

Becoming a Servant

How James Kugel's Conception of Avodat Hashem Can Help Us Think About the Dispositional Goals of Jewish Service-Learning

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A primary goal of service-learning is to effect some change in the world. A secondary goal of service-learning in Jewish contexts is the strengthening of Jewish community. Yet service-learning is also a kind of learning, designed to bring about certain kinds of growth among the individual participants. This learning ought to be understood in dispositional terms; that is, in terms of the cultivation of aspects of character that are associated with the practice of Jewish service at its best. To develop this concept and to propose specific dispositions that may function as goals for Jewish service-learning, this article turns to recent scholarship by James Kugel that focuses on the centrally important Jewish concept of avodat Hashem, service of God.

How should we think about the goals of service-learning? First, engaging in the work of service must always be focused on the positive change that one hopes to bring about, whether that intended change is local and individual-focused (feeding the hungry, comforting the afflicted) or global and institution- or system-focused (improving environmental conditions, resolving international conflict). The notion of *tikkun olam*, "repairing the world," implies that the world as it currently exists is in need of repair; there are innumerable ruptures that need our attention and that we, through our actions, can heal. Like service itself, service-learning, too, must always be focused on some positive change; the learning that may occur among participants (as a result of or in conjunction with their participation in a service project) cannot overshadow the ethical requirement for the service to actually benefit those whom it is intended to serve (see, e.g., Butin, 2010, p. 5).

A primary goal of service-learning, then, is effecting some change in the world. A secondary goal, particularly in Jewish contexts, is the strengthening of Jewish community. There is an intuitive logic here. When Jews serve together, within an intentionally Jewish framework, then in addition to contributing to those who are served, they may also cultivate a stronger and healthier Jewish community, one that is more participatory, more engaged, and, especially, more committed to its ideals. They do this on a local level by creating micro-communities around service-learning opportunities, and those micro-communities may then affect the broader Jewish community.

Yet alongside these two goals, service-learning is also a kind of *learning*. Service-learning projects and programs are designed with the individual participants in mind, to bring about certain kinds of growth. What do program leaders

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hope participants will learn? What kind of effect do they hope the project or program will have? Depending on the particular service project, participants may learn relevant facts (for example, about poverty or environmental issues). They may learn skills, both cognitive (for example, policy analysis) and interpersonal (for example, dealing with people from very different backgrounds). However, beyond facts and skills, beyond even particular affective goals, the kind of learning that program leaders ought to desire in service-learning is dispositional or characterological. Service-learning should aim at the cultivation of character—and not merely character in general but specific traits or dispositions that are associated with the practice of service at its best—and not just service in general but Jewish service, which emerges from Jewish commitments, occurs within Jewish contexts, is constitutive of Jewish community, and is undertaken as an expression of Jewish identity. Participants ought to serve Jewishly, and in doing so, they should also become certain kinds of people or, indeed, certain kinds of Jews. One might even say that they should become (what is admittedly an awkward phrase) “Jewish servants.”

The awkwardness of the phrase is telling. One problem is that we do not have good language for these Jewish service-learning dispositions, and part of the reason that we do not have good language is that we do not have a clearly developed understanding of what they entail. What do we mean by serving Jewishly, and what dispositions do we have in mind when we imagine the ideal Jewish servant? A second problem is that the notion of “being a servant” seems, to some, suspiciously Christological. Jesus, after all, famously frames his own role as that of a servant, as when he washes the feet of the disciples (John 13:8) or when he famously declares that he “came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45). It is true that the Hebrew Bible applies the term “servant” to several specific people.¹ Moreover, Isaiah famously portrays a servant of God in several passages, including the “Suffering Servant” of chapters 52–53. Yet beginning with Acts 8, in which Philip offers an interpretation of Isaiah, Christian tradition understands Jesus to have been the servant who fulfilled those prophecies. In our own time, the servant leadership movement, which advocates for a model of organizational leadership in which the leader’s primary function is to enable others in the organization to thrive, is itself often associated with Christian institutions.²

On the other hand, for those immersed in the Jewish literary and religious tradition, the notion of *avodah* is certainly a familiar one, beyond the biblical references mentioned earlier. It can mean “service” in the sense of worship, whether Temple worship complete with bloody sacrifices (a central component of the Yom Kippur liturgy, the climactic, poetic reenactment of the Yom Kippur ritual in the Temple, is known as the “Avodah”) or, after the destruction of the Second Temple, worship of the divine through words. Thus, a famous rabbinic teaching (Ta’anit 2a) quotes the biblical verse, “[If you will] love the LORD your God and serve Him with all your heart” (Deut. 11:13), and then comments, “What is *avodah she-hi ba-lev*, service which is in the heart? This is

Service-learning should aim at the cultivation of character.

