

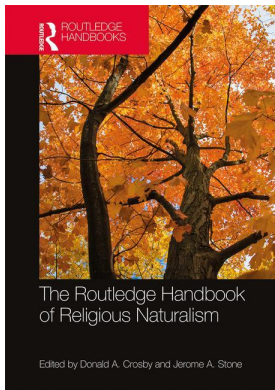
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A Jewish Perspective on Religious Naturalism

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A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

Dan Solomon

Introduction

I grew up as a science buff and self-proclaimed “Jewish atheist.” Still, I attended religious school, studied Hebrew, and prepared for my Bar Mitzvah. I had doubts, but was blessed with a liberal, philosophical rabbi. I told him that I didn’t believe in God, though I felt a kind of religious awe for the beauty of the natural world and the laws of science. The rabbi replied, “Oh, you believe in Spinoza’s God, which is the same as Nature; so did Einstein.” At 12 years old, without having a name for it, I had discovered that I was a religious naturalist. Not finding the language of scripture and traditional worship relevant to my naturalistic worldview, I drifted away from congregational Judaism. I continued to identify as Jewish, celebrating Passover and Hanukkah at home, and studying Jewish literature as part of my broader philosophical education.

Religious naturalism is rich in intellectual resources, but it is lacking in models for personal development, within a lived tradition. That is why I began with the story of my own religious development, arising out of contemporary American Jewish experience. My aim is to find a way toward religious naturalism growing out of that experience, rather than any essentialist “authentic” Jewish voice. I hope that non-Jewish religious naturalists will also find it relevant, since I believe it parallels the condition of a growing number of people from every religious background.

In *Religious Naturalism Today* (Stone 2008), Jerome Stone reviews a variety of approaches to religious naturalism, including Jewish ones ranging from the austere metaphysical naturalism of Spinoza to Mordecai Kaplan’s view of Judaism as a civilization. Other Jewish approaches relating to religious naturalism have included Sherwin Wine’s Humanistic Judaism; and philosophers Henry Levinson and Hilary Putnam, who emphasized the experiential value of Jewish practice over history, theology, and metaphysics.

I will critique these approaches as to how they develop naturalistic religion from Jewish resources. These resources include the Biblical story of the Jewish People; the transcendent God; festivals rooted in pre-biblical agricultural traditions; ethics emphasizing humanistic values of justice and mercy; and a critical approach to scripture. I will relate this to a view of religious naturalism drawing on Loyal Rue, where a successful religion is based on a narrative core, supported by five ancillary strategies: intellectual, experiential, ritual, aesthetic, and institutional (Rue 2006: 126–128).

Religious naturalism

I begin with a straightforward definition of naturalism, as

a set of beliefs and attitudes that focuses on this world ... it involves the negative assertion that there seems to be no ontologically distinct and superior realm (such as God, soul, or heaven) to ground, explain, or give meaning to this world.

(Stone 2008: 1)

Another view I find useful is that of Jack Cohen, a follower of Mordecai Kaplan, where naturalism is the “disposition to believe that any phenomenon can be explained by appeal to general laws confirmable either by observation or by inference from observation”; and “nature will be conceived of as the totality of reality—its substance, functioning, and principles of operation—including man and his spiritual qualities” (Cohen 1958: 21).

I view religion very broadly, as the framework we use to create meaning and purpose in our lives. Religion relates our beliefs about reality, our attitudes towards reality, and our choices of how to live in reality. Religion doesn't have to tell us what reality is, but it does have to connect with whatever we consider reality to be. In my naturalistic view, everything is part of the natural world, including human beings and human culture. So, my religion is grounded in my understanding and experience of nature.

Given the above, my definition of religious naturalism follows that of Stone (2008: 1), as “a type of naturalism which affirms ... that there are religious aspects of this world which can be appreciated within a naturalistic framework.” In application, my approach is like that of Ursula Goodenough (1998), in making nature my locus of concern nature, rather than humanity or a particular human tradition. Finally, I follow Stone (2008: 7–8) in finding a subtle but definite difference of attitude between many religious humanists and my understanding of religious naturalism. This will be discussed further in the section on Humanistic Judaism.

