

DANCING IN GOD'S EARTHQUAKE



The Coming Transformation of Religion

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An Overture to the Dance

We are all living through a world earthquake. Not only hills and mountains, rivers and oceans are dancing in the earthquake, as Psalm 114 foresaw. Every human community is quaking. Every aspect of our lives is shaking under foot and in our bellies—political, sexual, familial, intellectual, medical, military, economic, ecological. And some of us are trying to learn how to dance.

I know from earthquakes. I lived through the earthquake of the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, and I learned to dance into a new me, even while—especially while—the “dance floor” itself was dancing in the earthquake of 1968.

I have learned that when I weave a deep conversation where our words can aim toward wisdom, the way to begin is to look inward, beyond even the wisest of texts, and only then to dance and wrestle with the texts.

So I invite you, Reader, to begin this book by looking inward—right here, right now. What aspect of the “world-quake” have you faced—in your family and friends, your body, your sexuality, your faith, your livelihood, your experience of violence, of calm? How did you feel—literally feel, in your

bones and in your belly? In your breath? Let yourself feel that way again, for just a minute.

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Come back to Now, to your conversation with me. It is words we will share—words that long before they were printed on paper or electrons were Breath, shaped by our lips and tongue as we spoke them with each other. I invite you to pause to feel how your breath comes to you from trees and grasses, how it moves through you and then moves out to trees and grasses. This interbreathing, multiplied many trillion times, keeps all life on Earth, in Earth, alive.

We pause to thank that Breath: You/We/I breathe into us our consciousness of you, our consciousness that we are part of You, that you breathe into us the impulse to shape Your breath into words and the desire to shape our words so that they aim toward wisdom.

What arose for me in recalling my own Earthquake?

My own life was transformed by the week between the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King and the first night of Passover in 1968. The violent victory of racism over the most effective and beloved nonviolent leader in American history was followed by uprisings in Black communities across the country. They were followed by repressive police responses and even military occupations of some cities—including Washington DC, the capital of the United States, where I lived.

One week after Dr. King was murdered, the coming of Passover brought me “awoke.” The moment of “awakening” came when I walked home to prepare for my family’s Passover Seder, retelling the story of the liberation of the ancient Israelites from slavery under Pharaoh. As I approached my home, I saw a Jeep with a machine gun pointed at the block I lived on.

From deep in my gut arose the words “This is Pharaoh’s Army, and I am going home to do the Seder. This is Pharaoh’s Army.”

That moment was the turning of my life.

To what did I awake? To an earthquake inside me and an earthquake all around me. Within me, the earthquake shook me first into transforming my understanding of Passover. From a pleasant memorial in words and foods and melodies of an ancient Jewish freedom struggle, it became a beckoning, an incitement, to all peoples now to win their freedom from all Pharaohs; and I found myself writing a new version of the ancient Telling—a Freedom *Seder*, we called it.

Soon the earthquake shook me into transforming my whole life, from a barely casual relationship with being Jewish to a passionate encounter with Jewish thought and practice. I found myself, beyond my will, reframing my life around Jewish teachings, symbols, festivals, and practices—ultimately, to becoming a rabbi.

Around me, the earthquake of 1968 exploded the Democratic National Convention in Chicago—where I was a delegate—into a fiasco. Its failure showed that American democracy was incapable of ending the racism that murdered Dr. King and tore our cities apart. And incapable of ending the war that was tearing our country apart.

And even before Dr. King’s death, the first tremors of earthquake had begun to shake the ultimate institutions of solidity and calm—the churches and synagogues whose very purpose had been to assure everyone that the world was well put together.

So my own inner earthquake did not send me into joining the Judaism of my childhood, the Judaism of the last two thousand years, or the Judaism I could see all around me. My earthquake did not drive me into hanging on to some immovable past. Instead, I began to connect to the broken fragments

of the old Tablets of Certainty as the fragments began to glow and glimmer new thoughts, new patterns.

