The Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

Walking with God

Edited By
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דרכיה דרכי נעם

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ZIEGLER SCHOOL OF RABBINIC STUDIES
AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

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RABBI BRADLEY SHAVIT ARTSON
DEAN AND VICE PRESIDENT

IN THE GLORY DAYS OF THE MIDDLE AGES, TWO TITANS OF JEWISH THOUGHT, Rabbi Moses Maimonides (the Rambam) and Rabbi Moses Nachmanides (the Ramban) sparred. Their argument: was the obligation to believe in God one of the 613 commandments of the Torah, or was it the ground on which all the 613 commandments stood? Neither disputed that Jewish life flows from the fountain of faith, that connecting to God is a life-long journey for the seeking Jew and a pillar of Jewish life and religion.

Not only the Middle Ages, but the modern age affirms that same conviction. Conservative Judaism, in *Emet Ve-Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism*, affirms, "We believe in God. Indeed, Judaism cannot be detached from belief in, or beliefs about God. … God is the principal figure in the story of the Jews and Judaism." In the brochure, *Conservative Judaism: Covenant and Commitment*, the Rabbinical Assembly affirms, "God and the Jewish People share a bond of love and sacred responsibility, which expresses itself in our biblical *brit* (covenant)."

It is to aid the contemporary Jew in the duty and privilege of exploring that relationship, of enlisting the rich resources of Judaism's great sages through the ages, that the **Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University**, in partnership with the **United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism** and the **Rabbinical Assembly**, has compiled and published this adult education course focused on Jewish apprehensions of God. 12 essays and worksheets will open a wide range of insights and conceptualizations of the One who is beyond all words, beyond all conceptualizations, yet – paradoxically – who is as close as the human heart and who permeates all space and time. Typical of Conservative Judaism, these essays integrate traditional and academic insights and approaches, celebrate the pluralism of Jewish diversity throughout history, and insist that open-minded and critical study can energize a faith attained without blinders.

It remains our happy duty to thank the **Held Family Foundation**, and especially **Mr. Harold Held**, dear friend to the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies and the American Jewish University, and a philanthropic visionary, for making the production and dissemination of this remarkable tool possible. I'd also like to thank **Dr. Robert Wexler**, President of the American Jewish University for his steady support and encouragement of this project from its inception, and **Rabbi Jerome Epstein** and the **United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism**, and **Rabbi Joel Meyers** and the **Rabbinical Assembly**, for their partnership in producing the project. Thanks to Rami Wernik, Acting Dean of the Fingerhut School of Education, for his expertise as a pedagogue. And it is also a personal pleasure to thank my student and colleague, **Ms. Deborah Silver**, whose professionalism, insight, patience and diligence have produced a work of real excellence.

May the Holy Blessing One enliven your study, awaken your heart, and open your soul to the wonders of the Divine, and may the essays and worksheets which follow help you to walk the time honored path of Torah and mitzvot in a spirit of wonder, pluralism, openness, intellectual honesty, and strengthened faith.

B'virkat Shalom,
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GOD: AN INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

Much of contemporary theological discussion is marred by the coerciveness of its participants. Few people discuss theology in order to account for the broadest number of facts and perceptions. Instead, theology is characterized by a two-fold attempt to coerce others to believe as does the theologian and to compare the selected best of one's own tradition against the less (subjectively) palatable aspects of another's. Both efforts prevent an understanding of other people's perceptions of the world and inhibit one's own religious growth. I wish to avoid both blemishes.

So, at the outset, I must confess that I have no desire to persuade a belief in God the way I do or for the reasons I do. I offer my own perceptions of God, hoping that you will do the same, and that through our mutual attempts to internalize or even to reject (after careful thought) each other's theology, we will emerge somewhat wiser, more sophisticated, and better servants of God.

I have an additional confession to make. I cannot adhere exclusively to a single theological approach to God. To reduce God to one philosophical system (ontological, experiential, or existential) is to miss the full extent of God's majesty. This reduction is no less belittling to God than is the attempt to claim that God's complete revelation can be contained in mere words. This caveat is not intended as an excuse for sloppy thinking or unjustifiable conclusions, simply to assert that God is experienced on many levels, that people are complex creatures, and that any theology which ignores that multi-facetedness and that complexity cannot do justice to its subject.

Living in Southern California, we are frequent visitors to Disneyland. My children, my wife and I love the section called "Toontown," the neighborhood of some of Disneyland's most famous celebrities. Here it is possible to actually see the home of Minnie Mouse, as well as to meet her. Even more thrilling is the home of her lifelong companion, Mickey, which is just next door.

After touring each room of the house, examining Mickey's reading chair, television, and washing machine, we were finally led to Mickey's private theater, where his classic films were showing. Visitors wait there so they can be ushered in to Mickey's presence in small numbers, allowing greater intimacy when the anticipated moment comes. Finally, when our turn comes, we are led down a corridor, a door opens, and there he is. I will never forget how Jacob, my then two-year-old son, ran to Mickey's feet and wouldn't let go. The look on his face was one of complete rapture, and I have never seen him happier or more absorbed.

The Religious Issue at Stake

I am a rabbi, and my life is devoted to the service of God and Torah, which means that everything I do gets filtered through the peculiar lenses of my ancient craft. Jacob's enchantment in the presence of this cartoon character led me to think about the power of fantasy. What is it about the human mind that leads us to imagine beings we cannot see, creatures of our own fantasies, and then to love them with such overpowering force? Children are simply the most visible practitioners of loving their own imagined images. But we all do it - we know that Romeo and Juliet is a fantasy, yet we cry at the lovers' demise, we watch Casablanca (for the thousandth time, yet!) and are deeply touched by Rick's selfless love. Something about the way people are built impels us to create stories and invent characters who then are allowed entry into the most private chambers of our souls. We rejoice at their triumphs and their ingenuity, we mourn their tragedies and failings, all the while aware that they "exist" only as a product of our creative energy.

What can we learn from our drive to imagine? What does our need to empathize with fictional figures tell us about ourselves and about the world? What does my son's passion for Mickey Mouse reveal about the human condition?

The reason this issue is particularly pressing to me is that I am a lover of God. Fully aware that God has been portrayed

in a staggering variety of ways throughout the ages, I know that my own inner response to God is not very different from my son's response to a Disney cartoon. Understanding Jacob's relationship to Mickey Mouse can help us to formulate a clearer notion of how we relate to God, and just what that relationship entails.

Of course, classical analytical interpretation would assert that this love of Mickey Mouse (or of God) is simply a delusion, my own inner projection of insecurities and the need to be sheltered onto some external fallacy. There is no Mickey Mouse, but our fears of finitude, helplessness, and abandonment impel us to create these falsehoods to create an artificial sense of security. We coat a harsh world in the gentle blanket of a lie. The lie may be serviceable in the short term - it does make the universe less frightening. But in the long-term, this fantasy, like all falsehoods, is crippling, requiring more and more psychic energy to maintain in the face of life's harsh disappointments and cruel reality. The key to health, in this worldview, is to face the world unadorned, to move beyond the reliance on myths, however comforting or venerable. Mickey Mouse, for this school of thought, is no different than God. Just as we expect a child to outgrow the cartoon, so too a healthy adult ought to transcend the transcendent.

There is a great deal of power and coherence to this explanation of fantasy, and it reflects a direct challenge to the entire enterprise of religion - both in its fundamentalist and its more liberal modes. Seeking solace, order, and purpose through faith and ritual, regardless of whether the sacred stories are understood as historically true or as metaphorically true is simple delusion, a pathology to eradicate. Religion, for Freud and his classical followers, is the enemy. And so is Mickey Mouse.

Is Mickey Mouse the Enemy? Is God?

There are some problems with Freud's confident dismissal of religion as delusion, not least of which is the testimony of religious people throughout the ages, who associate their faith with great joy, resilience, and profundity. Even in our age of technological sophistication and scientific skepticism, religious faith continues to exercise a tremendous attraction, transcending all educational and financial divisions. Even among psychoanalysts there is a strong representation of the faithful, forcing a re-evaluation of what religion represents even within the field that Freud built.

Indeed, one needn't seek so far for the positive role of faith. Merely look, with me, at my son's joyous glee in the presence of his beloved mouse. Mickey, for him, allows him to connect with the world, to feel a sense of belonging and of reciprocal caring that deepens his humanity and makes him feel more alive. Mickey is clearly a force for good in his life, just as God is for the hundreds of millions (billions?) who believe.

But whether or not something 'works' does not establish its veracity. One can use the belief that the earth is flat to calm an irrational fear of falling off, but the functionality of a claim doesn't make it true. As a rabbi, I'm not willing to devote my life to something that functions through a lie. I don't want a mere delusion of holiness to help build community; I want God to be real.

In what way, then, is God real?

The Reality of Mickey Mouse

In considering the ways in which God is real, Mickey Mouse can provide some insight too.

When a child falls in love with Mickey Mouse, what the child loves is the image of caring, warmth, and joy that Mickey represents. In the sense of being a discrete character, Mickey doesn't really exist. But in the sense of embodying

certain values and characteristics, what Mickey represents is very real indeed. Mickey is merely one possible representation of that reality. There is no way to give unmediated form to love and fidelity, but it is possible to clothe those virtues in the garment of a character or the vehicle of a story. Love can never appear in the abstract, it must always be a specific love that is felt by someone for something else. So, too, faith, hope, or truth.

Fantasy, it seems, is how human beings make visible the invisible realities of life. Not less real, but more so, these intangible passions and commitments are at the very core of life, making life worth living and society possible. Without the concretization of fiction and art, we would remain unable to transmit or articulate the realities that undergird meaningful living. Fantasy gives us access to the most significant truths - loyalty, compassion, morality, passion, and trust. What Jacob responds to in Mickey Mouse is absolutely true, and is embodied in that cartoon character, even as it transcends Mickey's limits. The cartoon doesn't have an independent existence, but what it points to does, and is more real than most of the tangible delusions people glorify and pursue.

God as A Cosmic Mickey Mouse

God shares a lot in common with Mickey Mouse, representing that part of reality which eludes measurement or analysis, but which makes life worth the effort. What we learn from Mickey Mouse is that the character is but the embodiment of a reality that ultimately eludes being encompassed. God, too, is the concrete image of values and truths that can never be fully articulated or represented. But where God differs from Mickey Mouse is that God is not only the metaphor that makes those virtues visible to us, but that deeper reality itself. As Maimonides notes so presciently, "God is the knower, the subject of knowledge, and the knowledge itself — all in one (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:10)."

If the virtues and truths that God represents are impossible to contain, then ultimately it is impossible to speak about God in any meaningful way. God is not some tangible truth to be dissected, scrutinized, or analyzed. Just as one cannot explain what love feels like to someone who has never felt it, it is impossible to talk about God, we can only affirm God. Similarly, we use language to allude to a particular emotion, hoping to provide enough guidance and signposts so the listener can more successfully experience love itself. Love cannot be described, once and for all, it can only be alluded to and celebrated. Perhaps it is for this reason that the greatest words about love are to be found in poetry, which attempts to evoke, rather than to inform. All God talk is ultimately poetry, ultimately metaphor.

