.

Which is amazing.

I think it's even more amazing to walk into a building with no plaques. Plaques bring the Jewish community down. We have no fundraising at all—no car washes, no ad books, no Bingo, no cupcakes in the parking lot. All the money comes from people taking on their fair share of the expenses.

So the dues must be high.

Very high, up to $2500, although nobody is turned away for lack of money. If it were up to me there'd be no ceiling on dues, because people at the high end don't really pay their fair share. I'd like to see dues as a percentage of your taxes. Tell us how much you're paying the I.R.S., and we'll take your word for it.

What is it about this issue that affects you so deeply, even after all these years?

First, it's important for people to confront the true cost of what they want. Didn't Freud say that the payment was part of the cure? Second, we don't want people outside our community to be supporting it. Would you contribute to our ad book? No, this is a spiritual community. If we can't support ourselves, we should give it up. But above all it's about integrity: if you want something, you should pay for it. There's a widespread misconception that because a synagogue is non-profit and tax-exempt, it is therefore a charity. The harsh truth is that in many respects it's more like a country club. .

In so many congregations the fundraising apparatus creates an entire subculture of people who are not growing as Jews, who are busy instead with Bingo or the car wash. I believe the synagogue has failed those people. They feel active in the community, but how are they using their time? If there's no opportunity for fundraising, it frees up a lot of energy for other tasks.

As I see it, the purpose of a synagogue is for Jews to engage in primary religious acts which they should not, and probably cannot, do alone. That's the only justification for the existence of a congregation. Everything else congregations do, Jews can do cheaper, easier, and better somewhere else.

Let's define what you mean by "primary religious acts." I assume you're referring to study and prayer.

I'm referring to the three categories from *Pirke Avot [Ethics of the Fathers]—Torah, Avodah, Gemilut Hasadim.* Torah represents our intellectual side: reading, study, questioning, learning. Avodah is our emotional side: prayer, songs, candles, meditation. And the third category includes acts of help, repair, compassion, attention, and justice. Very few of us can do all three categories well, but by joining a community we can compensate for our personal inadequacies.

And what about people who love to be involved in fundraising and all that secular busy-work?

They're usually not drawn to our community, and there's no shortage of synagogues in greater Boston.

Do you think some forms of fundraising are worse than others?

I'm an extremist on the issue of legalized gambling. "Come on, rabbi, it's only a raffle, it's innocuous, what could it hurt? And we'll use the money to buy something you want!" I feel like the Dutch boy with his thumb in the dike; this is where I draw the line. I realize that Bingo or Monte Carlo

nights can deliver large sums of money, but I think they exact an even higher price from the soul of the congregation.

You really *can* have a congregation without fundraising—and without a professional who normally earns $100 an hour selling cupcakes in the parking lot. People in congregations often get so caught up in doing secondary acts—building a building, raising money, attending meetings—that they come to believe that the building, the raising of money, or the meeting is the purpose of the congregation. You end up with people who sincerely believe that running a photocopier, attending meetings or organizing Bingo are primary religious acts because it supports a religious institution. I'd much rather see members of a synagogue demanding that the congregation provide them with facilities—services, programs, lectures, classes, teachers, a library—so they can grow as Jews.

This is a spiritual community. If we can't support ourselves, we should give it up.

Has this battle been won, or do you have to reinvent this wheel every couple of years?

I do, unfortunately, because new members come in who are accustomed to doing these things in the old ways.

One of the things I hate most in organized Jewish life are the endless, vapid dinners that claim to "honor" somebody. With all the recent changes and improvements in American Jewish life, you would think someone would have come up with a good alternative to the testimonial dinner.

I agree. Dinners bring the community together, but instead of raising it up they bring it down. Most people hate these programs and would much rather attend a cultural program or a stimulating lecture. If you're not careful, ritualized public displays of gratitude can suffocate every other area of synagogue life. If everybody is thanked, the only noteworthy moments are the invariable omissions.

