

Excerpt

From *Legacy of Darkness and Light* by Michael Gellert

PROLOGUE

The God of Our Fathers

God is no saint, strange to say. There is much to object to in him, and many attempts have been made to improve him. Much that the Bible says about him is rarely preached from the pulpit because, examined too closely, it becomes a scandal. But if only some of the Bible is actively preached, none of the Bible is quite denied. On the improbably unexpurgated page, God remains as he has been: the original who was the Faith of our Fathers and whose image is living still within us as a difficult but dynamic secular ideal.

—*Jack Miles*

My father, Leslie, had a special wisdom. He had an ability to see into the heart of many things, often dealing with them based on what he felt in his own heart. On one occasion, when I was four years old, I was feeling especially adventuresome. It was a Sunday morning, and on Sunday mornings Leslie always took a long, hot bath while reading the newspaper with a small support cushion under his neck.

I needed to urinate, and I could do so while he took his bath. The toilet was right next to the bathtub, and as I stood facing it, a tantalizing thought entered my mind. I said, “Dad, what would you do if I peed on you?”

Remaining absorbed in his paper and not even looking at me, he said, “I don’t believe you would do such a thing.”

Pondering his disbelief, I said, “Do you dare me?”

Still fixated on his paper, he lackadaisically said, “You wouldn’t dare.”

And with that I turned my little fountain of youth upon him, laughing and gleefully spraying his newspaper and hands with the precision of a fireman putting out a fire. (“How bold one gets when one is sure of being loved,” a young Freud wrote his fiancée.) The paper went down suddenly into the water, and my daredevil attitude now sprayed his hairy chest.

He bolted up and screamed at me in Hungarian, “I don’t believe it! Are you crazy!?” An anger like I had never seen shot out from his eyes, and I realized I had done something terribly wrong. Frightened, I ran out of the bathroom and hid in my room for the rest of the morning. I do not remember the later events of the day, but I know that there

were no consequences. Leslie never pursued the matter, and it was never mentioned or discussed.

Some forty years later, I was visiting my parents at their condo in Florida. Leslie and I were on lounge chairs, relaxing by the pool and enjoying the sun. I was reading a book and he was, as usual, reading his paper. For some reason my mind fell upon the old memory, now crusty from never having been spoken about and put to words.

“Dad,” I said, “do you remember when I was a little kid and peed on you in the bathtub?”

He looked at me and said, “Of course I remember.”

“How come you never did anything about it?”

Without missing a beat, he said, “Because I realized that the only punishment fitting for such a crime was to kill you, and because you were my only beloved son, I knew I couldn’t do that, so I let the matter drop.”

I can still hear the soft, deep timbre of his voice.

The Other Side of Something that Glitters

Leslie did not always exercise such control over his rage. I will never forget my first encounter with it in an unrestrained form. It was not too long after the event I described above. He came home one late afternoon in a huff, telling my mother that he had to miss going to synagogue. I can’t remember anything else he said. I knew it wasn’t a Friday-evening, welcome-the-Sabbath service, because I went to synagogue with him every Friday evening (waiting, with all the other kids, for that special moment to run up to the cantor after his blessing of the wine and get a little cup of it, a sweet wine for the occasion). Somehow, I knew I wasn’t supposed to go on this particular visit to synagogue. Later I was able to piece together that he probably missed attending a Yizkor service at which he could recite the Mourner’s Kaddish, the memorial prayer, on the anniversary of his father’s death. He would do so in front of the unveiled scrolls of the Hebrew Bible—or, as it is commonly known, the Old Testament.

Leslie put his skull cap on his head and with prayer book in hand came into the living room where I was. He was going to conduct his own private prayer service, which, of course, I did not at the time understand. Now, this happened to coincide with the hour of one of my favorite events of the day. It was time for *The Howdy Doody Show*! I turned on the TV in great anticipation. Leslie brusquely told me to turn it off.

“But it’s *The Howdy Doody Show*,” I protested.

“Turn it off!” he said in a raised voice.

“No! I want to watch *Howdy Doody*!”

All of a sudden Leslie lunged toward me and started beating me. My mind was spinning. The blows to my body and head came in rapid succession. My mother started screaming at him to stop. He was kicking me. She got in between his flailing arms and my little body, trying to protect me. I could sense her fear (probably as much for her own safety as for mine, and possibly for the safety of my brother, whom she may have been pregnant with at the time). The theme song from the show filled the air: “It’s Howdy Doody time, it’s Howdy Doody time.” I tried to get away from him, but I caught a blow

that sent me headlong into the television set. The set was typical of the 1950s, made with a wood box that had pointy corners. My temple went into one of the corners.

I vaguely recall the sensation of falling as I collided with the TV. I can remember nothing else, as if my mind buried the rest of the trauma to protect me. I imagine there must have been blood. I was not taken to the hospital, though I should have been. I should have been given stitches. An indented scar sat like a small crater in my temple for the next thirty years, until it finally faded in with the rest of my skin. But my memory of the event never faded. I knew even then that I'd always remember it.