¹For example: the patriarchs (Exod. 32:12), Moses (Deut. 34:5), the prophets Abijah (1 Kings 14:18) and Elijah (2 Kings 9:36), and prophets in general (2 Kings 17:13, 23).

²On servant leadership, see Greenleaf (1970/1991) and the materials available at www.greenleaf.org. Examples of the use of the model in Christian contexts are numerous; consider the goals statement of Trinity Western University, which “strives to teach and to embody the pattern of servant-leadership exemplified by Jesus Christ” (available at <http://twu.ca/about/values/servant-leadership-life.html>).

prayer.”³ In other words, prayer is that mode of service to God where, unlike sacrifices, the real work takes place internally. At the same time, the sense of *avodah* as work or physical labor is also familiar. The contemporary Israeli Labor Party is known as Avodah, a remnant of the ideological reclamation of physical labor in the left wing of the Zionist movement in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

Now, this article is not the place for a comprehensive historical review of the term *avodah* in Jewish tradition. Instead, I want to examine that way that the notion of divine service has emerged in a perhaps surprising place, in the work of James Kugel, among the foremost biblical scholars in the contemporary academy. My purpose in doing so is not simply to offer a commentary on Kugel. Instead, I believe that Kugel has something to teach us in our thinking about the dispositions of Jewish service-learning. In this way, I hope to contribute to the development of our understanding and of our language, which I claimed earlier was lacking.

JAMES KUGEL AND THE CHALLENGE OF ACADEMIC BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

A prolific and prominent scholar, James Kugel is widely respected within the field of the academic study of Bible. Perhaps his most significant contributions are his insistence on the relevance and importance of the early interpretations of the Bible (i.e., those interpretive traditions that emerged in the centuries just before the Common Era⁴) and his literary analyses of biblical texts. He is also famous for his teaching at Harvard, where his classes on Bible sometimes enrolled almost a thousand students, and for leaving his chair at Harvard to move permanently to Israel in 2004.

In 2007, Kugel published *How to Read the Bible*, a long (700-page) guide to the Bible and biblical scholarship intended for the layperson, drawing on decades of his own academic scholarship and that of others. Curiously, Kugel expresses some ambivalence about the way that modern biblical scholarship subverts traditional understandings of and beliefs about the text. In his introduction, he declares himself to be “a believer in the divine inspiration of Scripture and ... a keeper of the Jewish sabbath, dietary laws, and all the other traditional practices of Orthodox Judaism” (2007b, p. 45). He acknowledges and understands that many readers who share his faith commitments will be unsatisfied with a book such as this one and may indeed reject it altogether. “If I have nonetheless gone ahead and written what I have,” he writes, “it is because I know full well that the questions raised by modern biblical scholarship are not going to go away” (p. 45).⁵

³Compare the parallel in Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai 23:25, which employs the more compact formulation *avodah she-ba-lev*, “service of the heart.”

⁴His argument is that these centuries witnessed what he sometimes calls an “Interpretive Revolution,” when communities of interpreters began to treat the biblical texts in specific ways that were discontinuous with how they were treated previously. In one sense, this is when the biblical texts *became* the Bible (i.e., when they became the unified text that plays the foundational role in Jewish and Christian, and later in Muslim, interpretive traditions). At the same time, even revolutions have antecedents, and Kugel (and others) have documented “intra-biblical interpretation,” the ways that later strata of biblical texts offer re-readings (and sometimes harmonizations) of prior biblical texts.

⁵As he writes more recently, “The fact that [a number of leading Jewish theologians of the 20th century] have wrestled with the problems that modern scholarship raises for traditional teachings doesn’t mean that the answers they have provided are satisfactory – or, in some cases, even remotely convincing” (Kugel, 2010, p. 2). See also Kugel’s 2009 open letter in the *YU Commentator* after his visit to Yeshiva University became an occasion of public controversy, in which he reacts to an Orthodox attitude that “amounts to shutting your eyes to almost all of modern scholarship and waiting for it to go away. It won’t. Such a stance ... basically amounts to sticking one’s head in the sand.” It is also important to note Kugel’s antipathy toward what he elsewhere derides as “biblical criticism lite” (Kugel, 2007b, p. 13; i.e., apologetic efforts by scholars to “have their Bible and criticize it too”).