How do you encourage members of your congregation to be religiously active?

A rabbi must be willing to relinquish traditional tokens of rabbinic

authority. The more you give away, the more secure you become. Most rabbis have it backwards: the more they hoard, the more powerful they think they will be. In fact that makes them weak.

Has your own religious observance changed much over the years you've been here?

In the years after Solel I was on a traditionally observant track, culminating in a couple of years of strict *shomer Shabbos* [Sabbath-observant] and strictly kosher. But I came out the other side. I remain very respectful of traditional observance, but I no longer think it's the way for me, and I suspect it's not going to be the way for many other Jews. Kashrut as it's currently practiced is putting itself out of business.

No matter how kosher you are, there's always someone who won't eat in your kitchen.

Because it's so extreme?

Yes, because no matter how kosher you are, there's always someone who won't eat in your kitchen. I'd like to see a reasonable standard of kashrut defined for liberal Jews. There is more than one way to be a serious and observant Jew. We both know a lot of very serious Jews who observe a widely practiced and informally agreed-upon mode of kashrut. It includes not eating anything that could not be made kosher. So these people will consider eating meat out in a restaurant, but they will not consider eating pork or shellfish under any circumstances, or eating milk and meat on the same dish. They are not strict about keeping two sets of dishes nor about waiting between eating meat and milk. They might—perfectly validly— maintain different standards for eating at home and eating away from home. And yet the role of kashrut in their lives is important and seriously religious, and it ought to be taken every bit as seriously as someone who considers him or herself glatt kosher.

We need a vocabulary to describe, not varying levels—that implies better and worse—but different ways of expressing the sacred in our lives. Because there is no name for this mode of kashrut, it exists as a sort of black market. What we ought to do is take ourselves seriously enough to give it a name.

What name would you give it?

Kashrut America, say. If we put this out there and give it a name, I think a lot of people who would like to keep kosher, would. There's an obsessive-compulsive aspect to traditional kashrut that doesn't seem to have anything to do with what God wants, it's just obsessive behavior. How beautiful it would be if someone could say, I observe kashrut America.

One could also say the same about Shabbat. Orthodoxy has defined and effectively co-opted the phrase *shomer Shabbat.* But that doesn't mean they're correct. The commandment is given twice, once with the verb *shomer* [keep] and once with *zakhor* [remember]. Perhaps we should define a new mode of Shabbat observance called *zokher Shabbat* that would not prohibit driving, for example, if that were done to celebrate Shabbat.

But they might say: If you stop doing X or Y, what will be left?

They said that to my grandfather, and I'm still here. Some Reform Jews have fallen off the edge, but so have some Orthodox Jews. I have a different attitude toward human behavior I'm more optimistic about what it means to be a human being. People want to be Jewish and they need help. You can have fences around fences, but that can't be the solution.

A few years ago your congregation produced its own prayerbook, Vetaher Libenu. How did that come about?

It grew out of an exercise I had given to members of a beginning liturgy class. I wanted them to try writing their own prayers so they could appreciate the prayerbook. At the time, the only available prayerbooks were the Silverman, which was deadly, and the Union Prayerbook, which was simply too thin.

So you wrote a new siddur with them?

No, I thought it was important that it be their creation. Any rabbinic presence would only skew it. My advice was: "Whatever you decide, tell the truth about what you believe." They came back to me and said, "You know, we don't think God is masculine or feminine, and we really don't think the language should reflect God's gender." Almost nobody was saying this at the time, so they were slightly ahead of the curve.

And when the new prayerbook was published, it made the news.

To our surprise, we realized that Beth El had published the first non-sexist Jewish prayerbook in history. The news went out over the AP wire and was picked up by newspapers all over the world.

