

CHAPTER XXIII

GOD'S CONDESCENSION

1. An attribute of great importance for the theological conception of God, one upon which both Biblical and rabbinical literature laid especial stress, is His condescension and humility. The Psalmist says¹: "Thy condescension hath made me great," which is interpreted in the Midrash that the Deity stoops to man in order to lift him up to Himself. A familiar saying of R. Johanan is²: "Wherever Scripture speaks of the greatness of God, there mention is made also of His condescension. So when the prophet begins, 'Thus saith the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place,' he adds the words, 'With him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit.'³ Or when the Deuteronomist says: 'For the Lord your God, the great God, the mighty and the awful,' he concludes, 'He doth execute justice for the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger.'⁴ And again the Psalmist: 'Extol Him that rideth upon the skies, whose name is the Lord, a Father of the fatherless and a Judge of the widows.'⁵ "Do you deem it unworthy of God that He should care for the smallest and most insignificant person or thing in the world's household?" asks Mendelssohn in his *Morgenstunden*. "It certainly does not detract from the dignity of a king to be seen fondling his child as a loving father," and he quotes

¹ Ps. XVIII, 36.² Meg. 35 a.³ Isa. LVII, 15.⁴ Deut. X, 17-18.⁵ Ps. LXVIII, 5-6.

the verse of the Psalm, "Who is like unto the Lord our God, that is enthroned on high, that looketh down low upon heaven and upon the earth."¹

2. This truth has a religious depth which no philosophy can set forth. Only the God of Revelation is near to man in his frailty and need, ready to hear his sighs, answer his supplication, count his tears, and relieve his wants when his own power fails. The philosopher must reject as futile every attempt to bring the incomprehensible essence of the Deity within the compass of the human understanding. The religious consciousness, however, demands that we accentuate precisely those attributes of God which bring Him nearest to us. If reason alone would have the decisive voice in this problem, every manifestation of God to man and every reaching out of the soul to Him in prayer would be idle fancy and self-deceit. It is true that the Biblical conception was simple and child-like enough, representing God as descending from the heavens to the earth. Still Judaism does not accept the cold and distant attitude of the philosopher; it teaches that God as a spiritual power does condescend to man, in order that man may realize his kinship with the Most High and rise ever nearer to his Creator. The earth whereon man dwells and the human heart with its longing for heaven, are not bereft of God. Wherever man seeks Him, there He is.

3. Rabbinical Judaism is very far from the attitude assigned to it by Christian theologians,² of reducing the Deity to an empty transcendental abstraction and loosening the bond which ties the soul to its Maker. On the contrary, it maintains these very relations with a firmness which betokens its soundness and its profound psychological truth. In this spirit a Talmudic master interprets the Deuteronomic verse: "For what great nation is there that hath God so nigh unto

¹ Ps. CXIII, 5-6.² Weber, l. c., 154.

them, as the Lord our God is whensoever we call upon Him?"¹ saying that "each will realize the nearness of God according to his own intellectual and emotional disposition, and thus enter into communion with Him." According to another Haggadist the verse of the Psalm, "The voice of the Lord resoundeth with power,"² teaches how God reveals Himself, not with His own overwhelming might, but according to each man's individual power and capacity. The rabbis even make bold to assert that whenever Israel suffers, God suffers with him; as it is written, "I will be with him in trouble."³

4. As a matter of fact, all the names which we apply to God in speech or in prayer, even the most sublime and holy ones, are derived from our own sensory experience and cannot be taken literally. They are used only as vehicles to bring home to us the idea that God's nearness is our highest good. Even the material world, which is perceptible to our senses, must undergo a certain inner transformation before it can be termed science or philosophy, and becomes the possession of the mind. It requires still further exertions of the imagination to bring within our grasp the world of the spirit, and above all the loftiest of all conceptions, the very being of God. Yet it is just this Being of all Beings who draws us irresistibly toward Himself, whose nearness we perceive in the very depths of our intellectual and emotional life. Our "soul thirsteth after God, the living God," and behold, He is nigh, He takes possession of us, and we call Him *our* God.

5. The Haggadists expressed this intimate relation of God to man, and specifically to Israel, by bold and often naïve metaphors. They ascribe to God special moments for wrath and for prayer, a secret chamber where he weeps over the

¹ Deut. IV, 7; Yer. Ber. IX, 19 a, where the plural, *Kerobim*, suggests the idea, "all kinds of nearness."

² Ps. XXIX, 4; Tanh. Yithro, ed. Buber, 17.

³ Ps. XCI, 15; Isa. LXIII, 9; Sifre Num. 84.

distress of Israel, a prayer-mantle (tallith) and phylacteries which He wears like any of the leaders of the community, and even lustrations which He practices exactly like mortals.¹ But such fanciful and extravagant conceptions were never taken seriously by the rabbis, and only partisan and prejudiced writers, entirely lacking in a sense of humor, could point to such passages to prove that a theology of the Synagogue carried out a "Judaization of God."²

¹ Ber. 6 a; 7 a; R. ha Sh. 17 b; Hag. 5 b; Sanh. 39 a. Comp. Schechter, *Aspects*, p. 21-50.

² Weber, l. c., 157-160.