People of faith, therefore, will not find in this book the key that allows them to reject the entire edifice of modern biblical scholarship and to maintain their belief in the unified, Mosaic authorship of the biblical text or the historicity of its accounts.⁶ Yet Kugel's purpose is not merely to subvert traditional beliefs. "What I would like to do," he continues, "is to present ... what ancient and modern scholars have had to say about the Bible, and then conclude by examining the questions that this survey raises, sketching out one or two of my own thoughts about how a person might go about honestly confronting modern scholarship and yet not lose sacred Scripture in the process" (p. 45). I take Kugel at his word here. In some sense, the modest thoughts that he offers in the conclusion of the book lie at the heart of his project—not just in writing this book, but in pursuing the lifetime of scholarship that he has pursued and in living the life that he has chosen to live.

Turning to that conclusion, then, Kugel's approach to the challenge of modern scholarship "has to do with the way in which God was apprehended in ancient Israel, and more particularly, with a significant change that took place in that way of apprehension" (p. 682). In other words, he wants to tell us a story about a particular evolution of ancient Israelite religious consciousness. So this answer will be unabashedly theological, but also unabashedly historical. The verbs in the sentence just quoted are in the past tense: God *was apprehended* a certain way, and then a change in that way of apprehension *took place*. In line with the general argument of the book, Kugel intends to describe for us two different ways of thinking about God, one that we can locate in the earliest biblical texts and a second way that we can locate in later texts and, subsequently, in the views of the first interpreters of the Bible. Either one of these ways of thinking about God may be insightful, or perhaps neither one is. Yet the argument does not demand any prior commitment to the insightfulness (or divinely inspired quality) of the biblical text.

The first way of thinking about or apprehending God is what Kugel calls "the God of Old" (see Kugel, 2007b, ch. 7, and Kugel, 2003, *passim*). In this conception, texts typically describe an encounter with the divine in which God "step[s] through a curtain that divides ordinary from extraordinary reality" (pp. 682–683). God appears, often in a way that seems confusing at first, but then suddenly becomes clear. Think, for example, of the man/angel wrestling with Jacob (Gen. 32:25–33). God is not abstract and disembodied; on the contrary, the texts (when taken in their plain sense) seem to have no problem with the corporeality of God. The only problem is that we typically do not see God, do not experience God in our everyday lives. In these texts, human–divine encounters are rare, fleeting, and, when they occur, terrifying. Most importantly, the

⁶To be sure, they *will* encounter Kugel's relentless insistence on the importance of how the Bible was read in the ancient world. He treats that traditional way of reading the text respectfully and seriously— but he does so because that way of reading the text is what made the Bible significant for all of Western monotheism, not because that way of reading the text is correct. "Most of what makes the Bible *biblical* is not inherent in its texts, but emerges only when one reads them in a certain way, a way that came into full flower in the closing centuries BCE" (Kugel, 2007a, p. 668). Notice that Kugel's respectful treatment of the ancient interpreters is accompanied by an unapologetic historicization of those interpreters and their reading of the texts: they emerged at a particular time, for particular reasons, thereby changing the prior meanings (what we might call "plain-sense" meanings, to which he alludes earlier in the phrase "inherent in the texts") that the texts had held for their original authors and audiences. For much more on this argument, see Kugel (1997, 1998).

conclusion that the ancient Israelites drew from this conception of the divine is that, insofar as human beings could design experiences to encounter the divine, those encounters would take place in cultic settings, “a safe and carefully controlled environment in which trained cultic personnel could stand up close ... in order to seek the deity’s favor” (p. 683). Kugel thus links the God of Old to the Temple and the biblical idea of sacrifices (*korbanot*, in Hebrew, based on the root for “coming close,” k.r.b.).

Yet the God of Old was not to last. Over time, that prior conception of God was replaced by a different conception:

Israel began to conceive of a different sort of “standing up close,” and the change proved revolutionary. It had to do with serving God.... This [idea] came to define a relationship, first between God and specific individuals, then between Him and the whole people.... To be a servant or a slave was to be in a state of humble subjection, ever eager to do the master’s bidding; but it was also conceived to be in a state of closeness, even familiarity (p. 683).