Just as poems can use different metaphors to describe the same emotion or virtue, so too religion can employ different images to describe the same transcendent unity that we call God. The rabbis recognized this irreducible theological pluralism when they write that "God is like an icon which never changes, yet everyone who looks into it sees a different face (Pesikta de Rav Kahana 110a)", or yet again when they relate that "God was revealed at the Red Sea as a hero waging war, and at Sinai as an elder full of compassion, … [yet] it is the same God in Egypt, the same God at the Red Sea, the same God in the past, the same God in the future (Mekhilta, Shirata, Beshallah 4)." The reality that our perception points to is always greater than our ability to express in words. The very limitations of our own finite perspective, our cultural embeddedness, and our personal histories profoundly shape how we see and relate to that underlying reality. Perhaps the greatest biblical theologian, then, is Hagar, who recognized that inevitably how she knew God was a reflection of her own vision: "And she [Hagar] called the Holy One who spoke to her, "God of My Seeing (Genesis 16:13)."

How we see God is all we can talk about, and is the outer wrapping that religion uses to attempt to communicate what can only be experienced directly. God is perceived "according to the power of each individual, according to the individual power of the young, the old, and the very small ones (Shemot Rabbah 29:1)." Just as Mickey Mouse is an

embodiment of certain wonderful emotions and values that can only make their appearance in the form of specific characters, so the values that God embodies - of holiness, righteousness, wisdom and compassion - can only be made tangible through specific religious forms. Each religion, then, offers a culturally based filter to make those infinite truths apparent to its believers. Since we can only be receptive to something that speaks our own language, the task of each religious tradition is to take these cosmic profundities and to garb them in the clothing of speech that can be heard. "The Torah speaks in human language," the rabbis assert, because otherwise we would be incapable of hearing its wisdom.

So God is, at one level, a culturally-bound metaphor. Inescapably, since we must rely on language to communicate, and language (including art) always develops among a concrete community sharing a particular history, how we speak of the Sacred and the Good will assume contextual form - through the stories, rituals, and prayers of our own faith traditions. As the Zohar recognizes, "all this is said only from our point of view, and it is relative to our knowledge (II:176a)."

Yet the matter doesn't end there. These expressions of elusive truths do point to something real, something that each human being experiences with overwhelming power. During those peak moments in our lives - when we are married, at the birth of a child or the death of a loved one - that inexpressible reality is so real that all else pales in its presence. That our descriptions of God are culturally bound cannot eclipse the God beyond the metaphors, the Holy One to whom those metaphors point. Even while recognizing that the perception of God is "according to the power of each individual," that same midrash asserts "Do not believe that there are many deities in heaven because you have heard many voices, but know that I alone am the Holy One your God (Shemot Rabbah 29:1)."

For there are eternal verities that have enriched life through the ages. There are grand truths and values more wondrous than life itself that lift us up and strengthen our resolve. Our metaphors, the way we speak about God, help to remind us of the truths buried deep in our hearts and shining at us from the brightest stars. Judged from this perspective, religion is true when it helps us to shape our lives by those timeless profundities and helps us to experience those elevating sentiments. Religion works when it plugs us into the reality of being connected with all that is and all that ever was, when it infuses our lives with purpose and our communities with a zeal for justice and compassion. Religion is true, in short, when it can produce Godliness among its practitioners, justice among its disciples, and a deep sense of belonging and peace.

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel notes: "A Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought; to surpass his needs, to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does." We demonstrate the validity of our understanding of God - its power to serve as a vehicle for truths otherwise inexpressible yet profoundly real - by the way we live our lives, by the way we fashion a sacred community, by the way we are true of our ancient covenant. "There is no Monarch without a nation," the medieval Jewish philosopher Bahya ben Asher admitted. We make our God (as metaphor) reflect God (the reality) by our willingness to live as God's people, by our willingness to make the values and mitzvot of Judaism live through our deeds. Perhaps that's what we mean when we say the Shema: Adonai, our understanding of God, is ultimately a reflection of the Ein Sof, the One beyond all description.

And that is no Mickey Mouse.

GOD: AN INTRODUCTION – TEXT 1

GOD AS THE SOURCE OF MORALITY

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

As an atheist, I was unable to justify even the simplest moral claims. For many years, I had no theoretical grounding for assertions as clear as "raping my sister is wrong" or "murdering the Jews in Nazi Germany was wrong." If there is no external, non-human source of morality, than the most I could assert was that *I think* raping my sister is wrong. But the rapist thinks it is right and the matter must rest there. *Teku*.[1] Even more upsetting, if morality is based on human or social need, a Nazi could make an irrefutable argument that Germany's need required the execution of millions of Jews - not that Jews were really a threat, but that the German people needed a scapegoat. And, if consensus is our basis of morality, there certainly were more Germans than there were Jews.

For me, the only way to ground morality into a system which didn't collapse was to place moral authority beyond human judgment. God is the source of morality. We may understand God's moral imperative imperfectly, but that does not make the imperative or its Source any less real than an imperfectly transmitted letter would render its author's existence false. God has planted in each person a moral force, akin to our drive for food, sleep, and sex. Just as with those other drives, they can be denied, perverted, or rationalized away. But they are real nonetheless. God is the reason why raping my sister is not simply wrong in my opinion but wrong, why murdering Jews cannot be justified on grounds of social utility.

It might be argued that moral treatment of people derives from human equality. Such an assertion cannot be demonstrated exclusively through reason, and I must treat it as a dogma of faith (one which I share). People are clearly not equal unless we have something perfect with which to compare them - some are brighter than others, some stronger, some richer, some better looking. And some are weak, stupid, poor, or ugly. There must be an outside point of comparison, One whose nature is so radically different from that of any person, however wonderful, that in face of that Other all people are essentially equal, despite their distinctions. People are equalized in comparison to the Holy Eternal One. It is through God that the moral argument that all people are equal ("created equal", in fact) gains force.

My intuitive insistence on morality nurtures my intellectual recognition of God.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **According to the author, how do God and morality relate to each other?**
- **Might there be sources of morality other than God? What might they be?**
- **Do you think that a Jewish conception of God gives rise to a different morality?**
- **Are you persuaded by this text? Why/why not?**

[1] *Teku is the Rabbinic terminology used in the Talmud when it is impossible to arrive at an answer to a question. For the actual meaning of the term, see the essay on God in Halakhah.*

GOD: AN INTRODUCTION – TEXT 2

GOD AS THE SOURCE OF MORALITY

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

One cannot consider the existence of God from a neutral position. One can act as a believer and see if the promises made to a believer are true, or one can act as a non-believer and judge the merit of non-belief. Experience is rich and divergent enough, filled with wonders and horrors to the point that its testimony is eloquent in both directions - regardless of one's religious assertions.

But when I say the *Aleinu*, I know that I stand before the Ruler of space and time and that we have a shared relationship. When my wife lights Shabbat candles, I know that we are enjoying a gift from the Holy One and are enjoying God's company and love. When I spend a night in a shelter for the homeless I know that I am God's ally, and when I speak about a Jewish response to the possibility of nuclear holocaust, I am caring for creation and thereby serving the Creator.

So many experiences in my life point to God's reality. No, that is too pale. Many of my experiences point to God's love and involvement. I have been richly blessed, and the very ability to perceive those blessings is itself another pointer to God.

These experiences and perceptions are the everyday miracles in which I sustain my relationship with God.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **According to the author, what kind of experiences point to God's reality?**
- **Is there a difference between God's reality and God's love?**
- **Has there been a time in your life when you felt God is real? When?**
- **Are you persuaded by this text? Why/why not?**

GOD: AN INTRODUCTION – TEXT 3

GOD AS THE SOURCE OF MORALITY

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

The third leg of my perception of God stems from two enormous miracles. The first is that of life itself, the second is the continuing vitality of the Jewish People.

I have no explanation for the fact that I, a composite of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphate, and sulfur, can think, feel, and behave. I find this fact staggering and silencing. One minute alive and able to laugh or cry, the next second a body lies lifeless, simply a pile of elements like any other. In our ability to maintain our own health (to renew creation every day), to impose our will on our environment - including our ability to reproduce (again, acting as creators), and to make moral judgments (distinguishing between good and evil), I perceive a God-like ability. It testifies to me of God.

Finally, I look at the Jewish People. History knows of no other example of a people who were separated from their land for most of their history, who lacked the power to govern themselves or the stability to control their destiny who nonetheless retained a strong and continuous identity. Yet we did just that. There are no weekly meetings of Edomites in Brooklyn, or of Hittites in Los Angeles. But not a day goes by in which the descendants of ancient Israel do not meet with the express purpose of participating in, and strengthening, that unbroken identity. We not only know we are Jews, we care about it. Jewish creativity continues unabated.

That Jewish creativity began when we viewed our role as being God's People. Our earliest memories focus on the quest for God. We are not unique in the quality of our art, our cuisine, our architecture, or our music. Only in our spirituality. So I link our unique trait of spirit with our unique ability to survive. The fact is that the people who claim to be God's chosen have survived despite all the overwhelming odds to the contrary. We testify, as the medieval Catholic church understood so well, to God's concern and involvement in the world.

I am driven, by the fact of Jewish survival, to *davven*.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **According to the author, what is the relationship between miracles and the existence of God?**
- **What is the relationship between the final sentence of this text and the rest of it?**
- **Are there miracles in your life which underpin your perception of God? What are they?**
- **Are you persuaded by this text? Why/why not?**

GOD: AN INTRODUCTION – TEXT 4

GOD AS THE SOURCE OF MORALITY

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

One of the striking facts about religious faith around the world is the array of ways in which human beings conceive of, and worship, the Divine. The sacred claims a myriad of names – Ahura Mazda, Brahma, Nirvana, Wanka Takan, Osiris, Zeus, Jupiter, Wodan. Given how many names the Divine is called, it is particularly striking that the Jewish conception of God doesn't have a name at all. Or, at the very least, our God's name is suspiciously like no name at all… "God" isn't a name; it's a job description…

Our portion [*Lech Lecha*] mentions that Abraham "built an altar to the Lord and invoked the Lord by name (12:8)." What does it mean to invoke a nameless God by name?

…To name something is to reveal something about its essence, to exert a kind of control, to assert a comprehension of its nature, its limits and its potentials. Certainly when the Torah says that Abraham called on God by name, it means to tell us that Abraham enjoyed an intimacy with God that others of his generation did not. It teaches that Abraham knew God with a thoroughness that no one before him could equal.

And yet, the name that Abraham knew sounds suspiciously like no name at all.

The name consists of four Hebrew letters: Y-H-V-H. Lacking vowels (or hard consonants, for that matter) the word "Y-H-V-H" is virtually impossible to articulate. It sounds like a breath, like air passing in and out of the lungs. Perhaps it tells us that God is the breath of the universe.