Jews, Judaism, and naturalism

It wasn't until the end of the eighteenth century, when European Jews began to be freed from medieval ghettoization, that a distinction between Jewish peoplehood and Jewish religion was recognized. This is particularly evident in the Reform Movement, which emphasized the idea of Judaism as a religion, and deemphasized ethnicity, in hopes of enabling full participation in the national loyalties that were developing (Meyer 1988). The mostly secular early Zionists also maintained this separation, in aiming to develop a new Jewish culture in Palestine. While Mordecai Kaplan famously questioned this distinction, as will be discussed, it is still important for many American Jews. A recent Pew survey (2013), for example, found that 22 percent of self-identified Jews say they are not Jewish by religion. Even among “Jews by Religion,” 55 percent say that ancestry and culture matter more to being Jewish than religion does.

The Pew survey unfortunately doesn't include information about supernatural beliefs, as opposed to belief in “God,” which is undefined. The fact that a much larger percentage of Jews, 23 percent, than in the general population indicate no belief in God supports the impression that Jews tend to be more naturalistic than non-Jews. Interestingly, only 47 percent of Jews of “no religion” say they don't believe in God; I wonder if these include many of the famous “spiritual but not religious” folks. On the other hand, 16 percent of those who are religious say they

don't believe in God, so there is some overlap in these categories. This suggests that a significant number of American Jews might be identified as religious naturalists.

Previous approaches to Naturalistic Judaism

Stone (2008) has discussed a number of Jewish thinkers who might be characterized as religious naturalists. Here, I will just highlight those ideas that I find most useful, and focus on the Jewish aspects, rather than ideas *vis-à-vis* naturalism. I refer the reader to Stone for the latter. Note that I'm grouping loosely under denominations or movements, not individuals as Stone does.

Secular and unaffiliated Jews

The first and foremost of historic naturalistic Jews was Baruch Spinoza, whose "God, that is, Nature" has defined pantheism. Another was the philosopher Samuel Alexander (though he did attend a Reform synagogue). Many of the science writers who fed my childhood passion for science, such as Isaac Asimov and Carl Sagan, were Jewish, and followed Einstein in taking an interest in what I would call a religious attitude towards nature. A number of secular Jewish movements, or movements founded by Jews, such as Socialist and Zionist groups, and Ethical Culture, have emphasized the ethical tradition within Judaism. Just as liberal Jewish religious movements provide resources for religious naturalism, without themselves fitting the definition, so have these secular movements been influential in maintaining Jewish connections among many who personally might indeed fit my more robust definition of religious naturalism.

Reform Judaism

The Reform movement, from its beginnings in Germany, has included leaders and thinkers who eschewed supernaturalism. For example, Israel Jacobson, sometimes called the founder of the Reform movement, to maintain decorum, banned "superstitious" customs such as breaking a glass at weddings (Meyer 1988). On the other hand, the strong emphasis on "ethical monotheism" in Reform leads it to a more humanistic than naturalistic attitude. At the extreme this can be seen in what, in the twenty-first century, seems like an archaic denigration of nature; as with Samuel Hirsch, who contrasted Jewish active (ethical) religiosity with "pagan" subordination to nature (Meyer 1988).

Reconstructionism

Nothing less than a naturalistic reconstruction of Judaism was the project of Mordecai Kaplan, possibly the most influential naturalist voice in American Jewry. In *Judaism as a Civilization* (Kaplan 1967), he detailed his plan for an American Judaism rooted in Jewish culture, but reimagined naturalistically. His key idea was that Judaism and Jewish culture (which he called civilization) were inextricable, or even identical. He criticized Reform Judaism for being more a religious philosophy than a living religion. He emphasized the need for cultural distinctness, to "hold one's interest" in Judaism, against alternatives (Kaplan 1967: 178). This led to his proposal for a "reconstruction" of Jewish civilization, maintaining Jewish distinctness by adhering as much as possible to traditional practice, while reinterpreting traditional concepts in keeping with modern ideas.

Kaplan advocated replacing the traditional allegorical method for interpreting traditional concepts with a functional method. This pragmatic approach involves identifying traditional

values and practices “which are spiritually significant for our day,” and finding equivalents relevant to our contemporary civilization (Kaplan 1967: 385–389). Obviously, this leaves a lot of room for picking and choosing, and in practice Kaplan’s own sense of “spiritually significant” is what dictated the course of Reconstructionism. These most significant, i.e., sacred, elements of Jewish tradition are the sancta, including God, Torah, festivals, and ritual observance. But these must be reinterpreted within the context of lived experience, and continue to develop as culture evolves. Again, the reinterpretation leaves a lot of room for variation, especially if the “lived experience” of different Jews is different. This is why maintaining a Jewish “civilization” of shared experience was critical to Kaplan’s project. This is also why change must be gradual, within the organic life of the Jewish people. For example, in keeping with modern universalism, he removed references to “the Chosen People” from the liturgy. However, instead of removing references to God, he provided various naturalistic reinterpretations of the “God-idea.”