In my adolescence, as I learned of Leslie's history as a prisoner who had been tortured by the Arrow Cross, the Hungarian Nazis, I came to understand his rage. At least, I came to understand it better. After all, there were many Holocaust survivors who managed to get through life without such explosions of violence. Only much later would I understand that something else was at work here that melded in with his war trauma.

The Stormy God Within Us: What This Book Is About

Who was this man who could be not only a loving father but also a monster—a monster who in his devotion to God almost became the devil? And moreover, who was this God who could permit this to happen and perhaps even condone it? Was it he who cast a spell on Leslie?

His sneezings flash lightning
 And his eyes are like the glimmerings of dawn.
 Firebrands stream from his mouth;
 Fiery sparks escape.
 Out of his nostrils comes smoke
 As from a steaming, boiling cauldron.
 His breath ignites coals;
 Flames blaze from his mouth.
 Strength resides in his neck;
 Power leaps before him.
 The layers of his flesh stick together;
 He is as though cast hard; he does not totter.
 His heart is cast hard as a stone,
 Hard as the nether millstone.
 Divine beings are in dread as he rears up;
 As he crashes down, they cringe.

Thus did God speak to Job when he praised his most awesome creature, Leviathan, the monster of the sea. But it was not only God's beasts, Leviathan and Behemoth, who were monstrous. The dark side of God himself is revealed in stark terms throughout the Hebrew Bible, the one scripture that is mutually venerated by the three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He often behaved in primitive ways, erupting in temper tantrums and meting out his wrath without moral consideration. His propensity toward evil on the largest scale was demonstrated by his apocalyptic flood—a final

Apocalypse thereafter becoming a general feature of the Abrahamic belief system and a particular one intrinsic to the Yahweh complex.*

In addition to the near-total genocide of the deluge, Yahweh commanded the Israelites to commit numerous wholesale genocides in order to secure the Promised Land and to eliminate the threat of his chosen people being tempted by others who worshipped the rival gods of whom he was jealous. He was an explosive, brutal, and psychologically *young* God, and not the loving, equanimous, perfect being many today look to in their faith. As Freud caustically put it, he “was certainly a volcano-god. . . . an uncanny, bloodthirsty demon who walks by night and shuns the light of day.” Yahweh’s monsters, after all, were but symbolic, poetic ways to speak about his wild and dangerous nature.

This book is about the Abrahamic God’s dark side and its impact on us. I wish to illustrate that this small but potentially deadly episode with my father was an expression of something that has been going on, in different forms, for a very long time. Many of our fathers have been instruments of God’s dark side. That is because, psychologically speaking, they have lived under the roof of the same God. This God is himself a father to both them and their fathers, going all the way back to Abraham—the founding patriarch to whom the Abrahamic religions owe their origins—if not further. He is *the* Father, the one whom we address when we say, “Our Father who art in heaven.” He is known as Yahweh (sometimes mispronounced as “Jehovah”) in the Hebrew Bible, the Father in the New Testament, and Allah in the Qur’an.

What Leslie did to me was something that *happened to* him, that *seized* him. This is not to wash away his personal and moral responsibility for his action. Rather, this is to connect his action to a larger force that has come down to us through history. Rage like the kind he unfurled is built into the temperaments of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, just like it is built into the temperament of their mutually shared God, and these human and divine temperaments are related. It is true that peoples who have no connection to the Abrahamic religions are fully capable of rage, too, and often this is indistinguishable from Yahwistic rage.** It is also true that in the pantheons of other peoples, there are gods who, like Yahweh, blessed their wars and conquests. But there are significant differences that make Yahweh unique.

* As the term “evil” will appear in various contexts in this book, it may be helpful to provide a modern definition of it that is not circumscribed by theological language. What is evil? As journalist Lance Morrow writes, defining evil can be compared to defining pornography. Asked to define the latter in an obscenity case, US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said he couldn’t define it, but he knew it when he saw it. For our purposes, I offer the following psychological definition that I use in my work as a psychotherapist (and here I use the psychological term “individuation” to signify personal development with an aim toward becoming the individual whom one is meant to become and whose identity is distinct from general, collective psychology): Evil is whatever we willfully or unconsciously do to stand in the way of another’s individuation, well-being, or ability to thrive. At its worst, it is the active impulse to destroy their soul or psyche, the seat of their individuation, well-being, and ability to thrive. The fact that we may direct it against ourselves makes it no less evil. In either scenario, evil is the tyranny of anti-individuation.

** By the terms “Yahwistic” and “Yahwist,” I do not mean, as biblical scholars do, the Jahwist or “J” author or school that, together with at least three other authors or schools, are believed to have written the Hebrew Bible. I use these terms in a psychological sense to signify the person who has a Yahweh complex or behaves like Yahweh.

For one thing, he is not worshipped as one among other gods, balanced by them in their various roles; he is worshipped as the one and only God, who combines all roles. This endows him with an absolute authority and vitality heretofore unimagined. Though biblical scholars can trace the distinct, ancient Near Eastern gods who were merged together in the Israelite tradition to create Yahweh, this historicism does little to detract from the power that this new megapersonality held and still holds over the many heirs of the Abrahamic heritage. The new whole was greater than the sum of its old parts.