I began dancing my way into a new version of Judaism. And I learned how to do that and in the same breath, the same dance, to swoop and turn with other traditions, other symbols, other festivals.

Along the way, the continuing shaking of America and of the world, even the biological Earth, also brought me dancing to a new way of understanding God. Not “Lord,” “King,” up there lording it over us poor *shleppers* here beneath. Rather, the Interbreathing Spirit of all life. The Great Name in which is woven all the names of all the beings in the universe.

“What is the world?” asked the Rebbe of Chernobyl, one of the great Hassidic teachers. “The world is God, wrapped in robes of God so as to appear to be material. And who are we? We are God, wrapped in robes of God, and our task is to unwrap the robes, discover—uncover—that we and all the world are God.”

It is in that sense that I see our earthquake as God’s earthquake. The Breathing Spirit of all life has become not just a Breath, not only the Wind of Change, but the Hurricane of Transformation. The Transformation, the Earthquake, is what we make, what we live, what we are.

In 1968 I was not alone. Indeed, the year 1968 in America and France and Czechoslovakia became a moment when shock after shock became an earthquake. And half a century later, the world is still shaking in every dimension of our being. What do we do when the earth keeps quaking, when we begin to realize it is not a momentary lapse?

Some of us stagger along, helpless, falling, being clobbered, even dying as the planet trembles. We try to carry on business—“busyness”—as usual. Our keeping busy in our accustomed patterns distracts us from the vast changes going on around us. Anyway, we don’t know what else to do. If the

world is toppling, we can still keep doing what we already know how to do.

Some of us look desperately for something immovable that we might be able to hang onto while the world shakes. We may look to a photograph we carry in our heads from the “orderly” past. (The photo may in fact be fuzzy and untruthful, but better this past “certainty” than so much disorder in the present.) That immovable past has in it power structures of the soul, the psyche, and society: The patriarchal family. Contempt for queers. America’s “manifest destiny” to control the world. The subordination of women. Acceptance of a world in which the wealthy have the strongest voice and tell us all how to behave. Acceptance of a norm in which some cultures, some religions, some communities, some races, are in charge and some obey.

And, of course, we celebrate religions as they were handed down to us, frozen into patterns that emerged when the last great earthquake calmed down. We may retell the stories of those earthquakes. We may retell the stories of how a Pharaoh or a Caesar fell from power in that earthquake. But most of those who teach us those stories insist that those tumultuous times are over. Our religious lives, they insist, must not be contaminated by a search for modern Pharaohs or Caesars, or by listening seriously to other religious traditions—let alone to the always unfolding Voice of God.

And then there is the third way of responding to the “worldquake” we are living through: learning to dance in the earthquake. It is hard to dance when the dance floor itself is dancing, shaking, whirling, changing shape. How can we bring grace, music, joy into that dancing? Hard—but that, it seems to me, is the most life-giving response to the world we live in.

For me, the writing and rewriting of this book, the living and reliving of an activist politics rooted in the Bible and the Spirit, have brought me to clarifying a new theology as well as a new politics. The new theology is ecological rather

than hierarchical. I do not mean only a theology far more infused with Earth, but one that sees all life—the interweaving of organs to make a whole body–mind, the interweaving of cultures to make a whole Humanity—as deeply different from the model of the Great Chain of Being that saw rocks at the bottom of a chain of rising consciousness; vegetation one step up; various levels of animal life still higher; almost at the top, the human race; and just above, the Royal God, ruler of them all, Lord and King.

Instead, we are moving toward a vision of Reality and God that sees the species, the organs, the cultures intertwined, and *YHWH* as the Breath of Life that interbreathes us all. *YHWH* pronounced not as Yahweh or Jehovah or Adonai or Lord but as itself—*YyyyHhhhWwwwHhhh*, a Breathing that is experienced as one of the wisest organic metaphors for the Holy One.