Kaplan felt that the continuation of Jewish civilization requires a God-idea, whose significance derives from the conduct it leads to, not its specific theological expression. Further, this God-idea must in some sense be personal, since “the modern thinker tends to base his conception of God upon the cosmic implications of human personality” (Kaplan 1967: 397). Kaplan’s expositions of his own God-idea, or rather God-ideas, are creative and varied. First, there is God as seen in “the element of creativity, which is not accounted for in the so-called laws of nature” (Kaplan 1967: 316). Then we have “the reaction by which man’s will-to-live overcomes the fears and miseries that only a being of his mental capacity can know” (Kaplan 1967: 330). Finally, “there is something in the nature of life which expresses itself in human personality, which evokes ideals, which sends men on the quest of personal and social salvation.” Stone (2008: 111–119) provides a more complete exposition of Kaplan’s God-ideas.

Given Kaplan’s admission that the specific expression of a God-idea is not important, it is questionable how seriously his own statements should be taken. In fact, Kaplan is quoted as saying in 1915 (early in his career) that “Judaism, to be significant to modern man or woman, can no longer afford to speak in the language of theology” (Cohen 1958: xviii). Similarly, Levinson (2001) points to Kaplan’s “predicate theology” as converting the noun “God” to the predicate (adjective) “divine.” Thus, instead of “God is just, merciful, and forgiving,” one would say “justice, mercy, and forgiveness are divine.” It seems that Kaplan didn’t always heed his own warning as to the “extent the mental habit of hypostasis (the tendency to treat qualities, attributes, relationships as though they had a separate existence) has been responsible for the contradictions and ambiguities that have discredited the conception of God and driven many to atheism” (Kaplan 1962: 21). Levinson (2001: 6) even suggested that “as a religious naturalist, Kaplan would have been better off stopping short of giving any theological explanations for anything.”

In *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, Kaplan (1962) presents a reconstructed version of another Jewish sanctum, the cycle of festivals. Following the functional method, he insists that “they must have meanings which will guide and inspire us. It is, therefore, necessary to identify the Sabbath and Festivals with specific ideas and ideals which play an important part in the psychology of the modern man” (Kaplan 1962: 39). He then, in a series of chapters with titles like “God as the Power that makes for Social Regeneration,” embarks on a project of reinterpreting the traditional Jewish God in ways that might be invoked in particular festivals.

The most glaring problem with Kaplan’s project of reconstructing American Judaism as a civilization is that, in the century since he started developing his ideas, it has not happened. Thriving, organic Jewish cultures exist in Israel and in Orthodox enclaves such as those in and around New York City; but liberal American Judaism has moved on, into the melting pot. The

largest Jewish denomination is still Reform, with 35 percent, while Reconstructionism has less than 1 percent of American Jews (Pew 2013). (“No Denomination” is second, with 30 percent.) Even more to the point, the Reconstructionist congregations are not noticeably distinct from other groups; they are often viewed as Conservative liturgy with Reform beliefs. Besides the assimilationist *Zeitgeist*, reasons for this failure—or perhaps incomplete success—of Kaplan’s project can be found in his ideas themselves.

Kaplan’s elements of group separateness are not enough to mark a civilization or even a culture. They might be seen instead as identity markers that are, in practice, mixed and matched with a variety of other elements in a given individual’s life. Even members of the same Jewish congregation will not share the same set of these; just as they will not share the same God-idea. Then there is the need to take the multiple identities of American Jews into account. My children and I are proudly Jewish, though my mother was of Orthodox Christian heritage, and my children and stepchildren are of Vietnamese and Japanese, as well as Jewish, heritage. American Jews are at the forefront of liberal American pluralism, where a “mix-and-match” approach to culture prevails. This is reflected, for example, in “Nones” who have a Christmas tree, and the growing number of Christians who shop for churches where they find a comfortable environment, rather than adhering to an ancestral tradition.