…And the history of that name reveals that Jews understood that they should treat that awkward word with reverence, for it was unlike any other name in the world. Its articulation was restricted to the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, by the holiest person in Biblical Judaism, the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, in the holiest place in the world, the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. Since the destruction of the Temple some two thousand years ago, no observant Jew has pronounced that "name", the ineffable sign of our unique God.

To say that God is ultimately unnamable is to suggest that the Divine is ultimately beyond the totality of our experience, beyond our comprehension. Without actually *being* God, we cannot fully *know* God. What we can do, however is to *relate* to God; to seek to embody godly traits and, in all of our actions, to cultivate God's loving presence.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, taken from "The Bedside Torah", Contemporary Books, 2001.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **According to the author, what does naming something imply?**
- **What do you think the name Y-H-V-H might connote?**
- **What, according to the author, does it mean to say that God is unnamable?**
- **What issues does God being unnamable raise for you?**

CONTRIBUTORS

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The Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

God in the Hebrew Bible

GOD IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Rabbi David Lieber, DHL

The Hebrew Bible is neither a book of history nor of theology, yet it is central to our understanding of ancient Israel and its faith. Its contents are rich and varied. Some of its writings reached their final form as late as the second century BCE (Before the Common Era), such as the Book of Daniel, alluding as it does to the Maccabean age. Others, such as the Song of Deborah, are a thousand years older, with passages dating from the age of the Judges in the twelfth century BCE. It is not surprising, then, that its pages reflect the religious beliefs and practices of the times and social conditions in which they originated.

The stories of the patriarchs, for example, while reaching their present form in later days, retain memories of the time when the ancestors of Israel were still landless, wandering clans. Each was headed by a patriarch who not only saw to its physical well-being, but to the maintenance of its customs and traditions and the training of the young. He also was charged with the proper maintenance and worship of the family god ("the god of the fathers") who was considered part of the household and protected it from evil spirits. Hence the biblical notion that the first born were to serve as priests. This may have been the reason behind Jacob's eagerness to inherit the right of the first born, as the midrash also suggests. Note that the god of each of the patriarchs is referred to by a different name: *elohei Avraham*, *pahad Yitzhak, abir Ya'akov*, suggesting that different deities were involved. Alongside of this god, many families had other gods, some (known as "*trafim*") to ward off demonic forces, others to assure fertility. Family festivals were regularly celebrated at the home shrine, while others, often major agricultural ones, were observed at larger open-air sanctuaries.

Laws in the Covenant Code (Exodus 21-23) and stories of the conquest in the Book of Judges reflect the early stages in the life of the tribes (12th-11th centuries BCE). Many of the clans had settled down in villages and towns, usually of no more than three-hundred members. The clans still maintained their family solidarity, but now they had to negotiate their practices with their neighbors ("*re'im*"). The council of elders served that purpose, with each family retaining a high degree of independence. It controlled its own property, homes as well as slaves and cattle. It continued to worship its household gods and held its own family celebrations. At the same time, all of the families were bound by common moral laws and joined with their neighbors in worshiping at open-air shrines on the occasion of communal celebrations. The gods to whom they brought offerings were generally the ones responsible for the fertility of the land and of the cattle, the *ba'alim* and *asheirot*.

Clans banded together into tribes to defend themselves against marauders and to conquer new territories from the Canaanites. In these battles, they turned to YHWH, the god of war (Exodus 15:3) who appointed charismatic chieftains ("*shoftim*") to pacify the land. These chieftains were imbued with the spirit of YHWH, but did not give up on their local gods. Thus, Gideon, zealous as he was for YHWH, even refusing the invitation of his people to rule over them since YHWH alone was their ruler (Judges 8:23), did not refrain from erecting an ephod (probably, in this context, an image to be worshiped) which "became a snare to Gideon and his household" (8:27). Elsewhere we are told that under the pressure of the Philistines, the tribe of Dan left its original home, north of Judah, to settle on the northern border, beyond the Kinneret. Here the tribe erected a sanctuary to house the ephod, together with the Levite who ministered to it, both of which had been taken by force from the house of Micah. The sanctuary later occupied a place of honor in the northern kingdom since its priesthood was descended from Moses (18:30).

The onslaught of the Philistines led to the union of the tribes, a move sanctioned by YHWH, who directed Samuel - judge, priest and prophet - to anoint Saul as their first king. The kingdom was now involved in ongoing battles, under the leadership of YHWH and his anointed king. This was especially true of David who was promised an eternal dynasty by him, one that was sealed by a covenant. YHWH was now recognized as the god of the realm, his ark brought to Jerusalem and subsequently installed in an ornate temple erected by Solomon. That this did not affect the way the people continued to worship their own gods is evident from the narratives in Kings and the pronouncements of the classical prophets. Even as late as the closing days of the first temple (586 BCE) we find the prophet Ezekiel denouncing the

people for the worship of alien gods in the temple itself (ch.8) and the ongoing sacrifices at the open-air sanctuaries (so also, eg, Jeremiah 2:30ff, an older contemporary of Ezekiel's).

It is only after the Babylonian exile that we witness a change in mood. This is attested by the Torah which seems to have emerged in Babylonia itself. It was evidently the product of priests and scribes who set themselves to collect and preserve the oral traditions and practices of the past. The need for this was felt by the newly established communities of exiles who, living in their own villages, still longed to return to their own land and sought to keep the connection with the past alive for themselves and their descendants. The earlier materials, which were edited and reconstituted to provide hope and guidance for the future, were taught orally on Sabbaths and holy day, as well as at sessions with young men being trained to take their place in the community.

To maintain their distinctiveness from the surrounding Babylonian groups, the Jewish villages had to have a common god who had been worshiped by them in the past. The discrete household and village gods no longer sufficed. What was needed was a god who was known to all of the ancestors of Israel and only one met that requirement: YHWH, who had been worshiped nationally in the temple in Jerusalem, whose prophets had warned of the coming destruction and urged the people to be faithful to him.

We do not know when the Torah emerged in its present form. Since Ezra is alleged to have brought it back to Jerusalem in the fifth century BCE,it appears to have existed at that time, though possibly not in its final form. Interestingly, a midrash seems to recognize Ezra's role in the composition of the written text, stating that the original copy of the Torah had been destroyed at the time of the exile and that Ezra had rewritten it from memory. Accordingly, if Moses had not given the people the Torah, Ezra would have proved worthy of doing so!

The Torah, then, became the foundational text of Israel and its God the one to be worshiped and revered. As such, He is its central subject and his existence is taken for granted. He is incomprehensible, yet He reveals himself in a variety of ways.

To start with, He is the creator. Behind Genesis 1 lurk older Mesopotamian myths, yet the chapter itself is relatively free of mythical allusions. Nor does it insist on "*creatio ex nihilo*" (creation out of nothing) a reference to which does not appear in any text before the Maccabean age. Rather, written in poetic prose, it refers to God as bringing order out of chaos in an effortless manner. Everything proceeds according to the divine plan, with each day allocated a specific act of creation. The objects created in days four to six are parallel to those in days one to three, except that they are endowed with the power of locomotion. At the summit stands the human being who alone is celebrated as having been created in the divine image, which probably means that he is to be the divine surrogate on earth. On the seventh day, God "rests", indicating that the active process of creation has been completed and that the Creator has provided His creatures with a hallowed day on which they could enjoy the blessedness available to them as His creatures. Difficult though the circumstances might be under which they were living, His people were reassured that He could be trusted to bring order out of the chaos in which they were living, if only they carried out His will for sacred living.

He is the God who enters into covenants. These are of two major kinds. The first is essentially a promise sealed by a sacred oath and accompanied by a sign, as in the case of the covenant with Noah and with Abraham. The second is a mutual agreement in which each of the two parties obligates himself to specific behaviors. Thus marriage may be considered a covenant. Even a close friendship, such as that of David and Jonathan, may be sealed by a covenant. More famous is the covenant between God and David in which the latter is promised that his descendants will always rule over Israel, provided that they live in accord with the divine will. And, of course, the most significant one is that between God and Israel in which He announces that Israel is his to be His treasured people, bound to Him by a life-long

commitment to His commandments, failing which they are to be punished by exile and destruction. The most dramatic example of this is found in Deuteronomy 27 where the vassal treaty of Esarhaddon (672 BCE) serves as a model.

He is the God who commands. From the point of view of Judaism, this is His most prevalent characteristic. His commandments supersede every other claim; they are non-negotiable. The most famous among them is the decalogue, the so-called "Ten Commandments". Technically, they appear to be the principles of the law, rather than the law itself, setting down the divine claim for obedience to His will, the exclusivity of His worship and the moral foundations for the Israelite society. Father and mother are to be honored as the transmitters of the traditions of their people and the Sabbath observed as the day celebrating the covenant of Israel.

Aside from Genesis which is largely narrative in nature, all of the other books of the Torah contain laws. The earliest collection is *Sefer ha-Brit*, the so-called "Covenant Code". It contains civil, criminal, religious and moral laws, many of which appear to be quite ancient. The laws in Leviticus largely relate to the priests, though chapter 19, "You shall be holy...." is addressed to the entire people. The laws in Numbers appear like an appendix to Leviticus, while Deuteronomy, as its Hebrew name, *Mishneh Torah*, ("a copy of the Torah") suggests, is a reprise of earlier laws, some of which are updated. The laws are not systematically organized, but the books do contain information about the courts, their authority and what kind of punishment is to be meted out.

The function of the laws is to make it possible to maintain a well-ordered society and to keep chaos from overwhelming order, whether social or cosmic. This is true not only of the civil and criminal laws but of the ritual ones as well which are intended to keep life-threatening disorders in check. The sacrificial system, too, is designed to maintain proper relationships with the deity to assure His blessings for the entire community.

He is the redeemer. As such, he can transform any chaos into order, any intolerable situation to one of joy. He can overcome bondage and exploitation and see to it that those who are abandoned are cared for. The exodus from Egypt is but a past example of His redemptive power, assuring those in Babylonian exile that their time of redemption is close at hand. As for those who are suffering at the hand of the dark powers behind the mighty empires that control Judea, their hour too has come, as God's hosts intervene to do battle with the forces of evil to bring the entire world under His reign and assure the victory of the forces of peace and justice.

The God of the Bible is everywhere and "everywhen". He cannot be manipulated but may always be approached in prayer and worship. The biblical text suggests how that may be done, not only spelling out the words and rites to do so but helping create the spirit into which we may enter when we seek His presence.