And this shift accords with my own life-growth into hearing the Hebrew Bible as not only an anthology of diverse tales and sources but as itself a subtle Unity—a beckoning to the human race to grow up. From birth and infancy and childhood, from adolescence to an adulthood drenched in drudgery and domination, and beyond, toward a maturity of peaceful sharing of abundance.

This way of understanding the Bible’s understanding of reality is quite different from the model that now dominates the work of “leftish” theologians. That model is one rooted in *tikkun*—the healing of a broken world. In that model, the world we all inherit is shattered. It is up to us to invent the tools we need to struggle to repair the broken vessel.

Seeing Humanity and all of life in a process of maturing does not endorse every choice we make as we grow. We make mistakes. From bad results and sour experience we learn to make wiser choices. The whole process can feel more joyful if that is what we understand we’re doing, more joyful than if in anger we curse or knuckle under to “the Lord” who has

handed us the down and dirty task of repairing “His” broken, misbegotten world.

Sometimes in our growing we make a giant choice so big and complicated that it is hard to disentangle success from bad mistake. That is when we find ourselves in an earthquake. God’s Earthquake. And if we can keep in mind that the Earthquake comes because we have grown a few giant steps forward toward grown-upness, and simply need to pause, to catch our breath, and then to take another step—if we can keep that in mind, we can dance the next few steps instead of trudging them.

Some of us have had the individual experience of learning to dance to a new tune because an earthquake in our personal lives has erased the old melodies. Some of us have had our lives transformed by the earthquake in the whole social system we are part of.

This is not the first time whole societies have had to learn to dance in an earthquake.

About three thousand years ago, the pressure of two empires—Egyptian and Babylonian—imposed an earthquake on a loose network of Western Semitic communities. Out of the earthquake emerged a new kind of community, what we know as the biblical people of Israel—Torah, Shabbat, the Sabbathical Year, challenges to the existing rules of serfdom and enslavement and the subjugation of foreigners, provisions for rhythmic renewal of the earthy land itself, prophetic visions of universal peace despite a present in the midst of constant war.

About two thousand years ago, the suzerainty of Rome imposed an earthquake on the cultures of the Mediterranean basin. Out of the earthquake emerged two new kinds of communities—Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.

Today, we live in an earthquake that is shaking all the previous cultures of the globe. Some of the changes seem to work for human advancement; others damage human beings and

many other species. They began with the Industrial Revolution built on burning fossil fuels. From this came easily available newspapers and worldwide computer conversations; worldwide kidnapping of human beings into slavery and the subjugation of whole continents into colonies; newly successful medicines and effective birth control; far more food and many more human beings; mass democracies and efforts to guarantee human rights; the emancipation of slaves and colonies; academies of verifiable science, first in a reductionist take-it-apart mode and then taking seriously the interconnection of life-forms in an ecological worldview that spread beyond biology to cultures. And alongside these sweet-and-sour fruits there came some that were baleful, poisonous to all of Humankind: industrialized genocide, H-Bombs, and global scorching.

Some of these uncertain shuffling steps lifted our knowledge, our compassion; some multiplied cruelty. All of them together shook us into a worldwide earthquake. And perhaps into the slow emergence of new kinds of community: Renewing, transforming Judaism, Christianity, Islam, secularism, science, Hinduism, Buddhism. Making “interfaith” and “multireligious” connections and learnings that a century ago would have been labeled heresy. Renewing, transforming, what it means to be an American, a French (wo)man, an Israeli, a Palestinian, Indigenous. What it means to be a tree, a frog, a symbiotic biome in some human’s belly. Not only transforming each community for the sake of its own future, but reshaping each so that all can connect with each other.

Out of suffering Pharaoh—Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Sinai.

Out of suffering Nebuchadnezzar—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah.

Out of suffering Rome—Akiba, Jesus, Mary, “The Thunder—Perfect Mind.”

Out of suffering tyrannized Mecca—Mohammed.

Out of suffering the Holocaust, the H-Bomb, Trump, and

global scorching—Carson, MLK, Heschel, SNCC, Barber, the Dreamers, McKibben, Sarsour, Ocasio-Cortez.