Another problem, from a naturalistic point of view, is the use of traditional language in Reconstructionist services. Most of them do not hold traditional God-ideas, but most of them also do not have, and may not be interested in, specific interpretations. This seems to be in keeping with Kaplan’s claim that the idea matters less than the practice, but the result is vagueness, not naturalism. Stone has raised additional questions about Kaplan’s naturalism, for example in calling the God-process “trans-natural” (Stone 2008: 118). Levinson suggests that “Kaplan made claims about what he called ‘transhistorical, transcultural, and eternal’ entities that were values ... hardwired into the ways of the world,” and “identified ‘truth,’ ‘justice,’ and ‘love’ as ways of being that operated independently in the universe.” “This cosmic and super—or extra-human side of Kaplan’s religious naturalism had few if any influential followers among American Jewish thinkers” (Levinson 2001: 6).

Two American Jewish pragmatists

Hilary Putnam is an interesting case of a major American-Jewish philosopher, a naturalist influenced by pragmatism, who began Jewish practice late in life. In *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* (Putnam 2008), he discusses three twentieth-century Jewish philosophers, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas, who were not naturalists, but whose ideas he found of use in his own quest. As a “nonreductive naturalist,” he held that higher levels of reality, like the moral one, had to be understood in their own terms. With John Dewey, he saw values and ideals, and even God, as having a kind of reality. While subjective, as deriving from humans, “which values and ideals enable us to grow and flourish is not a mere matter of ‘subjective opinion’; it is something one can be wrong or right about” (Putnam 2008: 101). So, he did “not see reality as morally indifferent; reality, as Dewey saw, *makes demands* on us” (Putnam 2008: 6). The philosophers Putnam discusses emphasized this aspect of Jewish ethics, and Buber’s approach to this will be discussed further later in this paper.

Another American Jewish philosopher in the pragmatic tradition was Henry Levinson. His “Festive Jewish Naturalism,” as touched on in a couple of articles mainly dealing with other topics, seems to be a promising contribution to Jewish religious naturalism (Levinson 2001, 2006).

In these articles, as discussed by Stone (2008: 179–182), a variety of Jewish and other ideas are offered in the spirit of Festive Jewish Naturalism, which is engagingly humorous, but substantive. I find his exposition useful and a kindred project to my own collection of resources for Jewish religious naturalism. Unfortunately, no further, more systematic writings by Levinson on this subject seem to be available, and he is no longer living.

Humanistic Judaism

As Reconstructionism is associated with Mordecai Kaplan, so Humanistic Judaism is molded in the image of its founder, Sherwin Wine. As the name implies, Humanistic Judaism is based on (1) strict Humanism, eschewing God-language; and (2) Judaism, in Kaplan's sense of a "civilization" or culture. For Humanistic Judaism, a Jew is simply someone who identifies with Jewish culture.

The most distinctive aspect of Humanistic Judaism is the insistence on saying what one believes, and believing what one says. This means discarding or radically revising much of the traditional liturgy, especially to remove all reference to deity. Contrasting his approach with Reconstructionism, Wine asked, "Why bother to change one little item in the service when the whole concept of a worship experience where people talk to God for three hours is inconsistent with an impersonal deity? How can any reasonable person talk to creative energy?" (Wine 1985: 68).

In keeping with this strict nontheism, Wine and his followers have modified the Hebrew words of the traditional blessings. For example, the central "Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad" (Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One) becomes "Sh'ma Yisrael, Ehad Ameinu, Adam Ehad" (Hear, O Israel, our People are one, Humanity is One). Wine relegated the Torah from its traditional central place in the holy ark at the front of the sanctuary, for readings during worship services, to the library, for study as literature.

In Humanistic Judaism, as in fact for many secular Jews, traditional festivals and life-cycle events continue to be celebrated, but without theistic language. Many of the Jewish holidays lend themselves easily to humanistic practice, with Shabbat being a day of rest, and Sukkot a week to celebrate nature and the harvest, eating meals in a "booth" in the backyard. Others have obvious humanistic themes, such as Passover's story of freedom, and Hanukkah's of fighting for one's beliefs (even while recognizing the irony that the Maccabees were themselves intolerant zealots).

The most important festivals, the "High Holidays" of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, take a bit more humanistic work, but there are rich themes of renewal and repentance available in these celebrations. So, following the example of Kaplan's functional method, but much more thoroughly, Humanistic Judaism identified "spiritually significant" values in traditional practices, and found "equivalents relevant to our contemporary civilization."