On the ancient Near Eastern scene, Yahweh was a supergod who acted in ways and with purposes not yet witnessed. His unpredictable, stormy temperament consisted of more than merely the furies of nature or human nature projected onto him. His rage went well beyond the pale of other gods, too. His actions represented more than simply the Israelite version of the vengeful acts Greek gods inflicted against humans for their insults to them.

His wrath was filled with torment and deep resentment rooted in his being rejected by his creatures, and it struck with a personal sting yet with blind indifference. To this day, it is central to the divine mystery itself and is the *raison d'être* for the core religious attitude of all the Abrahamic traditions: in the Psalmist's words, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

Of course, I would not say that the force that seized Leslie was literally the ancient Yahweh. Instead, he was gripped by the Yahweh complex—that is, a god complex that takes on the specific features of Yahweh. The idea of a god complex is not new in psychology. Someone with a god complex tends to be inflated, arrogantly believing that their abilities, knowledge, and opinions are infallible—even when the facts prove otherwise. Sometimes they believe they are specially privileged and permitted to do things others are not. This gives their self-delusion a narcissistic and sociopathic quality.

But with its distinct features the Yahweh complex is a unique kind of god complex. It is modeled on the personality of Yahweh, a god whose role as creator quickly became overshadowed by that of a judge and warrior. In his judgments he was frequently rigid and harsh, and in his punishments, petty and draconian (he was merciless with petty thieves, revealing how petty he himself could be). As a warrior, he was ruthless and savage. "The Lord is a man of war," the Hebrew Bible tells us. He was also emotionally needy and wounded, for which he compensated by demonstrating his power, as often against his chosen people as on their behalf. He was, again, not the exalted, omniscient, and perfect being many people today imagine God to be. Flawed in all-too-human ways, he was, as literary critic Northrop Frye observed, "not a theological god at all but an intensely human character as violent and unpredictable as King Lear."

Hence, the Yahweh complex doesn't always look like a god complex, and to the uninformed person's eye it may appear merely as nasty human behavior. Or, among its more nuanced features that set it apart from other god complexes, it can make us gloomy and withdrawn, like Yahweh himself often was. Either way, it doesn't necessarily exude the inflation and pseudo-confidence that typify a god complex.

Like an inferiority, persecution, martyr, Napoleon, or other complex, the Yahweh complex has a life of its own, exerting its influence on us whether we like it or not and whether we are aware of it or not. The Yahweh complex does not make us *think* we are Yahweh the way, for example, a person with a messianic complex thinks that he or she has a special calling to help or save others at all costs. Rather, it makes us have the *attitudes*, *emotional style*, and *behaviors* of Yahweh, regardless of whether we recognize these as

such. The Yahweh complex is Yahweh’s personality within our own; it is, so to speak, Yahweh in us—an “inner other,” a godlike force within our own psyches.

Unlike most other complexes, the Yahweh complex can operate collectively as well as individually, affecting sizable groups of people at the same time under the right circumstances. Jung might say that it is a collective and archetypal war-god complex similar to the Wotan complex that took hold of Nazi Germany and that was modeled upon the Teutonic or early-Germanic, tribal war-god Wotan, known in Scandinavia as Odin. Like the Wotan complex, the Yahweh complex has many functions in addition to war. Having traveled down to us through history via the collective psyche, it includes ingredients of both collective consciousness (that which we are all aware of) and the collective unconscious (that which we aren’t). Though knowledge about Yahweh is accessible to us through our collective consciousness—through our scriptures and religious institutions—knowledge of our Yahweh complex largely escapes us as it inhabits the collective unconscious, a mysterious domain whose depth is difficult to fathom.*

It is important that we begin to understand how this complex, so prevalent and yet so overlooked, can influence us. Whether or not we still worship and think of God strictly according to our Abrahamic traditions, or for that matter even believe in him, the Yahweh complex can drive us to unconsciously act out the primitive attitudes, emotions, and behaviors that he typically demonstrates in the Hebrew Bible. If we fall into the grip of this complex, it can make us behave in the angry, controlling, power-driven way Yahweh often behaved. We will imitate his perfectionistic expectations, patriarchal authoritarianism, amorality, judgmental harshness, punitiveness, and drive to dominate others. In shaping our relationship to our own humanity as well as to others, the Yahweh complex can have detrimental effects on our culture, our organizations, and—when it possesses our leaders as it often does—our public and international affairs. The Yahweh complex may well be the most influential complex of all.

* A definition of Jung’s core concepts of the archetype and the collective unconscious may be called for here: to keep it simple, we can think of archetypes as instincts of the psyche. They developed in human evolution, as did all instincts, and hence act upon us forcefully. A war-god complex is archetypal because it behaves as an instinct does (in particular, the instinct for war). The collective unconscious is a layer of the mind that is below the individual’s ego and personal unconscious. It is not unique to each of us the way the ego and personal unconscious are but is inherited and universally shared in common. It may be thought of as the psyche’s storehouse of the archetypes.