**“Ultimate Reality” in Judaism**

*“Ultimate reality” is a phrase that a scholar might use about religion. It does not emerge from within any religion (except possibly a quite abstract Protestant theology).*

*My brief talk is not about an “ultimate reality” in itself but about how Jews might talk about “ultimate reality”, what they might mean by such a phrase.*

**“God”: monotheism associated with Abraham’s call from God to “go forth”**

(“God” is not a Jewish term. Jews use various Hebrew expressions as names or euphemisms for the divine. They include a generic term translated as “God,” *Elohim*; and a personal name *YHVH*, the pronunciation and exact meaning of which are unknown, so substitutes are used for this name – one of these substitutes is the word *HaShem*, which means simply “*The* name”.)

There are two key motifs in the Abraham narratives:

* Transcendent creator (sovereign: *malkhenu* “Our King”), calling for submission to God’s command (Genesis 22: Abraham accepts God command to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God on Mount Moriah)
* Personal relationship (parental: *avinu* “Our Father”), responsibility to be a partner with God in mending the world (*tikkun olam*) and therefore to hold God accountable and to expect God to act with justice (Genesis 18:16-33: Abraham argues with God on behalf of the righteous of Sodom & Gomorrah)

Personal/transcendent tension (or dialectic) captured by *Sh’ma,* passage which Jews are obligated to recite at least twice a day: “Harken, O Israel, YHVH [is] our God, YHVH [is] *echad* (the Hebrew numeral “one,” but here meaning Unique/Incomparable/Ultimate”) (Deuteronomy 6:4)

We know *that* God is, but not *what/who* God is. For example, we can stand in awe before the world as God’s creation, use God imagery to cultivate meaning and connect with past generations, sense God in human relationships or in community, imagine that we imitate God’s actions when we do good to others. All of these possibilities are referred to in rabbinic literature. Nevertheless, by doing these things we cannot claim to know anything “ultimately real” or true about God. There is a seeking to know *who God is* within Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah, but this only became mainstream in Judaism during the last few decades.

For this reason, though God is discussed in depth by philosophers like Maimonides (12th century, Spain and Egypt), God is not a pressing topic for the Jewish people in general.

**In the Zohar (seminal Kabbalistic or mystical text, ca. 13th century), we find the statement:**

**“God, Torah and Israel are one”**

**This suggests that these three can each function as the “ultimate reality” for Jews**

**“Torah”: God’s will expressed through obligations placed on the Jewish people**

The *Written Torah*, or Five Books of Moses, must be interpreted in order to be properly understood and put into practice. The interpretation that is generated by the lineage of rabbis (just to note, Jesus, though called “rabbi” in the New Testament, is not included in the lineage of rabbis) and comes to form Jewish tradition is itself Torah, called *Oral Torah*.

As the word of God, Torah also has the status of “Ultimate Reality” for many Jews, governing their everyday behaviour, relations with Jews and non-Jews, structuring of time and space, and cycles of life. They ask questions of Torah rather than directly of God, believing the answers they discover in Torah to be of divine origin.

**“Israel”: where Ultimate Reality is encountered and experienced through daily life**

The word ‘Israel’ can refer to four different but interrelated things:

* The name given to Jacob during his struggle or wrestle with the strange man on the banks of the Yabbok Genesis 32:23-33)
* The descendants of Jacob, the “children of Israel”; his sons, the twelve Tribes, and the people who descend from them to the present day
* The land that God promised to Abraham’s seed, where the children of Israel settled after the Exodus from Egypt, where King David reigned and where the Temple was built under Solomon and later rebuilt after the Babylonian exile
* The modern State of Israel

For many Jews their connection to Israel, in any or all of these meanings, is in itself an “Ultimate Reality.” It is a defining feature of their lives as Jews, because their relationship to Israel is at the heart of the Jewish story as it is told in the Bible. In addition, according to the Prophetic writings the return of the Jewish people to Israel – an actual place, not a metaphor - marks both the redemption of the Jewish people from divinely imposed exile and the potential redemption of all humanity from their alienation from one another.