GOD IN THE HEBREW BIBLE – TEXT 1

ישעיהו מ:יב–בו

יב מִי־מָדַד בְּשָׁעָלוֹ מַיִם וְשָׁמַיִם בַּזֶּרֶת תִּכֵּן וְכָל בַּשָּׁלִשׁ עֲפַר הָאָרֶץ וְשָׁקַל בַּפֶּלֶס הָרִים וּגְבָעוֹת בְּמֹאזְנָיִם: יג מִי־תִכֵּן אֶת־רוּחַ
יְהוָה וְאִישׁ עֲצָתוֹ יוֹדִיעֶנּוּ: יד אֶת־מִי נוֹעָץ וַיְבִינֵהוּ וַיְלַמְּדֵהוּ בְּאֹרַח מִשְׁפָּט וַיְלַמְּדֵהוּ דַּעַת וְדֶרֶךְ תְּבוּנוֹת יוֹדִיעֶנּוּ: ...יח וְאֶל־מִי
תְדַמְּיוּן אֵל וּמַה־דְּמוּת תַּעַרְכוּ לוֹ: יט הַפֶּסֶל נָסַךְ חָרָשׁ וְצוֹרֵף בַּזָּהָב יְרַקְּעֶנּוּ וּרְתֻקוֹת כֶּסֶף צוֹרֵף: כ הַמְסֻכָּן תְּרוּמָה עֵץ לֹא־יִרְקָב
יִבְחַר חָרָשׁ חָכָם יְבַקֶּשׁ־לוֹ לְהָכִין פֶּסֶל לֹא יִמּוֹט: כא הֲלוֹא תֵדָעוּ הֲלוֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ הֲלוֹא הֻגַּד מֵרֹאשׁ לָכֶם הֲלוֹא הֲבִינֹתֶם
מוֹסְדוֹת הָאָרֶץ: כב הַיֹּשֵׁב עַל־חוּג הָאָרֶץ וְיֹשְׁבֶיהָ כַּחֲגָבִים הַנּוֹטֶה כַדֹּק שָׁמַיִם וַיִּמְתָּחֵם כָּאֹהֶל לָשָׁבֶת: כג הַנּוֹתֵן רוֹזְנִים לְאָיִן
...כה וְאֶל־מִי תְדַמְּיוּנִי וְאֶשְׁוֶה יֹאמַר קָדוֹשׁ: כו שְׂאוּ־מָרוֹם עֵינֵיכֶם וּרְאוּ מִי־בָרָא אֵלֶּה הַמּוֹצִיא בְמִסְפָּר צְבָאָם לְכֻלָּם בְּשֵׁם
יִקְרָא מֵרֹב אוֹנִים וְאַמִּיץ כֹּחַ אִישׁ לֹא נֶעְדָּר:

From Isaiah 40:13-26

Who has measured the waters with the hollow of his hand
and marked off the heavens with a handsbreadth,
contained the dust of the earth in a measure
and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?
Who has directed the spirit of Adonai?
Does any man tell him his advice?
With whom did he consult, so that he would understand,
teaching him the path of judgment, of knowledge,
showing him the way of understanding?...

So – to whom will you compare God? Against what will you evaluate him?
An idol, cast by a craftsman, overlaid with gold by a goldsmith,
chained with silver chains?
The person too poor for an offering chooses wood that will not rot,
He seeks out a skilful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move.
But do you not know? Have you not heard? Was it not told to you at the outset?
Do you not understand the foundations of the earth?
It is he who sits above the earth's circle,
so that its inhabitants look like grasshoppers
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain
and spreads them to make a tent to dwell in
who brings princes to nothing
and makes the rulers of the earth mere emptiness…

To whom, then, will you compare me, so that I may resemble him?
says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high, and see – who created these?
He who brings out all their legions by number
calling the name of each one.
By the greatness of his might
and the strength of his power
not a single one is missing.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What aspects of God in this passage mark God as creator?**
- **Are there any aspects missing?**
- **What is the place of human beings in this text?**
- **What relationship can human beings have with this God?**

GOD IN THE HEBREW BIBLE – TEXT 2

תהלים קה

...ד דִּרְשׁוּ יְהוָה וְעֻזּוֹ בַּקְּשׁוּ פָנָיו תָּמִיד: ה זִכְרוּ נִפְלְאוֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹפְתָיו וּמִשְׁפְּטֵי־פִיהוּ: ו זֶרַע אַבְרָהָם עַבְדּוֹ בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב
בְּחִירָיו: ז הוּא יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ מִשְׁפָּטָיו: ח זָכַר לְעוֹלָם בְּרִיתוֹ דָּבָר צִוָּה לְאֶלֶף דּוֹר: ט אֲשֶׁר כָּרַת אֶת־אַבְרָהָם
וּשְׁבוּעָתוֹ לְיִשְׂחָק: י וַיַּעֲמִידֶהָ לְיַעֲקֹב לְחֹק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרִית עוֹלָם: יא לֵאמֹר לְךָ אֶתֵּן אֶת־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן חֶבֶל נַחֲלַתְכֶם: יב בִּהְיוֹתָם
מְתֵי מִסְפָּר כִּמְעַט וְגָרִים בָּהּ: יג וַיִּתְהַלְּכוּ מִגּוֹי אֶל־גּוֹי מִמַּמְלָכָה אֶל־עַם אַחֵר: יד לֹא־הִנִּיחַ אָדָם לְעָשְׁקָם... טז וַיִּקְרָא רָעָב
עַל־הָאָרֶץ כָּל־מַטֵּה־לֶחֶם שָׁבָר: יז שָׁלַח לִפְנֵיהֶם אִישׁ לְעֶבֶד נִמְכַּר יוֹסֵף:... יכג וַיָּבֹא יִשְׂרָאֵל מִצְרָיִם וְיַעֲקֹב גָּר בְּאֶרֶץ־חָם:
כד וַיֶּפֶר אֶת־עַמּוֹ מְאֹד ...לז וַיּוֹצִיאֵם בְּכֶסֶף וְזָהָב וְאֵין בִּשְׁבָטָיו כּוֹשֵׁל:... מב כִּי־זָכַר אֶת־דְּבַר קָדְשׁוֹ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם עַבְדּוֹ:
מג וַיּוֹצֵא עַמּוֹ בְשָׂשׂוֹן בְּרִנָּה אֶת־בְּחִירָיו: מד וַיִּתֵּן לָהֶם אַרְצוֹת גּוֹיִם וַעֲמַל לְאֻמִּים יִירָשׁוּ: מה בַּעֲבוּר | יִשְׁמְרוּ חֻקָּיו וְתוֹרֹתָיו
יִנְצֹרוּ הַלְלוּיָהּ:

From Psalm 105

Seek Adonai and his strength, seek his presence always,
Remember the wonders he has done,
the signs he performed, and the judgments he spoke,
offspring of Abraham his servant, children of Jacob, the ones he chose.
He is Adonai, our God, his judgments are in all the earth,
He has always remembered his covenant,
the word he commanded, for a thousand generations,
that he made with Abraham, that he swore to Isaac,
that he stood up for Jacob as a statute for Israel,
an everlasting covenant, which stated:
I will give you the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance.
When they were few in number, unimportant, sojourning in it,
wandering from nation to nation and one kingdom to another
he allowed nobody to oppress them…

When he called up a famine on the land and broke the staff of bread
he had sent a man before them –
Joseph, who was sold as a slave…

Then Israel came to Egypt, Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham
And Adonai made his people very fruitful…

Then he brought out Israel with silver and gold
and there was none among his tribes who stumbled…

For he remembered his holy promise
and Abraham, his servant,
So he brought his people out with joy
His chosen ones with singing
And he gave them the lands of the nations
And they possessed the products of their labor
so that they could keep his statutes and observe his commandments
Halleluyah!

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What is the nature of God's covenant, according to this text?**
- **How does God perform God's side of the covenant?**
- **What is the place of human beings in this text?**
- **What relationship can human beings have with this God?**

GOD IN THE HEBREW BIBLE – TEXT 3

תהלים יט

א לַמְנַצֵּחַ מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד: ב הַשָּׁמַיִם מְסַפְּרִים כְּבוֹד־אֵל וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו מַגִּיד הָרָקִיעַ: ג יוֹם לְיוֹם יַבִּיעַ אֹמֶר וְלַיְלָה לְלַיְלָה
יְחַוֶּה־דָּעַת: ד אֵין אֹמֶר וְאֵין דְּבָרִים בְּלִי נִשְׁמָע קוֹלָם: ה בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ | יָצָא קַוָּם וּבִקְצֵה תֵבֵל מִלֵּיהֶם לַשֶּׁמֶשׁ שָׂם אֹהֶל בָּהֶם:
ו וְהוּא כְּחָתָן יֹצֵא מֵחֻפָּתוֹ יָשִׂישׂ כְּגִבּוֹר לָרוּץ אֹרַח: ז מִקְצֵה הַשָּׁמַיִם | מוֹצָאוֹ וּתְקוּפָתוֹ עַל־קְצוֹתָם וְאֵין נִסְתָּר מֵחַמָּתוֹ: ח תּוֹרַת
יְהוָה תְּמִימָה מְשִׁיבַת נָפֶשׁ עֵדוּת יְהוָה נֶאֱמָנָה מַחְכִּימַת פֶּתִי: ט פִּקּוּדֵי יְהוָה יְשָׁרִים מְשַׂמְּחֵי־לֵב מִצְוַת יְהוָה בָּרָה מְאִירַת
עֵינָיִם: י יִרְאַת יְהוָה | טְהוֹרָה עוֹמֶדֶת לָעַד מִשְׁפְּטֵי־יְהוָה אֱמֶת צָדְקוּ יַחְדָּו: יא הַנֶּחֱמָדִים מִזָּהָב וּמִפָּז רָב וּמְתוּקִים מִדְּבַשׁ וְנֹפֶת
צוּפִים: יב גַּם־עַבְדְּךָ נִזְהָר בָּהֶם בְּשָׁמְרָם עֵקֶב רָב: יג שְׁגִיאוֹת מִי־יָבִין מִנִּסְתָּרוֹת נַקֵּנִי: יד גַּם מִזֵּדִים | חֲשֹׂךְ עַבְדֶּךָ
אַל־יִמְשְׁלוּ־בִי אָז אֵיתָם וְנִקֵּיתִי מִפֶּשַׁע רָב: טו יִהְיוּ לְרָצוֹן | אִמְרֵי־פִי וְהֶגְיוֹן לִבִּי לְפָנֶיךָ יְהוָה צוּרִי וְגֹאֲלִי:

Psalm 19

For the choirmaster: a psalm of David.
The heavens recount the glory of God
and the firmament tells of the work of his hands.
Day pours out speech to day
Night expresses knowledge to night.
There is no speech, nor any words; their sound is unheard.
Their murmur goes out over all the earth
and their words reach the end of the world.
In them he has built a tent for the sun,
which goes out like a bridegroom from his canopy
rejoicing like a hero about to begin a race.
Its starting point is the furthest reach of the heavens
its finishing line their opposite border
and nothing is hidden from its heat.
The Torah of Adonai is complete, restoring the soul,
The testimony of Adonai is certain, making the simple wise,
The precepts of Adonai are just, gladdening the heart,
The commandment of Adonai is shining, enlightening the eyes,
The awe of Adonai is bright, enduring for ever,
The judgments of Adonai are both true and just.
They are more desirable than gold, heaps of gold,
They are sweeter than honey, the honey flowing from the comb.
Your servant is enlightened by them
and in keeping them there is great reward.
Who can discern errors? Cleanse me from hidden sins
and keep me from deliberate ones, let them not rule me
Then I shall subdue them, and be cleansed of great transgression.
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in your sight
Adonai, my rock and my redeemer.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What is the relationship between the first and second halves of this psalm?**
- **What does this psalm say about God being the God who commands?**
- **What is the place of human beings in this text?**
- **What relationship can human beings have with this God?**