From the point of view of religious naturalism, Humanistic Judaism shares the shortcomings of humanism in general, as discussed by Stone (2008: 71). In particular, there is a strong emphasis on human self-reliance, sometimes joined with a sense that humans are alone in a hostile world. Just as one example, Sherwin Wine's *Staying Sane in a Crazy World* includes the following, as part of a credo:

I believe that we live in a crazy world ... that the strength to cope with a crazy world comes from within ourselves, from the undiscovered power we have to look reality in the face and to go on living. I believe that the best faith is faith in oneself, and that the sign of this faith is that we allow our reasoning mind to discipline our action.

(Wine 1995: Preamble)

Another characteristic of Humanistic Judaism is ambivalence as to whether it is religious or secular. Some Humanistic Jewish rabbis and congregations say they are religious humanists, and others are staunchly secular. It is not clear whether this is an advantage, in providing flexibility, or a disadvantage, as courting confusion. Going along with the ambivalence over secular vs. religious, Humanistic Judaism also shows a reluctance to use words such as “sacred,” “holy,” and “spirituality”; in contrast to many writers on religious naturalism who continue to find them useful. The congregational model that Wine and others instituted is clearly following in the religious path laid by predecessors, culminating in Kaplan. The sticking point for many is the notion that religion requires God-belief. In any case, these ambivalences seem to disqualify Humanistic Judaism as a candidate for a true religious naturalism. However, I feel that Humanistic Judaism is closer to what religious naturalistic practice would have to be like than the other Jewish groups discussed here. There is no reason that a Humanistic Jewish community could not evolve into a “humanistic religious naturalism,” as presented by William Murry (2006). A healthy infusion of full-blooded naturalism, in Goodenough’s sense, with the accompanying humility in the face of nature, might be all that it takes.

Resources for Jewish religious naturalism

One can be a Jewish religious naturalist within any of the movements mentioned in this chapter, or following the ideas of the individual thinkers. However, I believe that none of them are suited to maintaining a robust religious naturalism within a Jewish framework. Instead, I think the latter requires:

1. Starting from a science-based, naturalistic viewpoint, which I believe is the only way our globalized civilization will survive this twenty-first century. The alternative, of beginning with Jewish heritage, has been seen to result in any original naturalistic intent being fragile, as traditional language reinforces traditional non-naturalistic responses.
2. Following Goodenough in “exploring the religious potential of the scientific understanding of nature,” rather than taking “a venture in theological reconstruction” (Stone 2008: 161).
3. Making use of Jewish resources suitable for naturalistic appropriation. Judaism is to be viewed as a heritage to use and adapt, rather than as a tradition to maintain or reject. In Stone’s words, this should be “a dialog between the tradition (as faithfully reconstructed as possible, albeit from our perspective) and our own viewpoint, requiring the autonomy and integrity of our own viewpoint and the challenge of tradition” (Stone 2008: 171). So, Kaplan’s “reconstruction” would just be the first step, in providing a partner for the conversation to begin.
4. Framing human relation to the ultimate in the traditional Jewish polarity of the transcendent vs. immanent aspects of God; but naturalized by drawing on the contrasting philosophies of Buber and Spinoza.

A robust religious naturalism, with the focus on nature, includes humanity as an integral part of nature. Similarly, Jewish heritage is taken as a natural part of human heritage. Though our tribal nature leads us to dwell in our particularistic traditions, naturalism indicates a universalist view. Jewish heritage is seen as one among many strands of human heritage, with an increasing number of Americans recognizing themselves as woven from multiple strands. Even those

who imagine that they are “simply” WASP, Vietnamese, or whatever, might be surprised to see a genetic and cultural analysis of where their ancestors really came from!

So, I look for resources in the heritage of Jewish civilization, which a Jewish naturalist can use to live religiously in our contemporary global civilization. Levinson (2001: 6) quotes Kaplan as saying, “sancta ... provide Jewish religious naturalists with what Daniel Dennett calls memes, or vehicles of cultural memory with which to keep spinning our cultural webs.” But memes do not have to exist in culture-sized packages; they can indeed be spun into webs, or woven into tapestries or braids. In the following sections, I will review key elements of the Jewish heritage, as I see them as fitting into a robust religious naturalism.