I was interested in how the editors of the siddur explained their decision in favor of gender-neutrality, so I went back to look at the introduction. "Above all," they write, "we questioned why the rich fabric of our psalms and prayers has been woven exclusively on masculine threads recalling monarchs, lords, and fathers, despite the unequivocal statement of the Torah, 'And God created mankind in God's image; male and female God created them'...We have come to believe that the exclusive use of masculine imagery to describe God invites idolatry, that the imagery too easily becomes the reality."

We weren't really prepared for such a strong reaction on that issue. Some of us thought that translating *Baruch Atah Adonai*...as "Holy One of Blessing, Your Presence fills creation" was actually a more radical step than gender neutrality.

I hate responsive readings.
Do you know anybody
who thinks they're uplifting?

What if you had hated the new siddur?

These were extraordinarily talented and literate people. I knew they weren't going to come up with garbage. They showed me the final manuscript and asked me to look for errors. I found some and missed a few others.

One thing you don't find in this siddur is any responsive reading.

I hate responsive readings. Do you know anybody who looks forward to them or thinks they're uplifting? But they're all over American Jewish liturgy like some kind of weed. I can understand reading responsively if you have a particular psalm that was intended to be antiphonal, but otherwise I think it's deadly.

But you see it everywhere.

This goes to a deeper problem, the role of the leader of the service. One of the things I have tried to teach the congregation is that I can't pray for

them better than they can prayer for themselves. Sometimes I joke, "I know more about praying than you do, because I went to rabbinic school. So if God has time to listen to just one of us, it will be me."

They laugh, and then I say, "If you don't believe me, why do you act that way?" People must learn to pray for themselves.

Was this something you learned at Solel?

No, Solel did responsive readings too. I thought they were dumb, and finally I said to myself, I'm a rabbi, I don't have to do this. I feel the same way about the sequence of the wedding liturgy.

So what do you do about it?

I do a wedding in two acts. First we all gather around a big table, and the cantor or I will teach everyone a wedding *niggun*. And, as an inducement to get people to join in, we announce that we won't bring in the bride and the groom until everyone is singing. We read and sign the *ketubah*, and then we have the bride and groom speak to one another publicly. It's very powerful, and people usually cry. Only then do we erect the *huppah* at the other end of the room. It's all intuitive. I don't believe liturgy should require explanation.

Yes, I hate it when everything is explained and the service becomes a simplified lesson instead of a religious experience.

Just because many people are operating on a functional third-grade level of Jewish literacy doesn't mean that we should start with the fourth grade. My approach is, You can run and catch up, or you can be left behind. Most people, I find, are thrilled to be treated that way. If you go to a tennis pro, he's not going to play down to your level; he'll try to bring you up to his. You learn something by doing it. A visitor from another planet would probably assume that most synagogue services were designed primarily to make an occasional non-Jewish visitor feel comfortable. What would happen if services were designed instead for the regulars?

In other words, don't keep telling us what we're doing, or why. Just do it. Which means, I guess, no transliterations, right?

None. There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and it really is possible to learn them all. I sometimes tell people: If you were pledging a fraternity, you could learn the Greek alphabet in a week and swallow a goldfish, so you can certainly learn Hebrew. On a scale of difficulty where Hungarian is a 10 and pig Latin is a 1, English is a 7 and Hebrew would be a 3.

Rabbi Moshe Waldoks once said, "There's something terribly wrong with American Jewish worship. Each week in this country there are a couple of thousand bar and bat mitzvahs, and virtually nobody walks out of any of them saying, 'That was great! I want to be here every week.'" We're offering a three millennia-old tradition on how to make sacred sense out of life. If that's your product, you don't need advertising or bargain-basement prices. All you need is to be welcoming, to give people the real thing, to respect them. In other words, no shlock.

Given the obvious success of services at Beth El, you must have many imitators.

You'd think so, wouldn't you? Visitors to Beth El are always saying, "This is beautiful, we've got to try these things in our shul." My goal was never to change the world, but I thought that if you put some of these principles into play, a lot of other places would try them. But surprisingly few places actually do. It's a mystery to me.