And more? And more!

When I-It becomes unbearable, I-Thou flowers.

But never going back to an old form. Always drawing nourishment from the older wisdom, always learning something new from the noxious overlord, moving forward in a spiral.

Connecting with each other in this way is the social and political equivalent of an ecosystem, in which all our cultures interbreathe in joyful diversity in order to transform the world into a joyful home for human beings and all other life-forms.

In that respectful listening to and learning from all our cultures, I discovered—uncovered!—the unexpected truth that I owe a great deal to the culture of ancient Earth-oriented Judaism—the Hebrew Scriptures. They were the spiritual expression of what we would now call an indigenous people—shepherds and farmers in close touch with Earth.

Indeed, it seemed a historical near-miracle that this spiritual journal of an indigenous people survived as a treasure available to many peoples that were not at all “indigenous.” In this crisis of the great Earthquake, we begin to realize that we have all become, as it were, “indigenous” peoples threatened by great empires of power, wealth, and technology. Suddenly events like the gathering of Native Nations at Standing Rock in the Dakotas to resist the destruction of their sacred waters and their sacred graves spoke to a public that for centuries had treated such cultures with contempt and subjugation. Could a worldwide people long riven from its land learn from that ancient wisdom a new approach to loving every land?

The “dancing” response to our earthquake is not the only one. If the world keeps shaking, even while we hang on to what we think that we remember, some of us may decide that the best we can do is try to make everyone else hang on to

that fabled past as well. That may require some coercion, but orderly domination may seem better than sheer chaos.

Indeed, the more that some of us dance our way into new blessings that contravene old wisdom, the more others of us see our new dance as filled with deadly sins and put their strongest energy into preventing or punishing these sins defined of old.

There is no question that our traditions did define some acts as sinful. And so we may today. But which actions? And what are the criteria that underlie our decisions? For instance, the Bible commands us to “Be fruitful, multiply, fill up the Earth, and subdue it.” Now that we are approaching eight billion humans on the planet, possessing nuclear weapons that could stop all photosynthesis and end all life, and using our sheer numbers and our CO₂ emissions to create the Sixth Great Extinction, have “Fill up the Earth” and “Subdue it” become a dangerous sin?

A precedent! The Talmud forbade raising sheep and goats in the Land of Israel. What chutzpah! How could the rabbis do this, seeing that herding was exactly the life practice of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and others of our sacred forebears? The rabbis realized that so many goats and sheep were munching on the grass that it would soon be denuded, bringing ruin on the Land and on the people. A blessing had become a sin.

The question is what defined those actions as sinful or blessing? If “sin” is what hurts people, forbidding it seems fair enough. So if ancient teaching says it is a sin to fail to pay our workers before the sun sets on the work they have been doing, that seems fair enough. (And millions of us responded that way when a partial shutdown of the US government in 2018 left hundreds of thousands of workers trapped without being paid for weeks.)

But is it possible for the great earthquake to shake our social and personal geography enough that some sinful acts

that damaged people now actually meet their deepest needs? Become joyful blessings rather than sins?

For example, the Bible clearly thought it was a sin for two men to have sex. That may have had to do with wanting to “be fruitful, multiply and fill up the Earth” with children. It may have had to do with not wanting one man to subjugate another man “as with a woman,” since it was considered normal, even desirable—certainly not a sin!—to subjugate women. Whatever the reason, we are living through an earthquake in which many of us have learned that sexuality has more joyful blessings than we realized: that two men, or two women, can create a joyful and sacred relationship. Now that our eyes have been shaken wider open by the earthquake, many of us can see love around us where before we could see only sin.

Indeed, many of the ancient sins that are invoked by those today who oppose new dances in the earthquake have to do with sexuality. The ancient definitions of those sins, especially in early Christianity, leaned heavily on fearing sex, subordinating women in part because they roused such intense anarchic feelings in the men who controlled the ancient narrative and wanted to control their own lives, not leave them subject to anarchic flashes. Even the metaphor of “dancing” might evoke such dangers.