In place of the extraordinary, fleeting encounters with God under the first conception, the second conception lends itself to a persistent, ongoing, familiar—but servile—relationship.

The second conception also requires human beings to take a stand on the all-important question of what God actually wants his servants to do. This leads, naturally, to law—and not just to law as a social institution but to law as a religious institution, God’s law, where violating the law is not merely a crime but a sin against God. “So it was that, with ever greater emphasis, serving God meant not only offering sacrifices in the temple, but carrying out His many statutes” (p. 683). And unlike sacrifices, which (unless you were a priest yourself) were enacted in a distant place by someone else, “God’s laws are ever-present, governing a person’s everyday life and that of his neighbors and his village” (p. 683). *Avodat Hashem*, serving God, becomes less and less about the Temple cult and more and more about daily life in both ethical and ritual spheres. In this conception, God is more present, because one is always serving God by obeying God’s laws; but at the same time God is more absent, because the boss rarely if ever emerges from the remote executive suite to comment on the work. As the Bible was redacted following the Babylonian exile, its sources “came, slowly but steadily, to be united behind a single purpose: to tell people what God wanted them to know and believe *and do*, to tell them how to be God’s familiar servants” (p. 684). Thus, the biblical text—not in its earliest layers, which operate with a God-of-Old conception of the divine, but in its later layers—both puts forward the core ideal of *avodat Hashem* and, at the same time, represents the earliest efforts to explain what that ideal practically entails.

THE VERY IDEA OF SCRIPTURE

By this point, we may be wondering why this particular story about the evolution of ancient Israelite belief and practice is so important to Kugel—how it provides any kind of solution to the conflict between traditional and modern interpretations of the biblical text—as well as whether it should be important to us. Yet there is one more very important point to make. Kugel now reminds us of a curious paradox: although the ancient interpreters and their rabbinic inheritors

believed that the biblical text had sacred authority, at the same time they happily modified or supplemented or even subverted its plain-sense meaning in ways that often seem surprising to us. How could they do this? How did they *dare* to do this? He writes, “This is *the* question to ask, since the answer reveals the very idea of Scripture at its essence” (p. 684).

Having surely gotten our attention, he continues,

The answer is that there was something considered even more important, more powerful, than the words of the text themselves. That something was precisely the “standing up close” mentioned above: the supreme mission of serving God, of being God’s familiar servants. Scripture was sacred, but more sacred still was the purpose underlying the very idea of Scripture.... It is not the words of Scripture themselves that are ultimately supreme, but the service of God ... that they enjoin (pp. 684–685).

This supreme mission, then, becomes a kind of interpretive criterion against which everything else is measured. Kugel adds, “To flesh out this commandment [of Deut. 10:12, to serve God with all your heart], was the purpose of all of Scripture and all later interpretation” (p. 685). The ideal of *avodat Hashem* becomes the criterion; specific laws are then judged against that criterion.

Thus, the most important question for the ancient interpreters (and their rabbinic inheritors) as they considered any particular biblical text is not, “What does this verse mean?” Instead, it is always, “How shall we serve God?” What is *avodat Hashem*, service of God, in this instance? What does God want us to do? How can we read this text—whatever text we are reading—as an appropriate corollary to or enactment of the all-important imperative in Deut. 10:12? As Kugel writes elsewhere, “Torah in this sense ... is not a history but ... a call to action, a call to service to God” (Kugel, 2010, p. 16).

On this reading, the specific ethical and ritual laws of the Bible are mere instruments, devised as one early noble effort to respond to the call to serve God. When those instruments become inappropriate or ineffective for the particular service task at hand, the early interpreters and the rabbis after them—and the entire Jewish interpretive tradition after *them*—subjugated the specific laws to the higher purpose of serving God. That was how they felt empowered to modify or subvert the plain sense of the text in favor of new readings that (they believed) better embodied the ideal of *avodat Hashem*.⁷ What Kugel wants us to see is that the call to *avodat Hashem* provides the fuel for the interpretive engine, the motivation to engage in the endless effort to apply the Torah’s teachings to our contemporary situation as best as we can understand. If we are called to serve God, *la’avod et Hashem*, we cannot simply follow a manual or a list of rules. “Scripture is sacred”—and, we might add in a friendly amendment that Kugel would surely accept, the Mishnah and the Talmud and the rest of the Jewish interpretive tradition are sacred as well—“but more sacred still [is] the purpose underlying the very idea of Scripture,” namely, *avodat Hashem*.