It's also true that religious institutions are especially slow to change. And there has been a dramatic shift over the past two or three decades from the imperial rabbinate to what I would call the empowering rabbinate. When I was ordained, you were expected to wear a robe. There was an aura around the rabbi. When I was a kid the rabbi actually entered the sanctuary from a hidden door. These days he—or she—is much more willing to be a regular person. So obviously I'm not the only one who's thinking in these terms.

How do you prevent Beth El from becoming too big?

The members have capped our membership at 450 households. And maybe God put us out in the sticks to keep our growth at a more manageable pace.

What do you do about overly fancy bar mitzvahs, or the growing tendency of appropriating wedding customs for bar and bat mitzvahs?

The second problem, I think, has to do with people getting married later and being afraid that their parents won't be alive for their grandchildren's weddings. Imagine if we held weddings within a typical Shabbat service. The kiddush would have gourmet food, but only people who were invited would attend. Well, that's what we've got now with bar and bat mitzvahs.

What about the growing tendency to hold a bar or bat mitzvah on a Monday or a Thursday, to convene a special minyan just for that occasion?

I don't like it, and I won't do it. It has to occur a time when the congregation is already present. In many Reform congregations, bar and bat mitzvahs have closed down Shabbat morning services, which are effectively by invitation only. Technically, of course, any minyan of ten adult Jews can suffice, but the reading of Torah requires an ongoing community. At Beth El we say to the kid: This service, where you will be called to the Torah to celebrate your coming of age, will go on whether or not you and your family are here. We're delighted that you will be part of it, but we did this last week and we'll do it again next Shabbos—with or without you.

As long as I'm listing my pet peeves, here's another: a bar mitzvah speech where one of the parents extols the virtues of the kid—his generosity, his precociousness, even his soccer abilities. I find these speeches vulgar and inappropriate.

We have rules on that, which boil down to this: The kid gives a *dvar Torah*, but it can't be used to thank anyone. It can be only one thing: an example of the child's erudition. In effect, the congregation tells the family: We're glad you're here, but this isn't really your day, and, while we love your kid, we don't want a thirteen-year-old leading us in prayer. Parents can speak, but we limit the talk to one page in the form of a blessing or a teaching.

How can you convey and enforce these expectations, which go so strongly against the grain of most American-Jewish bar and bat mitzvahs?

Anyone who has a bar or bat mitzvah coming up is invited, but not required, to take a class that's taught by the rabbi. And the only way to get into this class, which includes a weekend retreat, is to be accompanied by one or both of your parents. When you have a dozen families taking a class together and going away together for a weekend as a group, you're creating a small, secure community within a larger community. During that weekend retreat we describe the congregation's expectations for their upcoming event. We put a lot of pressure into making the event modest and *haymish*. All of this helps keep a lid on it, and I find that most people are relieved to be given permission to celebrate in a more meaningful way. Sometimes I hear congregants talk about attending bar and bat mitzvahs at other places, and how grateful they feel not to be part of that madness.

Your first book was The Book of Letters, *which I would describe as a combination of calligraphy and midrashim about the alphabet. What led you to write it?*

Twenty-five years ago I was auditing Professor Alexander Altmann's class on Jewish mysticism at Brandeis. One of my classmates was Michael Strassfeld, who had just begun work on *The Jewish Catalog*. He sent me a form letter saying, in effect, We're putting together a compendium of information to guide a new generation of Jews into Jewish practice, and we'd like to list you as a teacher. Could you please tell us what you would teach?

