



A Touch of the Sacred, A Theologian's Informal Guide to Jewish Belief

Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz & Frances W. Schwartz, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007

Our faith in God and our love of Judaism are tested daily by our turbulent world and personal challenges. In this special book, Dr. Eugene Borowitz, the leading theologian of liberal Judaism, offers a highly accessible guide to the questions we've wrestled with in our spiritual lives:

- How do we know if our experience of God is authentic?
- What part of praying is thinking?
- How did our agnostic community go spiritual?
- Who is a *mentsch* (and how do I become one)?

Dr. Borowitz talks about the mix of faith and doubt, of knowing and not-knowing, and shares with you his rich inner life, which draws from both the rational and mystical Jewish thought that have inspired two generations of rabbis, cantors, and educators. Personal and intimate, powerful and soul-strengthening, these musings will challenge your mind and heart as you enrich your understanding of Judaism's core beliefs.

Is Our God Experience Authentic?

Directly stated, there is no infallible way to know whether we have had an authentic encounter with God. In other words, when we reflect on our sense that God was present to us, we probably remember feeling a certain confidence, perhaps one accompanied by an aura of well-being – although the tone may also be one of skepticism rather than assurance. If we regularly guard against being taken in by our own emotions or by spurious others, we may come away from any intimations of the holy feeling quite dubious, or even the opposite! With fraudulent gurus abounding and all sorts of spiritual leaders promising to assuage our anxieties, most of us are more gullible than we readily admit. What might have first seemed like religious truth may on second look be something quite different.

It would be nice if Jewish tradition supplied a foolproof way to keep us from error in matters of religious experience; unfortunately, in this case the tradition can take us only so far. For example, there have been two major schismatic groups that perverted Jewish belief: the ninth-century Karaites and their successors, who rejected rabbinic teaching; and the followers of Shabbatai Zvi, whom many Jews considered the Messiah even after he converted to Islam, in the seventeenth century.

The Torah's words about distinguishing between true and false prophets are of limited help. They advise us that if what was predicted comes true, we were indeed dealing with a

true prophet. We can't do much with such after-the-fact confirmation these days, since prophecy has long since ceased among us.

Far more useful is the test applied by the Rabbis to those they suspected of being the Jewish equivalent of heretics. The most famous case is their early second-century archvillain, Elisha ben Abuyah. Once a noted rabbi and the cherished teacher of the famous Rabbi Meir, ben Abuyah was excommunicated, put in *herem*, by his rabbinic colleagues after he espoused a type of paganism. When his beliefs led him to stop observing Jewish law, the Rabbis knew he had left their covenanted community and gone to an "evil" way of life. While liberal Judaism today is not as law bound as were the Rabbis, most Jews would agree that the best evidences of an authentic encounter with God are the actions that such an encounter prompts.

A second, subtle indicator of an authentic meeting between a Jewish person and God is that it changes our relationship with the Jewish religious community. Of course, having a sense that one has been close to God, even momentarily, changes us personally. But for all that God is involved with us individually, our God has been concerned with the Jewish people for millennia. As valuable as you and I are as individuals, God didn't give the *Torah* to us merely as a self-help manual. A genuine encounter with God should deepen our participation in communal Jewish religious life as well as its ethical outreach. For some people, that may mean adopting more traditional practices; but it may well encourage others to



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