Louis Jacobs and the Quest for a Contemporary Jewish Theology

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Miri Freud-Kandel, *Louis Jacobs and the Quest for a Contemporary Jewish Theology,*" The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in Association with Liverpool University Press, 2023.

Review Essay by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

For some Jews, faith is not a problem. God gave us the Torah at Mount Sinai; we have an unbroken tradition of law and ethics authorized by the great sages of every generation. We do not merely believe in God as an abstract entity; we feel God's presence. Fulfilling God's commandments keeps us in constant relationship with God.

For some Jews, faith is irrelevant. Life is lived without reference to God. The Torah and mitzvoth are not on the agenda. Such Jews are Jewish by birth, by fate, be ethnicity, by emotional attachment…but not by faith in God, nor through the mitzvoth, nor by deference to the great sages of the Jewish People.

For some Jews, faith is a basic component of life but faces nagging questions. Yes, the Torah is from Heaven…but what exactly is meant by that? Yes, the mitzvoth are commandments…but how does an eternal incorporeal God communicate commandments to people? Yes, our sages were great… but they had many disputes among themselves on basic issues of faith and religious observance. What is truth, what is conjecture, what are our options?

While the first two groups are relatively comfortable with their religious worldviews, the third group must negotiate conflicting pressures. Traditional faith is confronted with Bible criticism, modern scholarship and theologies, and an anti-authoritarian zeitgeist.

Let's talk about the third group.

These are thinking people deeply respectful of traditional Jewish beliefs and practices. They are religiously observant. Many—probably most—of them attended university and were exposed to scholarship that challenged or denied the foundations of their faith. They consider themselves to be religious Jews but they find that they must find ways to reconfigure classic principles of Jewish faith in light of the challenges of modernity.

Louis Jacobs (1920-2006) was a leading figure in British Jewry who belonged to the third group and who wrote significant works dealing with their concerns. Born in Manchester, he studied at Manchester Yeshiva and then at the kolel in Gateshead. A devout Orthodox Jew, he later attended University College in London, earning a PhD. He served as rabbi of congregations in Manchester and London and became Moral Tutor at Jews' College where he taught Talmud. He was in line to become head of Jews' College but Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie blocked the appointment. He felt that Jacobs' religious views had moved him outside of Orthodoxy. The "Jacobs' Affair" pitted the religious establishment against Jacobs' followers. When Jacobs was invited to his previous Orthodox pulpit, Chief Rabbi Brodie blocked the appointment. Jacobs' followers then established their own synagogue and launched the Masorti movement in England.

Miri Freud-Kandel, Lecturer in Modern Judaism in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford, has authored a volume exploring the teachings and influence of Rabbi Louis Jacobs. Entitled *Louis Jacobs and the Quest for a Contemporary Jewish Theology,* it is published by the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in association with Liverpool University Press, 2023.

Freud-Kandel provides a generous selection of quotations from Jacobs' various volumes, allowing the reader to "hear" Jacobs' own voice. But she also provides her own analysis, and points out strengths and weaknesses in Jacobs' theological positions.

Jacobs believed that "the ancestral faith becomes meaningless unless it finds its response in the depths of the individual soul." Moreover, "for a philosophy to be true it must be 'true for me'….The life of faith demands our total commitment." For Jacobs, faith was not an inherited system that one simply adopted; rather it was an internal spiritual process requiring considerable effort.

Jacobs did not believe it was possible to "prove" the truth about God, since God ultimately is far beyond human comprehension. But he thought that it was possible to approach a genuine faith by factoring in various arguments from reason, personal intuition, mystical insights. Jacobs wrote: "Few believers have arrived at belief in God by starting from the beginning to work it all out by reasoned argument." The individual Jew—thinking, processing, feeling, praying—must build a personal theology that leads to a meaningful faith in God.

Jacobs suggested a "liberal supernaturalism" that recognized the divine nature of Torah but that the Torah was mediated through human voices. He rejected the view, listed by Maimonides as one of the 13 principles of faith, that God literally dictated the Torah word for word as Moses copied it down. Given the findings of Biblical criticism, Jacobs felt it necessary to posit a less literal way of understanding *Torah min Hashamayim* (Torah from Heaven). He bolstered his argument by citing various rabbinic texts that entertained the view that not every word of the Torah was written by Moses. His basic approach was to indicate multiple "kosher" ways of understanding Revelation that did not

entail a literalist interpretation. He wrote: “To point to the human element in revelation is a far cry from implying that God is not the Creator of the Torah. On the contrary, it is God who makes Himself known through the human process of redaction. How this can be is a tremendous mystery, but then, so is how God can be in control of His universe and yet leave room for human freedom and human creativity.”

Jacobs’ interest was not so much in how the Torah came into being but how it was experienced as a spiritually powerful text that brought people closer to God. Similarly, mitzvoth are “commandments” in the sense that we find our way to the divine by observing them. Although this is circular reasoning, it reflects his desire to harmonize traditional beliefs with modern thought.

Jacobs did not claim that he had achieved *the* definitive Jewish theology but rather that he was expressing his own thinking. He insisted that contemporary Jews need to know what Judaism says to them now, not merely what our ancient and medieval rabbis taught. As Freud-Kandel summarizes: “Jacobs’ account of how God, Torah and Israel were to be understood in their different ways was intended to encourage Jews to work on their faith, to pursue their own individual quest, and to find meaning in Judaism through individual paths” (p. 211).

Freud-Kandel not only presents and evaluates Jacobs’ work, she also points to some of its shortcomings. She reviews various attempts made by other thinkers who tackled the issues that troubled Jacobs. But no one has written the absolutely final theology…and no one actually can do so. Each of us needs to think through the issues on our own.

Miri Freud-Kandel has written an important book that not only sheds light on the thinking of Louis Jacobs but helps readers gain a deeper understanding of what is at stake when traditional Jewish faith comes into relationship with modern and post-modern challenges.