GOD IN THE HEBREW BIBLE – TEXT 4

ישעיהו מג:א–יא

א וְעַתָּה כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה בֹּרַאֲךָ יַעֲקֹב וְיֹצֶרְךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אַל־תִּירָא כִּי גְאַלְתִּיךָ קָרָאתִי בְשִׁמְךָ לִי־אָתָּה: ב כִּי־תַעֲבֹר בַּמַּיִם
אִתְּךָ־אָנִי וּבַנְּהָרוֹת לֹא יִשְׁטְפוּךָ כִּי־תֵלֵךְ בְּמוֹ־אֵשׁ לֹא תִכָּוֶה וְלֶהָבָה לֹא תִבְעַר־בָּךְ: ג כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ קְדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל
מוֹשִׁיעֶךָ נָתַתִּי כָפְרְךָ מִצְרַיִם כּוּשׁ וּסְבָא תַּחְתֶּיךָ: ד מֵאֲשֶׁר יָקָרְתָּ בְעֵינַי נִכְבַּדְתָּ וַאֲנִי אֲהַבְתִּיךָ וְאֶתֵּן אָדָם תַּחְתֶּיךָ וּלְאֻמִּים
תַּחַת נַפְשֶׁךָ: ה אַל־תִּירָא כִּי־אִתְּךָ־אָנִי מִמִּזְרָח אָבִיא זַרְעֶךָ וּמִמַּעֲרָב אֲקַבְּצֶךָּ: ו אֹמַר לַצָּפוֹן תְּנִי וּלְתֵימָן אַל־תִּכְלָאִי הָבִיאִי
בָנַי מֵרָחוֹק וּבְנוֹתַי מִקְצֵה הָאָרֶץ: ז כֹּל הַנִּקְרָא בִשְׁמִי וְלִכְבוֹדִי בְּרָאתִיו יְצַרְתִּיו אַף־עָשִׂיתִיו: ח הוֹצִיא עַם־עִוֵּר וְעֵינַיִם יֵשׁ
וְחֵרְשִׁים וְאָזְנַיִם לָמוֹ: ט כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם נִקְבְּצוּ יַחְדָּו וְיֵאָסְפוּ לְאֻמִּים מִי בָהֶם יַגִּיד זֹאת וְרִאשֹׁנוֹת יַשְׁמִיעֻנוּ יִתְּנוּ עֵדֵיהֶם וְיִצְדָּקוּ
וְיִשְׁמְעוּ וְיֹאמְרוּ אֱמֶת: י אַתֶּם עֵדַי נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְעַבְדִּי אֲשֶׁר בָּחָרְתִּי לְמַעַן תֵּדְעוּ וְתַאֲמִינוּ לִי וְתָבִינוּ כִּי־אֲנִי הוּא לְפָנַי לֹא־נוֹצַר
אֵל וְאַחֲרַי לֹא יִהְיֶה:

And now, this is what Adonai says,
the one who created you, Jacob,
the one who formed you, Israel:
Do not fear! for I have redeemed you,
I have called you by name, and you are mine.
When you walk through the waters I am with you,
When you pass through rivers they will not sweep you away,
If you walk even through fire, you shall not be marked,
and no flame shall burn you.
For I am Adonai, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your deliverer -
I have given Egypt as your ransom,
I have exchanged Kush and Sheba for you.
Because you are dear in my eyes,
because you are important, and I love you,
I will give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
Do not fear! for I am with you,
I shall bring your offspring from the east
and gather you from the west.
I shall say to the north: Give up!
and to the south: Do not withold!
Bring my sons from far away,
my daughters from the ends of the earth,
every person called by my name
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed, and whom I made.
Bring out the people which is blind, yet has eyes,
which is deaf, yet has ears.
Let all the nations gather together
and all the peoples assemble -
Who among them can declare this
and declare what came before?
Let them bring their witnesses to vindicate them,
and let them hear, and say: It is true.
You are my witnesses, declares Adonai,
my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know, and believe me,
and understand that I am he -
Before me no god was formed,
and after me there shall be no other.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **How does this text portray God as redeemer?**
- **How is the redemption envisaged as taking place?**
- **What is the place of human beings in this text?**
- **What relationship can human beings have with this God?**

ירמיהו לא:ל–לו

ל הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְכָרַתִּי אֶת־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־בֵּית יְהוּדָה בְּרִית חֲדָשָׁה: לא לֹא כַּבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר כָּרַתִּי אֶת־אֲבוֹתָם
בְּיוֹם הֶחֱזִיקִי בְיָדָם לְהוֹצִיאָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר־הֵמָּה הֵפֵרוּ אֶת־בְּרִיתִי וְאָנֹכִי בָּעַלְתִּי בָם נְאֻם־יְהוָה: לב כִּי זֹאת הַבְּרִית
אֲשֶׁר אִכְרֹת אֶת־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל אַחֲרֵי הַיָּמִים הָהֵם נְאֻם־יְהוָה נָתַתִּי אֶת־תּוֹרָתִי בְּקִרְבָּם וְעַל־לִבָּם אֶכְתְּבֶנָּה וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם
לֵאלֹהִים וְהֵמָּה יִהְיוּ־לִי לְעָם: לג וְלֹא יְלַמְּדוּ עוֹד אִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ וְאִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו לֵאמֹר דְּעוּ אֶת־יְהוָה כִּי־כוּלָּם יֵדְעוּ אוֹתִי
לְמִקְטַנָּם וְעַד־גְּדוֹלָם נְאֻם־יְהוָה כִּי אֶסְלַח לַעֲוֹנָם וּלְחַטָּאתָם לֹא אֶזְכָּר־עוֹד: לד כֹּה ׀ אָמַר יְהוָה נֹתֵן שֶׁמֶשׁ לְאוֹר יוֹמָם חֻקּוֹת
יָרֵחַ וְכוֹכָבִים לְאוֹר לָיְלָה רֹגַע הַיָּם וַיֵּהֻמּוּ גַּלָּיו יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת שְׁמוֹ: לה אִם־יָמֻשׁוּ הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה מִלְּפָנַי נְאֻם־יְהוָה גַּם זֶרַע
יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁבְּתוּ מִהְיוֹת גּוֹי לְפָנַי כָּל־הַיָּמִים: לו כֹּה ׀ אָמַר יְהוָה אִם־יִמַּדּוּ שָׁמַיִם מִלְמַעְלָה וְיֵחָקְרוּ מוֹסְדֵי־אֶרֶץ לְמָטָּה גַּם־אֲנִי
אֶמְאַס בְּכָל־זֶרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ נְאֻם־יְהוָה:

Jeremiah 31:30 – 36

Behold, days are coming, declares Adonai, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt - for they broke that covenant, even though I was their husband, declares Adonai. Rather, this is the covenant I shall make with the house of Israel after those days, declares Adonai: I shall put my Torah within them; I shall write it upon their hearts; I shall be their God and they shall be my people. No person will need to teach any other, no person will say to another, "Know Adonai!" - for all of them will know me, from the smallest to the greatest, declares Adonai - for I shall forgive their iniquities and not remember their sins any more. Thus says Adonai, who puts the sun to shine by day, who fixed the rule of the moon and stars by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar, Adonai of legions is his name! "If ever these fixed rules change for me", declares Adonai, "then the offspring of Israel will cease to be a nation before me, forever." Thus says Adonai: "If ever the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth plumbed, then I shall reject the whole offspring of Israel for all they have done", declares Adonai.

The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

God in the Talmud

GOD IN THE TALMUD

Rabbi Gail Labovitz Ph.D.

Being asked to write about God in the Talmud is a bit like being invited to read one of those "Where's Waldo?" books – not in the sense that God is small or insignificant, of course, but in the sense that God is on every page but most often not immediately visible.

On the one hand, the entire Talmudic enterprise rests on the foundation of God and God's will for human beings as embodied in Torah; for the rabbis, the whole point of producing this work was as an exploration of how one was to live in service of God as directed by the Torah. On the other hand, when one is in the midst of a detailed, even picayune, discussion of whether two birds found in a dovecote on a holiday can be presumed to be the same ones that were there the day before the holiday, or whether a Jew is allowed to leave lost/abandoned food lying in the roadway, or whether a divorce document is valid if the husband tossed it to the wife and it landed exactly equidistant between them – then it can seem that God is only to be found only after intent scrutiny, not in the lines themselves but hiding between and around them. The task is further complicated by the fact that the Talmud is not really a single book with a single author, but rather a compilation of discussions undertaken by many rabbis in different places (primarily Roman Palestine and Sassanian Babylonian) and over a few hundred years. Add the contributions of the redactor(s) who shaped it all and you have over 2500 folios of material. There is not one picture of God in the Talmud, but many different images, many different views.

For the purposes of this essay, then, I want to suggest several different ways in which God's presence sometimes becomes more overt in Talmudic literature, in the hope that God's appearance there can help us know what we are looking for everywhere else. I will draw on three primary types of sources: rabbinic names for God, rabbinic sources about prayer to and praise of God, and rabbinic stories (aggadah) in which God features as an actor.

Rabbinic Names for God

The rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud did not restrict themselves to referring to God by those names that they had inherited from biblical literature. Throughout rabbinic literature are a variety of epithets for God which are, so far as we know, linguistic innovations of the rabbis. These names and the ways in which they are used tell us something about the attributes and nature of God that the rabbis found significant to name and label.

"Hamakom"

This name occurs already in early rabbinic literature from the time of the Mishnah, and is attributed to some of the earliest rabbinic figures. Literally translated, this term means "the Place," and is most often rendered in English as "the Omnipresent." Ephraim E. Urbach thus observed, "*Maqôm*…refers to the God who reveals Himself in whatever place He wishes; this epithet thus expresses God's nearness."[1] God, when named in this way, is close to human beings and accessible to them. The name "Omnipresent" emphasizes God with Whom we can have an intimate relationship: Israel is beloved before the Omnipresent like the love of a man and a woman (Yoma 54a). The epithet can also indicate God's presence at a time of need, invoked for example to bring healing for illness (Shabbat 12b) or comfort for a loss (Berakhot 16b).