Efforts toward equality of women and men in religious life and in society as a whole have undercut this focus on sexual sin, and have redefined what sin in our sexual lives may be: the abuse of power through rape and harassment, for example, have in some communities become seen as far more sinful than consensual sex out of wedlock. Even in religious communities that define most forms of birth control as sinful, 98 percent of the women in those communities do use those methods of birth control.

Since one response that many people have to our world earthquake is to hold fast the “immovable” communal patterns

of the past, their impulse is to treat as sins any deviation from those patterns, even if the deviation is nurturing to many human beings. This dynamic sets up a difficult relationship between those who wish to “dance” new patterns when the landscape, the dance floor, itself is dancing, and those who think that safety lies in restoring the past.

Often the tension between restoration and transformation leads to forbidding a specific sin, invoking coercion to prevent or punish it if it seems to weaken a traditional community, even if it does not harm specific individuals. Then it becomes hard to reexamine what sin is, what sins are. Religions themselves may experience earthquakes, and the survival technique of holding fast to the past is especially strong when it comes to sin and coercion.

Perhaps the most obvious example of both resistance to change and wholesale adoption of change in the midst of earthquake is what happened to Judaism when it was shaken by Rome. In a few cases, some Jews faced the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and being severed from the earthy land in which offerings of food had been the central way of approaching God by building sacrificial temples far away (Elephantine in Upper Egypt, for example). A much larger number of Jews responded by turning to words of prayer and words of Torah study as the heart of Jewish religious life.

My bias in this book is toward learning from the past but not restoring it. For this reason, I lean toward

- treating some actions that our ancient wisdom said were sins as, in our new world, bountiful blessings;
- treating some actions that were anciently described as blessings as having become sins under the new conditions that we live in; and
- realizing that some blessings that the Bible could only wistfully envision are now almost within our grasp—

achievable if we put our will and energy toward making them happen

One word about this third category: When Isaiah spoke eloquently of a world where nations will learn war no more, where all the swords will be beaten into plowshares, where the lion and the lamb will lie down peacefully together, he knew there was no way of actually achieving this in his lifetime. He was convinced it was important to set forth this unachievable vision, and we continue to honor his attempt.

In many of the chapters of this book, I will sketch projects that may at first seem beyond our reach. Some of them may be, but I hope they will set our visions in a life-giving direction. Others I believe can be accomplished if we will them.

Beginning after the joy of the Freedom Seder in 1969, once I grew beyond the shock of feeling myself drawn into not repeating but remaking a Judaism that I had previously ignored, I found myself learning from other cultures and traditions as well.

Almost fifty years ago, I heard Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi say that Rabbinic Judaism was finished, shattered by Modernity the way Biblical Judaism had been shattered by Rome. We were already beginning, he said, to shape a whole new paradigm of Judaism. And in June 2018, at a meeting of the Philadelphia Board of Rabbis, I heard Rabbi Steven Wernick, executive of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, say exactly the same words. No one stood up to scream or wail.

In half a century, this assessment moved from the fringes of the fringes of the community, from a rabbi searching toward the unimaginable—a feminist neo-Hassidic Sinai—to the epicenter of American Jewish religious life. In half a century!

Let me be clear about why I feel drawn to write this book, to dance in the music of Torah rather than shrug it away.

First: After living through the murder of Dr. King and Passover, then the murder of Bobby Kennedy, and the disastrous “unfreedom” of being a delegate to the infamous Chicago Convention of the Democratic Party—a kind of devil’s inversion of Passover—I could do no other. Passover and its inversion freed me into a new me by gripping me inexorably. “Inexorable” is, literally, what you cannot pray yourself out of. As I found myself drawn deeper and deeper into a Judaism that did not exist and cried out to be created, I felt the same inexorable gravitational pull.