God

First, we should deal with the elephant in the room. As in the parable of the six blind philosophers, arguing over their different senses of what the elephant is, any theology that claims to have defined, or described, God, seems to be missing the big picture. Ignoring altogether the conventionally theistic views of God, one can find a wide variety of plausibly naturalistic God-ideas: “Love,” “the Power for Good,” “Creativity,” and others mentioned by Stone (2008), for example. None of these seems to fit all of the usages in the Hebrew bible, nor to be compelling enough to stop one short, to feel that “here is God.” Rather, there is an alternative take on our parable: six blind women get together, discuss their differences, and conclude that there is a being greater than their limited awareness, whose parts manifest the features recorded separately by each of them. This metaphor is an apt one for the long history of “God-ideas,” from personal genie to abstract “ground of all Being,” which have been applied to the ultimate reality, our source and sustenance. A big-picture solution would have to satisfy Dowd’s (2008: 119) criterion, that “any understanding of ‘God’ that does not at least mean ‘Ultimate Reality’ or ‘the Wholeness of Reality’ (measurable and nonmeasurable) is, I suggest, a trivialized, inadequate notion of the divine.” So, I start from Spinoza’s God or Nature, the one Substance (i.e., Wholeness of Reality) in which all things inhere.

Though the familiar, personal God of so many Biblical stories, and of the traditional liturgy, is far from naturalistic, there are some Jewish ideas concerning God that can be adapted for Jewish religious naturalism. For those eschewing God-language, the tradition that the Hebrew, personal name of God is not to be spoken, is especially relevant. Many of the standard metaphors are not suitable for clear naturalistic use, but some are, and others can be developed, as exemplified by Dowd. Related to this move is the notion that God is beyond understanding, as in the famous “I am that I am” passage in Exodus (3:14); or in Job, where God must be obeyed, though seemingly beyond human notions of Good and Evil.

Job also highlights another important issue, that of faith. In Jewish tradition, faith is not equated with belief; it is trust; and, at least for the more thoughtful, it is not even naive trust that “everything will work out fine.” It’s more like Job’s attitude, that “though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.” At the time Job was written, there was no belief in an afterlife, so this meant essentially that “whatever happens, happens, and I will accept it.” This is something that a naturalist can relate to. Even though life, nature, reality will eventually kill me, I still trust that reality will move on. I have a feeling that things make sense, and that there is an order, from fundamental physics to human society, that allows us to understand the world, and strive for better lives and a better future.

There is indeed a pervasive sense of personality in the Biblical God (or God-ideas), and this fact must be addressed. Borrowing Kaplan’s functional method to look for the key elements

“which are spiritually significant for our day;” Martin Buber’s (1970) sense of God as residing in the “I-Thou” of personal relationship seems most promising. Buber insisted that God was not to be spoken *of*, but rather spoken *to*. This seems radically non-naturalistic, and in fact Buber cannot be classified as a naturalist. But he also held that an “I-Thou” relationship can be had with all manner of non-human beings, including cats, trees, and a cliff of mica. Thus, the I-Thou relationship does not require an equal, fully human-like personality on both sides, and does not require belief in God. As Buber wrote:

Whoever knows the world as something to be utilized knows God the same way. His prayers are a way of unburdening himself—and fall into the ears of the void. HE is godless—not the ‘atheist’ who from the night and longing of his garret window addresses the nameless.

(Buber 1970: 156)

Buber emphasized that the I-Thou relationship involves an ethical demand, for us to be present to the other, whomever or whatever that might be.

Combining the approaches of Spinoza and Buber, we can derive a conception similar to that of Bernard Meland’s “alternation of two approaches to reality” (Stone 2008: 88). This gives us a polarity of the transcendent, impersonal “God, that is, Nature” of Spinoza; and Buber’s intensely personal, immanent God of relationship. Again, we need to find a balance, rather than gravitating compulsively to either of these poles. I believe that a religious naturalism rooted in a scientific understanding of nature, combined with an aesthetic sense of our existential rootedness in nature, can provide the balance beam between these two poles.

Torah and the narrative tradition

Torah for Jews represents more than its basic definition as the first five books of the Hebrew bible. It represents law, teaching, commandment, including the supplementary “oral law” that tradition holds was handed down from time of Moses, finally to be written down in the Talmud. It truly is at the center of Rue’s mythic core of traditional Judaism, and is proclaimed in familiar liturgy as “a tree of life for those who hold fast to it” (Proverbs 3:18). An emphasis on the word, and on study, for the Jewish people in general, and not just priests and scholars, has been integral to Jewish culture at least since Ezra read the Torah to the people at the dedication of the second Temple and had translators available to ensure that they understood it.