"Shamayim"

This term is also found in the early strata of rabbinic literature. "Shamayim" is the Hebrew word for the sky or the heavens. Since the idea that God resides particularly in the heavens is found already in biblical literature (for example, Deuteronomy 26:15; I Kings 8:30; Jonah 1:9), it was not a great leap for the rabbis to adapt the word "Heaven" to stand in as a name for God. "Heaven" draws attention to God's transcendence, the need to approach God with reverence and awe. Not surprisingly, then, one common usage of this name is in the rabbinic phrase, "*yirat Shamayim*," the fear of Heaven: Rabbi Hanina said, "All is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven (Berakhot 33b, Megillah 25a, Niddah 16b)." Urbach suggests that Shamayim and Makom are in fact complements of each other, the nearness of

1 Ephraim E. Urbach, **The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs***, Israel Abrahams, trans. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1975), 72.*

the latter countering the potential for remoteness of the former, the majesty of the former countering the potential for familiarity of the latter.[2]

"Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu"

The Holy One, Blessed be He. Less frequently, one may encounter the Aramaic phrase "*Kudsha, B'rikh Hu*," which has a slightly different meaning: "The Holiness, Blessed be He." After the mishnaic period, this became one of the dominant names for God in rabbinic literature. The root *k,d,sh* in Hebrew includes the sense of something set apart, and thus this name invokes God's nature as apart from and beyond the scope of the world, let alone human comprehension. This name also carries echoes of Isaiah's famous vision, in which the heavenly seraphim praise God with the words (which we now use multiple places in our liturgy): "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory (Isaiah 6:3)". In several places, a longer form, "The King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed be He," appears (for example, Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Berakhot 28b, Shabbat 74b, Yoma 47a). Perhaps for these reasons, "Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu" is used as a title when speaking about God, and not as a form of direct address *to* God.

"Ribbono Shel Olam"

This name means "Master of the World." It is used to open a direct address to God, sometimes as a complement to Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu, as in the phrase: "So-and-So said before Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu, 'Ribbono Shel Olam…,(in Berakhot alone, see 4a, 9b, 20b, 31b, and 32b)". Both human beings and the lesser divine beings (angels and the heavenly hosts) are said to use this title when speaking to God. The one addressing God in this way is usually making a request, expressing a concern, or pressing a claim; thus s/he begins by acknowledging God's ultimate authority and expressing submission to it.

"Rahmana"

This name means "The Merciful One" in Aramaic. It appears extremely frequently in the Talmud. Intriguingly, this name is often associated with God in the role of Lawgiver; that is, it is frequently used in legal discussions to indicate a Divine command in Torah or to introduce a verse brought as a prooftext: "The Merciful One said/wrote…"Solomon Schechter thus suggested that this name "proves, by the way, how little in the mind of the Rabbis the Law was connected with hardness and chastisement. To them it was an effluence of God's mercy and goodness."[3] Calling God "Rahmana" may also be meant to prompt recognition of God's ultimate concern and love for God's creatures even when they appear to suffer: Rav Huna said in the name of Rav in the name of Rabbi Meir, and so too it was taught in the name of Rabbi Akiva, "A person should always be in the habit of saying that all that the Merciful One does, He does for good (Berakhot 60b)." Surprisingly, the Hebrew form, "Ha-Rahaman," appears only once in the Talmud, when a rabbi prays that "Ha-Rahaman save us (i.e., me) from the Evil Inclination (Kiddushin 81b)."

"Shekhinah"

"Shekhinah" appears at the end of this list because it actually exists in a place somewhere between a name and a concept. The word "Shekhinah" comes from the root *s,kh,n*, meaning to rest or dwell, and thus designates the manifestation of God's spirit and presence in the world. "Shekhinah" points to God's nearness to and intimacy with human beings at a given moment and/or in a given place. To have the Shekhinah rest directly on a particular person is to receive prophecy: Hillel the elder had eighty disciples; thirty of them were worthy like Moses our teacher to have the Shekhinah rest upon them (Sukkah 28a; see also Sotah 48b, Mo'ed Katan 25a). The places where the Shekhinah appears can be variable and multiple; it can be manifest in many places at once, just as the sun can shine on many places at once (Sanhedrin 39a; see also Bava Batra 25a). Moreover, although the Shekhinah once rested on the Temple (at least the first, if not also the second) in Jerusalem, God also causes His Shekhinah to rest in humble places like the burning thorn bush of Moses' first prophetic experience, or on a low mountain like Sinai (Shabbat 67a and Sotah 5a, respectively[4]). The Shekhinah represents God's closeness to human beings and the people of Israel in particular to the

[2] *See* **The Sages**, *71-2.*
[3] *Solomon Schechter,* **Aspects of Rabbinic Theology: Major Concepts of the Talmud** *(New York: Schocken Books, 1961; originally published 1909), 34.*
[4] *These two sources are significant also in that they demonstrate the Shekhinah as an aspect of God and under God's active control; in rabbinic literature the Shekhinah is not the quasi-independent entity and aspect of the godhead that it would come to be in some later strands of the Jewish tradition.*

extent of sharing in the pain of the suffering person (Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:5), watching over those who are ill (Shabbat 12b), and even accompanying the people into exile (Megillah 29a). On the other hand, rabbinic sources suggest that human beings, through their actions, can bring the Shekhinah near or drive it away: it is present when Jews study, pray, or sit together as a court (Berakhot 6a), while those who are arrogant or sin in secret "push against the feet of the Shekhinah (Berakhot 43b, Hagigah 16a, Kiddushin 31a)."

What Can We Say To and About God in Prayer?

In a variety of places – most notably in the tractate Berakhot ("Blessings") but also scattered throughout the Talmud – the rabbis consider human communication with God through prayer. By addressing such questions as what do we pray for, how do we address God, what may not be said about God, they reveal important clues about how they understood the nature of God, God's role in our lives, and the Divine-human relationship.

From the earliest layers of rabbinic writings, God is recognized as the author of all that happens in the world and to people. Mishnah Berakhot, for example, lists many blessings that should be said when one enjoys various foods, observes a variety of out-of-the-ordinary natural phenomena, encounters a special place, or experiences good fortune. Failure to make a blessing is a kind of theft from God.

But God is author of all, not only the good. This understanding is expressed, for example, in Mishnah Berakhot 9:2 and 5:

> "For bad news (one blesses) "Blessed is the Judge of the truth"
> "A person is required to bless for the bad just as one blesses for the good..."

Based on this principle, the rabbis are able to explain yet another mishnah (Berakhot 5:3 and a near exact parallel in Megillah 4:9): "One who says (while leading prayer)…"May Your Name be remembered for good"…we silence him. Why is this so? The Talmud answers (Berakhot 33b; Megillah 25a): It implies "for good," but not for bad, yet it is taught: "One must bless for the bad..." As Rava further elaborates (and other rabbis attempt to prove from scripture) in response to Mishnah Berakhot 9:5, blessing for the bad just as one blesses for the good means that one must accept the bad from God with the same wholeheartedness as when receiving good fortune.

Elsewhere, the rabbis suggest that prayer (although the term would not be created for many centuries yet) is a quixotic activity. God is vast and powerful beyond human comprehension, and thus despite our obligation to offer praise and prayer to God, God is also beyond human abilities of expression. One way the rabbis address this dilemma is by drawing on biblical models and precedents. In Deuteronomy 10:17, Moses described God as "the great, mighty, and awesome God" – *ha'el ha-gadol ha-gibor v'hanora*; the rabbis incorporated this phrasing into the opening paragraph of every Amidah prayer. Two parallel passages, Berakhot 33b and Megillah 25a, relate that when a certain man led prayer in the presence of Rabbi Hanina, he praised God as "the great, mighty, and awesome, and glorious, and majestic, and revered, and powerful, and strong, and praiseworthy, and honored God."[5] The rabbi, however, rebuked him: "Have you finished with all the praises of your Master?" Could we ever finish such praises once begun? And if we did any less, would not our incomplete praise of God be a kind of insult? The Talmud proposes a parable: if one were to praise a king for his great stores of silver, would one not be insulting him by ignoring his even greater treasures in gold? Only because we have the example set for us by Moses can we escape this bind, reciting his three praises of God and no more.

In Yoma 69b, however, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi states that although this phrase originated with Moses, it was the members of the Great Assembly who fixed it as part of Jewish prayer. Or rather, they restored it – being close readers

[5] *We are following the longer version of the passage, from Berakhot.*

of the Bible, they consider a passage in Jeremiah, where the prophet refers to God as "the great, mighty [but not awesome] God", and another in Daniel, where the attribute of might is missing.

The rabbis imagine the thought processes of the two prophets and in doing so, consider how God can remain mighty and awesome even in circumstances where it might appear otherwise. In the course of the discussion, the rabbis struggle to understand how an all-powerful God can allow harm to come to God's people. If God's power is not manifest in the world, does this mean that it has been defeated? The rabbis attempt to explain that God's power can be evident in other ways, in God's very restraint, for example. We must, the rabbis teach, praise God and seek to experience God as "the great, mighty, and awesome God." And yet, at the same time they know that sometimes we do not experience God that way, and to say so can even be a kind of lie, which is itself an affront to God. Our prayer, they realize and admit, lives in tension and paradox.

God in Talmudic Aggadah

When the rabbis of the Talmud tell stories about God, or about encounters between the Divine and human realms – involving biblical characters or themselves – what sort of stories do they tell? How do they depict God and the relationship between God and humans, between God and Israel? How do those stories relate to and illuminate other things the rabbis had to say about the nature of God or the human-Divine relationship?

Jacob Neusner has written that "It was in the Talmud of Babylonia in particular that God is represented as a fully exposed personality, like man."[6] Indeed, the rabbis do not shy away from anthropomorphized images of God, depicting in their stories a God Who experiences similar emotions and engages in similar activities as do human beings. This does not mean, of course, that God is comparable to the ordinary human being. On the one hand, God is the model of the most powerful of humans, the king who rules over his people and is responsible for their welfare, both in maintaining justice and in providing for their needs. On the other, since the rabbis believed that the human ideal is to be like God, then God must provide the model for them and their forms of Jewish practice. These two elements of God's activities can be seen in a source in Avodah Zarah (3b) which describes God's daily schedule: one quarter of the day for Torah study, one quarter to sit in judgment of the world, one quarter for providing sustenance to all creatures of the world, and the final quarter of the day for playing with the Leviathan.

God, like the rabbis, also prays. What prayer does God pray (and to Whom, one might ask, if one dared)? Berakhot 7a gives the following answer:

> "Rav Zutra bar Tuvia said in the name of Rav: "May it be My will that My mercies overpower My anger, and that My mercies be revealed over My attribute of justice, and that I should act towards My children with the attribute of mercy, and receive them beyond the measure of strict justice."

Not only does God pray (to God's own self), but when God revealed Godself to Moses after the sin of the golden calf (Exodus 33:12 – 34:9), Rabbi Yohanan says (Rosh Hashanah 17b) that God did so "robed…like a community prayer leader." Moreover, Rabbi Abin bar Rav claims in the name of Rabbi Yitzhak that the Bible hints God dons tefillin just as the (male) Jew was expected to do; inside God's tefillin, other rabbis elaborate, are verses of Scripture praising the uniqueness of Israel, just as our tefillin contain verses proclaiming the Unity of God (Berakhot 6a).