Second, I began to experience deep wisdom in the biblical tradition: wisdom that had inspired hundreds of generations of people who had rewritten it, reinterpreted it, reenacted it. Something in its ability to dance bespoke a sacred music. Precisely because it did not fit inside the generations I was living through, I came to respect its importance to the generations I was living through—still *am* living through.

And I also found the listening went more ways than one. The more fully I learned the Jewish practice of *midrash*—twirling the ancient text to let it speak new wisdom—the more I found Christians, Muslims, and secularists opening their ears. What Christians often call the Old Testament is sacred to them, too. It also holds a special place in the Islamic worldview. And the Hebrew Scriptures—the story of Pharaoh and the Exodus, for example—have even had a strong impact on modern secularism. So I expect that my drawing on its stories will speak beyond the Jewish community.

In me and in us all, the alternatives of hold tight the past or dance into the future face each other. Can they live side by side? Could they interpenetrate? Or must we choose between them?

This book is my effort to gamble on the dance that listens to the past and reconfigures its music to shape a changing future. It is my effort to consider the Hebrew Bible not just a

theme awaiting variations, á la Beethoven, but a pattern under transformation by a John Coltrane.

I understand our earthquake as so primal, so all-encompassing, that it comes from the unleashing of the most primal creative energies we know: Creator God, beyond our stories. And I seek to renew and transform the stories that some of us tell about that God: new metaphors, new rules of good behavior and the joy of living in new blessings, new prohibitions on new “sins” fraught with great danger, new symbols and festivals and practices, old ones infused with new significance.

What we thought were sins may as the world keeps dancing become a waltz or a mambo into new blessings. Conversely, habits that we wore without noticing may now seem dangerous and sinful. That’s what happens when we dance in the trembling, quaking, dancing, world.

So in each of the chapters that follow, I look at some ancient sins that have taught us new blessings and some ancient sacred practices that now seem sinful. There are several major dimensions of what the Bible sees as making up a sacred community that I will address, as they arise in different forms: the community’s relationship with Earth; its relationship with “outsiders” who live in its midst or seek to enter its borders; within the community, relationships between women and men and relationships between the economically or politically powerful and those who were disempowered; and its relationship with the Holy One, especially as understood through God’s “Name” and God’s “Image.”

As we learn how to dance in the earthquake, it is not adequate to say the traditional line: “May I have this dance with you?”

Instead, we say, “May we join this dance together?”

And hear the answer coming with a smile, a riddle in a different language: “May we?—*Mais oui!*—But yes!” For truth only comes when we weave our varied tongues together and laugh to hear the riddle solve itself.

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"I Can't Breathe"—WE Can't Breathe—Earth Can't Breathe

As I write a few days before Juneteenth, an especially poignant celebration of freedom for Black America this year, one of the most amazing Earthquakes in American history is still gaining strength: a multiracial Uprising against systemic racism.

For if the police, who are what makes the state a State—the authority that is entitled to use legitimate violence—act over and over in racist ways, then the society as a whole is crucially compromised.

The last nine minutes of George Floyd's life—in which he said again and again, "I can't breathe"—strike to the heart of us all. We must not permit any State to choke the breath from George Floyd or any other human being or any community of us—race, people, religion, gender.

It is uncanny that the human race as a whole is at this moment struck with a viral disease that attacks most powerfully the ability to breathe.

And uncanny again that at this moment we live as part of a planet that is choking, "We can't breathe." For the age-old exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen between all vegetation and all animals, including humans—is the Great Breathing that keeps Earth alive. Too much CO₂—the "climate crisis"—blocks our breathing.

As I affirm in Chapter 5, the crucial biblical "Name of God"—YHWH—is "unpronounceable" because "YHWH," with no vowels, is just a Breath.

Every effort to choke the breath from a living person or a community or a species or the planet is a violation of God's Name. We "take the Name in vain" whenever we forget that every breath we take is Itself the Name, and is part of that great Breath that is the Holy One.