⁷Compare Judith Hauptman’s claim that the rabbis’ interpretive practices allow them “to maintain the authority and sacredness of Scripture but, at the same time, to read their own, often more progressive social thinking into the ancient institutions” (Hauptman, 1997, p. 472). In other words, the rabbis’ agenda may be understood as imposing “more progressive social thinking” not simply because they were social progressives but because they believed that their *avodat Hashem* demanded exactly that.

DISPOSITIONS OF AVODAT HASHEM

For Kugel, then, biblical scholarship teaches us something of enormous spiritual value: it allows us to see the way that the ideal of *avodat Hashem* emerged as the core idea of Scripture and indeed of Judaism.⁸ At this point, some of the implications of Kugel's argument for the topic at hand—the development of Jewish service dispositions as a primary goal of Jewish service-learning—may already have occurred to the reader. First and foremost, the role of servant—or if “servant” is still an uncomfortable term, an *'oved* or *'ovedet Hashem*—represents a central ethical ideal. The *'oved Hashem* is the way to characterize the person we aspire to be, and the person we ought to educate others to be.

The *'oved Hashem* may act to repair the world and may be responsive to the needs of others. However, in terms of motivation, the *'oved Hashem*—even while repairing the world or responding to the needs of others—is motivated by the ideal of serving God, by striving to do God's work in the world. Practically, there may be no difference, but dispositionally, the difference is significant. The goal of the *'oved Hashem* is primarily to (discern and to) do God's will, to live a life of *avdut*, service. The dispositional goal of service-learning, then, is to transform individuals not into problem solvers or world repairers, but, first and foremost, into servants.

This ethical ideal may be inspiring in the way that it provides a powerful and enveloping motivational framework. Yet it also contains an inherent kind of ethical trap as well, because the single-minded focus on the will of God may distract a person from the needs of the person right in front of him or her (and surely sometimes has done so). And Lord save us from the self-righteousness of those who become convinced of their own rectitude in doing the will of God! The way to avoid this trap is not to demean the ethical ideal of *avdut*, of being a servant, but to insist on its full enactment—which includes the necessary humility to subjugate one's own will to that of one's Master. True servants aspire to do the Master's will as best as they can, but never claim to speak on behalf or with the authority of the Master. There is no foolproof guarantee, of course, but thinking about the ideal of *avdut* helps us see that the disposition to stand in humble critique of oneself—to ask whom one is truly serving—is a necessary virtue.

Second, we may recall Kugel's distinction between the episodic, extraordinary encounters with the God of Old and the everyday, routine encounters with God whom one sets out to serve, whose will one aspires to fulfill. The God-of-Old texts celebrate a certain set of virtues, such as insight or perspicacity, the ability to see things for what they truly are or what they ought to be, underneath the façades that human beings regularly encounter in the world. The *avodat Hashem* texts celebrate a different set of virtues: the virtues of the everyday, of constancy and consistency, of fidelity, of showing up to work and doing one's job even when the boss is absent, the project unwieldy, and the instructions not altogether clear. We might think about these dispositions as the antitheses of moral heroism. Our service need not be—perhaps *should* not be—heroic. It should not be extraordinary. It should be steady, consistent, and disciplined. Perhaps, then,

⁸Kugel is not quite as sanguine as this sentence might suggest; he recognizes that biblical scholarship also has the potential to disturb much of traditional theology and practice. So even as he says that traditional Judaism cannot afford to stick its head in the sand, he also sometimes suggests that traditional Jews ought not study biblical scholarship in order to avoid the problems that it raises.

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the dispositions to be cultivated in Jewish service-learning are, likewise, the dispositions of constancy and fidelity rather than heroism.

Third, the story that Kugel tells emphasizes the inescapable distance between the ideal of *avodat Hashem* and the inevitably flawed efforts to interpret it. Biblical laws are one approximation, intra-biblical revisions of those laws are a second approximation, the radical revision of the meaning of the texts by early interpreters are a third approximation, and so on. How does one know when to listen to the tradition? How does one know when one is sacrificing the ideal of *avodat Hashem* to a false god, worshipping the texts of the tradition rather than doing what God really wants? We do not and cannot know in advance, but this way of framing the issue makes clear that *avodat Hashem* is not mere slavish obedience.