I was thrilled to be asked. I was going to write "philosophy," but then I noticed that they had a real philosopher on their list. I was going to write "social action" until I noticed that Arnold Wolf was mentioned. He had been arrested in Selma. I was going to write back that I could tell hasidic stories, but they already had the Lubavitcher Rebbe! So I wrote back that I could at least teach the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

I meant it as a joke, but the editors of the *Catalog* seemed to take it seriously, because they listed me as a teacher of the Hebrew alphabet. When the book was published I started getting calls and letters from prospective students around the country who wanted to know about the mysteries of the letters. I started reading up on the subject, and went deeper and deeper until I had a little book whose subtitle was, "A Mystical Hebrew Alphabet."

I sent it—at your suggestion, by the way—to Harper & Row, where it landed on the desk of a young woman who happened to be going through a Jewish spiritual revival. She took this book on as her personal project. Years later, Stuart Matlins, publisher of Jewish Lights, picked it up and brought it back in print. He's a wonderful man to work with. I remember being at a marketing meeting when somebody asked, "How are we going to distinguish Larry from Harold Kushner?" Stuart thought for a moment and said "Why would we want to do that?"

You two must often get confused, two rabbinical authors and lecturers from the suburbs of Boston.

It happens all the time. Occasionally, after a lecture, somebody will come up to me and say, "Rabbi Kushner, your books have changed my life." Then they produce a copy of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. I say, "Whose name would you like me to sign?" It keeps me humble.

Your second book was Honey in the Rock.

By then I had figured out that mysticism was the repository for core spiritual teaching. I was also trying figure out what a new, American-Jewish mysticism would look like.

The one that really intrigues me is God was in this Place, and I, i did not know, *where you take a single verse from Torah and trace it through centuries of commentators as you try to imagine who they were in real life.*

That book was inspired by an interpretation from the pre-hasidic commentator Shimshon ben Pesach Ostropler, a Kabbalist, who postulated that Jacob at Bet-El saw the *merkavah*, Ezekiel's chariot—a well-known mystical symbol. (A similar idea appears in the Zohar.) That teaching inspired the book, which is about the big "I" and the little "i." The "I" of God, and our little "i"—how we understand the divine self, and how it's possible to have a mystical experience without losing your autonomy.

Sooner or later, I think we'll see a new metaphor coming out of American Jewry.

What are some books you find yourself recommending to students and congregations?

Buber's *Hasidism and Modern Man*, which is challenging on different levels. Scholem's *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*. Heschel's *God in Search of Man*, and *The Sabbath*. I also recommend *Your Word is Fire*, a little book of hasidic teachings on contemplative prayer edited by Arthur Green and Barry Holtz which has also been reprinted by Jewish Lights.

Isn't it unusual for a Reform rabbi to be so interested in Hasidism?

I see Hasidism as the last great flowering of the Jewish spiritual imagination. Maybe contemporary Hasidism has given Hasidism a bad name. Originally, hasidim weren't as halakhic in their approach as they are now. And I don't think halakhah is going to be the main organizing principle for Jewish life. Sooner or later, I think we'll see a new metaphor coming out of American Jewry.

In Hasidism I find a lot of support for the idea of God as everything, that God is the ocean and we are the waves. I increasingly believe that

the goal of religion is to get beyond the artificial separation between God and everything else. But you can only stay there for a moment.

Is that realization inherently the result of a mystical experience?

Not necessarily. I think that most of us, one way or another, have had at least a fleeting sense that the apparent fragmentation of our world is an illusion, and that everything is one.

One last question. In The Book of Words, *you advise people to buy a cemetery plot—and to visit it. That struck me for some reason, and I wanted to ask, Why?*

If you go to your plot, and stand there, you're forced to confront the fact that you won't live forever. There are two ways to deal with that reality. It can be debilitating and depressing, or you can say, "Yes, I'm going to die, but I'm not dead yet." That's one of the great religious insights of all time. Going to your cemetery plot can be an important spiritual experience. The amazing thing about being a rabbi is that you go to the cemetery and the next day you're doing a wedding, and a hospital visit, and a baby-naming, and then it's back to the cemetery. Being a rabbi forces you to confront the important moments of life, like a brick in your face every single day.

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