For a naturalist, much of this tradition will have to be left behind, radically reworked, or simply treated as edifying fiction. But, this very reworking can be seen to be part of another key Jewish tradition, that of Midrash, or interpretation. The literary history of the Jews can be viewed as one long and growing commentary on the core set of narratives in the Torah, beginning with Haftorah—the rest of the books of the Hebrew bible. There is no need for a fixed, authoritative naturalistic interpretation, either. The authorities themselves, the rabbis, developed from the start a tradition of sometimes rancorous debate. They included both sides of many arguments in the Talmud to demonstrate that the meaning of Torah requires interpretation, and the result is a human product, not a voice from God. So, Jewish religious naturalism simply joins this continuing discussion, from a naturalistic viewpoint.

For Jewish religious naturalists, the true history of the Jewish people is also an important resource. Sherwin Wine’s last book *A Provocative People: A Secular History of the Jews* (Wine 2012), published posthumously, was just such a history. Finally, as with all religious naturalists, Jewish

religious naturalists can make use of “Everybody’s Story” (Rue 2000), and the perspective this provides on the real place of Jewish history within it.

Israel

The third leg of the traditional central triad of Judaism, together with God and Torah, is Israel, the Jewish people. Even though Kaplan’s attempt to create an American-Jewish “civilization” was impractical, the idea of Jewish peoplehood has been essential for Jewish continuity among religious and secular Jews alike. In fact, this is why there is such a large group of people who continue to identify as Jews, while claiming no religious affiliation to Judaism. A useful aspect of this fact for Jewish religious naturalism is that it provides plenty of non-supernatural Jewish resources, even if it is just the “lox and bagel” Judaism of serving traditional foods. Naturally, these aspects would have to be integrated with the broader narrative and ritual practices, and not just stand in isolation.

The importance of the Jewish community in Jewish religious life highlights another important feature of Judaism that can be put to naturalistic use. Rather than seeking individual “salvation,” the “world to come” is traditionally viewed as one for Jews as a people, and, ideally at least, for all people. While there are great variations, such as the influence of Christian ideas, the communal tradition seems most useful for a Jewish religious naturalism.

Prayer and ritual

Prayer would seem to have little place in naturalistic practice. One option, though, is to follow Goodenough and Woodruff in replacing traditional theistic prayers with “Mindful Reverence” (Stone 2008: 162). This lends itself nicely to the Jewish tradition of reciting blessings for a myriad of daily activities; for example hand washing, tree planting, and appreciating natural objects. Of course, the traditional wording praises God for providing whatever it is that is being appreciated. A naturalist could simply take this as an opportunity for mindfulness and gratitude, without saying a blessing at all. Alternatively, God could be replaced with Nature or a natural process, in the kind of “revolutionary step” advocated by Cohen (1958: 157), in finding “new prayers or readings ... that can serve to tap deep-rooted feelings.”

Nonverbal rituals are also important in Judaism. In fact, while those holding most strictly to Jewish traditions are typically called “Orthodox,” their own preferred term is “Observant,” meaning that they observe all of the Torah’s commandments, including a whole set of rituals. Observance has the advantage of allowing degrees, so that the middle-of-the-road Jews called “Conservative” can be described in terms of strictness of observance. The Liberal Jewish movements are defined as those in which observance is optional, though possibly of varying degrees of symbolic importance. Nonverbal rituals seem to be especially appropriate for Jewish religious naturalism, as these are more easily reinterpreted naturalistically than blessings, prayers, and scriptural readings. Some kind of reinterpretation does seem necessary, though. “While ... abstract ideas are not likely to make a profound impression on the minds of most people unless accompanied by some activity, meaningless activities dissociated from any significant ideas are no less ineffectual” (Kaplan 1962: 38).

Festivals and life-cycle events

As mentioned previously, Humanistic and secular Jews have adapted Jewish festivals and life-cycle commemorations to a humanistic, naturalistic world-view. A good example of such adaptation is

provided in *God Optional Judaism* (Seid 2001), whose central sections are “Reclaiming Our Jewish Holidays” and “Reclaiming Life-Cycle Observances.” Though the author, “Secular Rabbi” Judith Seid, is not directly associated with Humanistic Judaism, she received her rabbinic training at the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, founded by Sherwin Wine.