Not surprisingly then, as already seen in the first source in this section, the rabbis imagine (Bava Metzia 86a) that God also engages in the quintessential rabbinic activity: studying Torah in the Heavenly *beit midrash*, the Study Hall on high.

[6] *Jacob Neusner,* **The Foundations of the Theology of Judaism***, Volume 1: God (Northvale, New Jersey, London: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1991), 137.*

> "They disputed in the heavenly study hall: If a white spot [in the skin; this is a potential sign of skin disease in Leviticus 13] appeared before a white hair, the person is impure. If the white hair appeared before the white spot, the person is pure. If there is a doubt [as to which appeared first] – the Holy One, Blessed be He, says the person is pure, and all of the [rest of the members of] the heavenly study hall say the person is impure."

In order to decide the matter, the parties to the debate decide to summon Rabbah bar Nahmani, a rabbinic expert in this area of law. The Angel of Death is unable to touch the rabbi while he studies, however, until a distraction is created, and fearing that he is being pursued by royal troops, Rabbah prays to die rather than fall into their hands. One deeply intriguing, even disturbing, element in this story is the idea that God can be out-voted in the heavenly study hall in a discussion of the interpretation Torah that God authored! God, like the human sage, willingly commits Godself to the process of debate and consensus building that rabbis use to create Jewish law and practice. God even submits, as it were, to the decisions made in the human study hall.

But the story of Rabbah bar Nahmani has another troubling element to it. It indicates a darker side of God's workings in the world, as the rabbi must die – God facilitates his death – so that he can help resolve the dispute in the heavenly study hall. This theme particularly comes to the fore in another story about God and Torah (Menahot 29b), in this case the giving of the Torah to Moses:

> "Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: At the time when Moses ascended to heaven, he found the Holy One, Blessed be He sitting and making crowns for the letters [of the Torah]. He said to Him, "Master of the Universe, what is delaying You?" He said to him, "At the end of many generations there will be a particular man named Akiva ben Yosef, who will explicate from each stroke (of the letters) mounds upon mounds of laws." He said before Him, "Master of the Universe, show him to me!" He said to him, "Turn around." He [Moses] turned around. He went and sat at the back of 18 rows [in Rabbi Akiva's lecture] and did not know what they were saying…He came back before the Holy One, Blessed be He, and said before Him, "Master of the Universe, You have a person such as this, and you give Torah by *my* hand?" He said to him, "Be silent – such is My plan." He said before Him, "Master of the Universe, You have shown me his Torah, show me his reward!" He said, "Turn around." He turned around; he saw that they [the Romans] were weighing out his flesh in scales. He said before Him, "Master of the Universe, this is Torah, and this is its reward?!" He said to him, "Be silent – such is My plan."

Often this story is invoked for what it says about Torah and the role of human beings in its development and transmission. But equally intriguing is the portrait of God found here. On the one hand, this is an image of God as intimately involved in the making and running of the world, down to the level of very small details. God will place extra pen strokes in the calligraphy of Torah letters, in anticipation of an individual rabbi who will live many years in the future. But there is also a darker aspect to God's involvement in the world. God's plans and activities, as depicted in this story, are often beyond human comprehension, and may even appear to us as capricious or unfair. God does what God does – chooses to whom Torah will be transmitted, allows a great Torah scholar to suffer a martyr's death – for reasons that even Moses, the greatest of all prophets, is not able or allowed to understand. In many places, the rabbis claim that good is rewarded and evil punished, but by telling stories like this one, they demonstrate that they also know that the empirical evidence of the world can suggest otherwise. As in our blessings over the bad as well as the good, we must only accept that God is the Author of all that comes to us in this world, that things happen for God's purposes even if incomprehensible to us.

And yet the rabbis were also certain that God is not inured to the suffering that comes of those decrees. One of the blessings described in Mishnah Berakhot 9:2 is said upon experiencing natural phenomena such as "shooting stars, and *zava'ot*, and thunder, and winds, and lightening…: 'Blessed is the One whose strength and might fill the world.'" The Talmud thus asks (Berakhot 59a): What are these "*zava'ot*"? The question is answered by means of a story:

> "Rav Katina said,"an earthquake" [*guha*]. Rav Katina was going on the road. When he came to the entrance to the house of a bone necromancer, an earthquake struck. He said, "Does this bone necromancer know what this earthquake is?" He [the necromancer] raised his voice to him: "Katina, Katina, why wouldn't I know? At the time when the Holy One, Blessed be He, remembers his children who are living in trouble among the peoples of the world, two tears fall into the Great Sea, and His voice is heard from one end of the world to the other – and this is an earthquake."

Rav Katina dismisses the necromancer as a bearer of falsehoods, but the storyteller hints that he very well may be correct: "the fact that he [Rav Katina] did not agree with him was so that all the people should not be led astray after him." Moreover, the passage continues with Rav Katina and several other rabbis each offering their own anthropomorphic explanations of Divine actions – hand clapping, sighing, foot stamping – that create the shaking of the earth.

Elsewhere in Berakhot (3b) there are similar images of God mourning for the destruction God has brought on the children of Israel. In these examples, God's mourning is not a rare occurrence, like the Divine tears that the necromancer claims cause earthquakes, but a regular, nightly event. The rabbis console themselves with the thought that so long as God's people suffer, even if at God's hand, God continually despairs for them.[7]

Conclusion

These sources make up only a small sample of the many Talmudic passages that speak of God, God's nature, and the Divine-human relationship. But even from this sample, we can see the complexity and, even, contradictions within rabbinic thinking about this vast topic.

The rabbis attempt to balance images of God as both close and transcendent; God is Omnipresent and God is Heavenly, God's Shekhinah is present among us, but God is above and over us as the Holy One and the Master of the Universe. God has absolute control over the workings of the world, and yet God submits to the process of communal debate and interpretation of the Torah. And even as we praise God for not only the good that God provides for us, but also in acceptance (if not comprehension) of the bad that befalls us, God mourns the sufferings of God's people.

[7] *See Michael Fishbane, "'The Holy One Sits and Roars': Mythopoesis and the Midrashic Imagination," in* **The Midrashic Imagination: Exegesis, Thought, and History**, *Michael Fishbane, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 60-77.*

GOD IN THE TALMUD – TEXT 1

תלמוד בבלי, יומא סט.ב

...דאמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: למה נקרא שמן אנשי כנסת הגדולה – שהחזירו עטרה ליושנה. אתא משה אמר (דברים י) האל הגדל הגבר והנורא, אתא ירמיה ואמר: נכרים מקרקרין – בהיכלו, איה נוראותיו? לא אמר נורא. אתא דניאל, אמר: נכרים משתעבדים בבניו, איה גבורותיו? לא אמר גבור. אתו אינהו ואמרו: אדרבה, זו היא גבורת גבורתו שכובש את יצרו, שנותן ארך אפים לרשעים. ואלו הן נוראותיו – שאלמלא מוראו של הקדוש ברוך הוא היאך אומה אחת יכולה להתקיים בין האומות? ורבנן היכי עבדי הכי ועקרי תקנתא דתקין משה – אמר רבי אלעזר: מתוך שיודעין בהקדוש ברוך הוא שאמתי הוא, לפיכך לא כיזבו בו.

Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 69b

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: Why were they called the men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the crown to its original glory. Moses came, and said "The great, mighty and awesome God [Deuteronomy 10:17]." Then Jeremiah came; he said, "Strangers are croaking in His sanctuary – where is His awe? [Jeremiah 32:18]" – which means, he omitted "awesome". Then Daniel came; he said, "Strangers are making slaves of His children – where is His might? [Daniel 9:4 ff.]" – which means, he omitted "might".

But the men of the Great Assembly said: On the contrary! Here is the proof of God's might: that he overcomes His own inclination and is patient with the wicked. And here is the proof of God's awe: were it not for the awe of God, how could a single nation of the seventy nations continue to exist?

But how could our teachers [Jeremiah and Daniel] uproot something which Moses had established? Rabbi Elazar answers: Because they knew that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is truthful. Therefore they did not lie to him.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Look up the references. What do they add?**
- **What were the circumstances in which Jeremiah and Daniel lived?**
- **What reasoning do the men of the Great Assembly use to justify restoring the full formula?**
- **What is Rabbi Elazar saying about God?**

GOD IN THE TALMUD – TEXT 2

תלמוד בבלי, ברכות ג.א

אמר רב יצחק בר שמואל משמיה דרב: שלש משמרות הוי הלילה, ועל כל משמר ומשמר יושב הקדוש ברוך הוא ושואג כארי ואומר: אוי לבנים שבעונותיהם החרבתי את ביתי ושרפתי את היכלי והגליתים לבין אומות העולם. תניא, אמר רבי יוסי: פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בדרך, ונכנסתי לחורבה אחת מחורבות ירושלים להתפלל. בא אליהו זכור לטוב ושמר לי על הפתח (והמתין לי) עד שסיימתי תפלתי. לאחר שסיימתי תפלתי אמר לי: שלום עליך, רבי ואמרתי לו: שלום עליך, רבי ומורי ואמר לי: בני, מפני מה נכנסת לחורבה זו? אמרתי לו: להתפלל. ואמר לי: היה לך להתפלל בדרך ואמרתי לו: מתירא הייתי שמא יפסיקו בי עוברי דרכים. ואמר לי: היה לך להתפלל תפלה קצרה. באותה שעה למדתי ממנו שלשה דברים: למדתי שאין נכנסין לחורבה, ולמדתי שמתפללין בדרך, ולמדתי שהמתפלל בדרך – מתפלל תפלה קצרה. ואמר לי: בני, מה קול שמעת בחורבה זו? ואמרתי לו: שמעתי בת קול שמנהמת כיונה ואומרת: אוי לבנים שבעונותיהם החרבתי את ביתי ושרפתי את היכלי והגליתים לבין האומות. ואמר לי: חייך וחיי ראשך, לא שעה לא בלבד אומרת כך, אלא בכל יום ויום שלש פעמים אומרת כך ולא זו בלבד, אלא בשעה שישראל נכנסין לבתי כנסיות ולבתי מדרשות ועונין יהא שמיה הגדול מבורך הקדוש ברוך הוא מנענע ראשו ואומר: אשרי המלך שמקלסין אותו בביתו כך, מה לו לאב שהגלה את בניו, ואוי להם לבנים שגלו מעל שולחן אביהם.

Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 3a

Rabbi Isaac b Samuel says in the name of Rav: There are three watches in the night, and at each and every watch the Holy One, Blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion, and says, "Alas for the children, for on account of their sins I destroyed my House and burned my Sanctuary and exiled them among the nations of the world."…

It was taught in a Baraita: Rabbi Yosi said: I was traveling on the road and went into one of the ruins of Jerusalem to pray. Elijah of blessed memory came to me and watched the door for me, and waited there until I had finished my prayer. He said to me, "Peace to you, my master and my teacher!" Then he said to me, "My son, why did you go into a ruin?" I said: "To pray." He said, "You should have prayed on the road." I replied, "I thought that people passing by might interrupt my prayers." He said, "You should have prayed a short version." And that is how I learned three things: do not go into a ruin; pray on the road instead; and pray a short version when you do.

