

THE MEANING OF GOD IN MODERN JEWISH RELIGION

BY

MORDECAI M. KAPLAN

Unfortunately for the struggle for freedom, the institution of slavery contributed in ancient times to human progress. When man had but few mechanical labor-saving devices, he depended largely upon sheer man-power to produce the surplus necessary to make of his life more than a hand-to-mouth existence. If there had been no slaves then to do the drudgery, the higher values of life would never have entered the consciousness of man. The great achievements in ancient art, poetry, literature and philosophy were made possible by the leisure enjoyed by the few talented individuals at the expense of the multitudes who lived and worked

like beasts of burden. Despite, however, the important part played by slavery in ancient times as a force for progress, no one would frankly venture to justify its continuance, even in mitigated form. But a habit once formed persists in the realm of the subconscious, even if in the realm of the conscious we condemn it. Men have not really extirpated their belief in the need of slavery, at least in a sublimated form. They still subscribe to the need of having the masses of men serve as the tools of the chosen and gifted few. They still act on, even if they disavow, the principle of aristocracy as essential to human evolution.

It is for that reason necessary to nurture the sense of justice which rebels against all forms of human bondage, to foster with the aid of the Jewish religious tradition that something in us which tells us that every human being is meant to be the master of his own destiny. The first and the most solemn protest against human bondage is the declaration that the God of Israel is essentially the Redeemer of the oppressed. As believers in the God of Israel, we must hold to the conviction that slavery must be abolished not only in name, but also in fact. A human being must have a purpose to live for, a purpose which his whole being consents to and shares in. All normal human beings, even the drawers of water and hewers of wood, have in them the potentiality of living for a purpose in the spirit of freedom. This does not mean that every human being can become intellectually and spiritually qualified to set up a purpose of his own. It is not given to everyone to exert initiative, or to possess originality. With the variegated character of human ability, some will have to lead and others to follow. But following does not mean slaving, so long as one knows and freely accepts the wherefore and the whereto of his actions, and of all that they imply in terms of the highest and most universal ethical purposes. Hence, *when we look to God as the Power that makes for freedom, we expect that He will give mankind no rest until it puts an end to the order of social living which makes it possible for a human being to be drudging and slaving for aims in which he has no part or parcel.*