Among the Jewish festivals are Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot, which originated in ancient harvest festivals, and were later adapted by the rabbinic tradition to a more complicated theology following the “chosen people” narrative in Torah. Practices deriving from pre-literate agricultural traditions, such as eating ritual foods, are readily adapted to naturalistic, nontheistic practice. Music of all kinds is an almost ubiquitous feature of Jewish celebrations. This is also quite adaptable, requiring at most adjustments in wording.

As to life-cycle observances, I can provide a few personal examples. My wife and I were married in a humanistic Jewish ceremony, with a traditional chuppah (wedding canopy), wine, and the breaking of a glass. The language was entirely nontheistic, but followed the traditional patterns and invoked the traditional values. Again, at a casual Saturday evening chapel service for an IRAS (Institute on Religion in an Age of Science) conference, with an audience from a variety of religious backgrounds, I celebrated Havdalah, the traditional ceremony marking the end of the Sabbath. This includes wonderfully evocative rituals, including singing, passing a container of fragrant spices, lighting a braided, multi-colored candle, and finally, dousing the candle in a glass of wine. All of these were related to the occasion of the beginning of a conference week of study, play, and socializing; as well as to the Jewish significance.

Ethics

At the core of all forms of Jewish culture, no matter how secular, is the ethical demand of the prophetic voice. From a naturalistic point of view, it is helpful to have a model like that of Putnam, referenced previously, which follows Buber and others in recognizing ethical demands as being placed on us by reality, i.e., nature. With this interpretation, the traditional Jewish symbol “hineni,” here I am, as the response given by Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and other Biblical characters to God’s demands, can be adapted for religious naturalism.

Though the details of the ancient moral code can no longer be taken as authoritative, the key moral attributes of mercy and justice continue to guide secular and Humanistic Jews. This dichotomy is echoed by a number of contemporary writers on religious naturalism or ethics. Rue (2000: 117), for example, views religion as promoting both individual integrity and social cohesion.

A distinctive Jewish ethical resource is the concept of “Tikkun Olam,” repairing or improving the World. Though the ethical call is to *me* personally, the project is one for all of us together, and relates to the wellbeing of the entire world. The Kabbalists developed this idea long after the Hebrew and Christian canons were set, but it is rooted in the strong social sense in Judaism. It has been embraced by liberal Jews and applied to the call for social action. In this sense, rather than the original mystical Kabbalistic sense, it can be of value for Jewish religious naturalists.

Conclusion

After meeting five theoretical objections to “a religion of nature,” Crosby (2002: 155–157) raises a final, practical objection; that religious naturalism has no practicing communities or institutional structures. He suggests building on existing nature oriented religions, such as Taoism, Shinto, and Native American ones.

That this communal and institutional aspect is missing in religious naturalism seems related to the problem of connecting the big picture with the personal one. For religious naturalism, the sense of our lives must be found in view of the natural reality to which we belong. The narratives that inform each individual's identity must tell the whole story, beginning with "everybody's story," evolving through the people(s) from which that particular person descends, and culminating in the life narrative of the individual. Each chapter of this story has been told in various ways. For religious naturalism, it seems that the big and the small pictures are given: "everybody's story" as informed by science and one's own experience. But the connective between these two, cultural heritage, is not so easily addressed in a general exposition of religious naturalism.

The exposition of Jewish religious naturalism in this paper has aimed at providing this needed connective. The polarity of ideas of God or Reality in Buber *versus* Spinoza can be taken as a symbol of the need to integrate the various narratives. Following Rue's account of religion (Rue 2006), we have seen that the mythic core is provided by a rich narrative tradition, including a tradition of interpretation that Jewish religious naturalists can take advantage of. Rue's ancillary strategies can also be seen as being available from Jewish resources, as well as from the general religious naturalistic resources discussed elsewhere in this Handbook. The intellectual dimension is especially strong in Jewish naturalists including Kaplan, Cohen, and Wine. One example of an experiential strategy for Jewish religious naturalism is converting occasions for traditional blessings into exercises in mindfulness. Jewish heritage is rich in ritual strategies, and ways of adapting these for religious naturalism have been presented. A few aesthetic strategies, such as the multi-sensory Havdalah ceremony, have also been discussed. Music has just been briefly mentioned, precisely because it is so easily adapted. Institutional strategies for Jewish religious naturalism might follow the example of other pioneering liberal Jewish branches. For example, an existing Humanistic Jewish community might evolve into a true Jewish religious naturalism, in the sense advocated here.

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