Kugel would say that we must always ask ourselves whether what we are setting out to do is, in fact, what God wants us to do—and no one else can answer this question with certainty. God, in this picture, does not provide us with the manual; we are on our own. I referred in the preceding paragraph to God as an absent boss, but we might also think about God as present but extremely reticent, the kind of boss who communicates high expectations with a simple look—where the interpretation of that look has to be carried out by the employee. We might say that what God wants us to do is to ask ourselves, as consistently and deliberately as possible, what God wants us to do. The dispositions to cultivate, then, are not merely service-humility, and not merely service-discipline and service-fidelity but also the capacity to inquire and discern and interpret and the motivation to do so well and responsibly—what we might call a kind of service-wisdom. Perhaps paradoxically, *avodat Hashem* demands independence of mind.

CONCLUSION: TOO MUCH THEOLOGY?

Some may be wondering whether any of this theology is relevant to our situation. Even if it is true that our conceptualization of the goals of service-learning seems to lack appropriate dispositional language, why should we draw on Kugel's interpretation of the Bible and its interpreters for that language? After all, part of the contemporary appeal of service and service-learning within the Jewish community is that service is Jewish but not too Jewish—that it is a way of acting Jewishly (i.e., ethically, in concert with other Jews) while leaving God out of the picture. Service is more engaging than synagogue, less intellectual than text study, nobler and more idealistic than Shabbat dinner, less controversial than Israel advocacy, and cheaper than day schools. For those participants or advocates or service-learning educators who have trouble towing the theological line, the preceding discussion may seem either irrelevant or infuriating. Why mess with a good thing?

The point is a fair one. However, recall here that Kugel is committed to insulating his argument from apologetics. He does not rely on faith claims (i.e., claims that derive their authority from prior beliefs about the text). His approach is simply to describe, as best he can as an historian, the conceptions of prior generations and then to leave open the question of whether those conceptions have something to teach us. Do they capture something important or insightful about our experience of the divine or of the world? Do they help us make sense

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of that experience? Do we recognize something about ourselves in them? Do we find ourselves challenged by them in constructive ways? Do they work for us?

Perhaps they do not. Perhaps the nontheist or agnostic service educator who reads Kugel (or the present article) simply puts it down with a look of bemusement at the theological muddle-headedness of it all. Why would someone as smart and critical as Kugel believe that there is a God who actually wants our service, that God in some mysterious way makes this principle known to us,⁹ and, most importantly, that there is value in directing our service toward the divine rather than directly toward our fellow human being?

Yet perhaps our agnostic service educators are surprised to encounter a conception of divinity and of revelation that they can live with, bound up with an ideal of service that makes sense of their own highest aspirations and their own deepest beliefs. Perhaps they find here a way of understanding and articulating the notion that the Good Life is a life lived in awareness and pursuit of something bigger than themselves. It is not that the details do not matter; on the contrary, they matter a great deal. Yet working out the details is, itself, part of that Good Life. Perhaps, then, they are surprised to discover that the ideal of directing one's service to the divine, even as one serves one's fellows, provides a meaningful framework for the inevitable frustrations of repairing a hopelessly fractured world. It is not that responding to the needs of others is wrong, of course, but it always seems like it is insufficient; reconceptualizing the life of service as the fulfillment of the divine will allows one to accommodate oneself to that inevitability without abdicating responsibility. Perhaps, finally, they are surprised to realize that the concept of *avodat Hashem* as they encounter it in Kugel does more work than they might have expected; that it provides some texture to their thinking about the goals of service-learning; that the dispositions of service-humility, service-discipline, and service-wisdom sketched earlier helpfully articulate what they want the participants in their programs to learn, and who they want them to become.

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⁹On his website, echoing stances taken by Buber, Rosenzweig, and Heschel, Kugel proposes that "the basic idea that Israel's connection to God is to be articulated through *avodat H'* ... is the whole substance of the Sinai revelation." Revelation has, as its substance or content, only this idea. He then adds, parenthetically: "whether it took place at Sinai or somewhere else," which suggests his lack of commitment to—and lack of interest in—the historicity of the Sinai event. How particular human beings actually came up with the idea (Kugel would comfortably say, how God revealed this idea) is not terribly important to him.