Then he asked, "What sound did you hear in the ruin?" I answered: "I heard a *bat kol* [a Divine voice] cooing like a dove, 'Alas for the children, for on account of their sins I destroyed my House and burned my Sanctuary and exiled them among the nations of the world.'" He said to me "By your life and the life of your head! This is not the only time the voice says that – every single day, three times a day, it does so also; and not only that, but every time a person from Israel goes into a synagogue or a study house and answers [the *kaddish*] with the words, 'May His great Name be blessed', the Holy Blessed One nods His head and says, 'Happy is the King who is praised in his house this way!'" What of the father who banishes his children? And alas for the children who are banished from their father's table!

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **The words spoken in the first paragraph and the third are the same. Do the different contexts make a difference to their meaning? How?**
- **What do you think is the significance of Elijah in this passage?**
- **How many different views of God are there in this passage?**
- **How does the final sentence of the passage fit with what precedes it?**

GOD IN THE TALMUD – TEXT 3

תלמוד בבלי, ברכות כח.ב

וכשחלה רבי יוחנן בן זכאי, נכנסו תלמידיו לבקרו. כיון שראה אותם התחיל לבכות. אמרו לו תלמידיו: נר ישראל, עמוד הימיני, פטיש החזק, מפני מה אתה בוכה? אמר להם: אילו לפני מלך בשר ודם היו מוליכין אותי, שהיום כאן ומחר בקבר, שאם כועס עלי – אין כעסו כעס עולם, ואם אוסרני – אין איסורו איסור עולם, ואם ממיתני – אין מיתתו מיתת עולם, ואני יכול לפייסו בדברים ולשחדו בממון – אף על פי כן הייתי בוכה ועכשיו שמוליכים אותי לפני מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא, שהוא חי וקיים לעולם ולעולמי עולמים, שאם כועס עלי – כעסו כעס עולם, ואם אוסרני – איסורו איסור עולם, ואם ממיתני – מיתתו מיתת עולם, ואיני יכול לפייסו בדברים ולא לשחדו בממון ולא עוד, אלא שיש לפני שני דרכים, אחת של גן עדן ואחת של גיהנם, ואיני יודע באיזו מוליכים אותי – ולא אבכה? אמרו לו: רבינו, ברכנו אמר להם: יהי רצון שתהא מורא שמים עליכם כמורא בשר ודם. אמרו לו תלמידיו: עד כאן? – אמר להם: ולואי תדעו, כשאדם עובר עבירה אומר: שלא יראני אדם.

Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 28b

When Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai became ill, his students went in to see him. When he saw them he began to weep. His students said to him, "Light of Israel! Right-hand pillar! Strong hammer, why do you weep?" He said to them, "If I were being taken before a human king, who is here one day and the next day is dead and buried; who, if he is angry with me will not stay angry with me for ever; who, if he punishes me, will not punish me for ever; and who if he kills me does not condemn me to everlasting death; a king who I can appease with words, or bribe – even if that were the case, I would weep! And now I am being taken before the King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, who exists for ever and ever. If he is angry with me he will be angry with me for ever. If he punishes me, he will punish me for ever. If he kills me, he will condemn me to everlasting death. I cannot appease him with words, or bribe him. Not only that, but I see before me two paths. One leads to the Garden of Eden and the other to Gehinnom, and I do not know down which I shall be taken. Shall I not weep?!"

His students said to him, "Master, please bless us." He said: "May the fear of Heaven be upon you like the fear of human beings." His students said to him, "Is that all?" He said to them, "Don't you understand? When a man wants to commit a transgression, what does he say? 'I hope nobody sees me!'"

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What names for God are used in this passage? How do they differ?**
- **What is the significance of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's blessing?**
- **What name do you think Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai would have used for God?**
- **If you had to name God using only this passage, what would you call God?**

GOD IN THE TALMUD – TEXT 4

משנה,סנהדרין.ה

ה אָמַר רַבִּי מֵאִיר, בְּזְמַן שֶׁאָדָם מִצְטַעֵר, (שְׁכִינָה) מָה הַלָּשׁוֹן אוֹמֶרֶת (כַּבְיָכוֹל) קַלַּנִי מֵרֹאשִׁי, קַלַּנִי מִזְּרוֹעִי. אִם כֵּן הַמָּקוֹם מִצְטַעֵר עַל דַּם שֶׁל רְשָׁעִים שֶׁנִּשְׁפַּךְ, קַל וָחֹמֶר עַל דַּם שֶׁל צַדִּיקִים.

Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:5

Rabbi Meir said: when a person is in pain, it is as if the Shekhinah says, "My head is hurting me!" or "My arm is hurting me!" This means that God [*Hamakom*] is in pain about the blood of the wicked which is shed; how much more so when it is the blood of the righteous!

תלמוד בבלי, מגילה כט.א

תניא, רבי שמעון בן יוחי אומר: בוא וראה כמה חביבין ישראל לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא. שבכל מקום שגלו – שכינה עמהן. גלו למצרים – שכינה עמהן, שנאמר: (שמואל א' ב) הנגלה נגליתי לבית אביך בהיותם במצרים וגו', גלו לבבל – שכינה עמהן, שנאמר: (ישעיהו מ"ג) למענכם שלחתי בבלה. ואף כשהן עתידין ליגאל שכינה עמהן, שנאמר: (דברים ל') ושב ה' אלהיך את שבותך, והשיב לא נאמר אלא ושב, מלמד שהקדוש ברוך הוא שב עמהן מבין הגליות.

Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 29a

It was taught in a Baraita: Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai said: Come and see how much the Holy One, blessed be He, loves the children of Israel! Wherever they were exiled, the Shekhinah is with them. When they were exiled to Egypt – the Shekhinah was with them, as it says: "Was I not revealed, yes, revealed, to your father's house when you were in Egypt? [I Samuel 2:27]." When they were exiled to Babylon, the Shekhinah was with them, as it says: "For your sake I was sent to Babylon [Isaiah 43:14]." And at the time they are destined to be redeemed, the Shekhinah will be with them, as it is said: "And Adonai your God will return your captivity [Deuteronomy 30:3]."

It does not say "will cause to return" – it says "return". This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, will return with them [himself] from captivity.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What do we learn about the Shekhinah from the first text?**
- **What do we learn about the Shekhinah from the second text?**
- **Are God and the Shekhinah separate entities in these texts?**
- **What does it mean for the Shekhinah to be with the children of Israel in exile?**

GOD IN THE TALMUD – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

תלמוד בבלי, ברכות לג.ב
משנה. האומר... ועל טוב יזכר שמך...– משתקין אותו.

גמרא. בשלמא...משתקין אותו...ועל טוב יזכר שמך – נמי משמע על הטובה ולא על הרעה, ותנן: חייב אדם לברך על הרעה כשם שמברך על הטובה.

Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 33b

MISHNAH: If, when a person is praying, he says… "May Your Name be mentioned for good" – people should silence him.

GEMARA: We understand why he is silenced…if he says, "May Your Name be mentioned for good" because this implies for the good only, and not for evil, and it has been taught: "A person must bless God for evil just as they bless God for good."

תלמוד בבלי, ברכות ס.א
מברך על הרעה כו'. היכי דמי? – כגון דשקל בדקא בארעיה, אף על גב דטבא היא לדידיה, דמסקא ארעא שירטון ושבחא – השתא מיהא רעה היא. ועל הטובה כו'. היכי דמי? – כגון דאשכח מציאה, אף על גב דרעה היא לדידיה, דאי שמע בה מלכא שקיל לה מיניה – השתא מיהא טובה היא. היתה אשתו מעוברת ואמר יהיה רצון שתלד כו' הרי זו תפלת שוא.

Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 60a

A person must bless God for evil – In what kind of situation? For example, if a flood swept over his land. Even though it will be a good thing for him [in the end] because the land will have acquired [extra] sediment and be more rich - for the moment it is still evil.

Just as they bless God for good – In what kind of situation? For example, if a person finds something valuable. Even though it will be a bad thing for him [in the end] because if the king hears about it, he will take it – for the moment it is still good.

And if a man's wife is pregnant, and he says, "May God grant that my wife give birth to a boy" – this is a prayer in vain.

The Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

God in Midrash

GOD IN MIDRASH

Rabbi Ilana Grinblat

Introduction

To explore the understanding of God in the Midrash, I would like to begin with a story that took place long before Midrash formally came into being. This story represents one of the first appearances in the Bible of the verb *darash*, which is the root of Midrash.[1] As Renee Bloch notes, the word Midrash is mentioned only twice in the Tanakh, within the book of Chronicles, yet the verb *darash* appears frequently. "It evokes the idea of a directed search" and most often is used in a religious sense, meaning "to seek the response of God in worship and personal prayer."[2] This type of seeking becomes the basis of Midrash and can become a paradigm for understanding the role of God in Midrash.

This story is told in the book of Genesis that the matriarch Rebecca is in physical pain during pregnancy. The text reads: "And the children struggled together inside her, and she said, 'If it be so, why am I thus?' and she went to inquire [*lidrosh*] of the Lord." [3]

This *darash* (inquiry) was produced by personal suffering that was both physical and spiritual. Rebecca was in pain and since she did not understand its cause, she faced a crisis of meaning. Her inquiry was urgent, and she longed for a resolution to this problem. The crisis caused her to ask an existential question: "*im ken lama zeh anochi?*" This literally means: "If so, why this me?" It can alternately be understood: "Why is this happening to me?"[4] or even "If so, why do I exist?"[5] Given what was happening to her, Rebecca sought to understand the nature of her place in the world.

With these queries in mind, she "went to inquire of the Lord." Not God but Rebecca took the initiative in this quest. Through her efforts, God – who initially felt distant from her – was brought closer. Prior to this moment, God never spoke to Rebecca but because of her initiative, God responded.

The text continues: "And the Lord said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb and two peoples shall be separated from your bowels, and the one shall be stronger than the other people, and the elder shall serve the younger.'"[6]

In responding, God did not remove Rebecca's pain. Rather, God helped her see the bigger picture by explaining the significance of the suffering. God showed Rebecca how her present pain would lead to a brighter future and how her personal story was connected to the larger narrative of the Jewish people. God thereby revealed the purpose of Rebecca's life, and she subsequently acted in pursuit of this vision.

These aspects of Rebecca's story become the essential elements of Midrash and its understanding of God.

Beginning with a Crisis

As with Rebecca's story, the starting place for the development of Midrash is in crisis. The body of literature known as Midrash begins early in the Tannaitic period; the earliest written compilations of Midrash – the Mekhilta, Sifra, and Sifre – are contemporaneous with the Mishnah (200 CE) although the teachings contained therein could be earlier. The rabbis at this time were facing a great historical crisis in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. They also endured continuing oppression under Roman rule that entailed persecution and even death as punishment for following Jewish practices.

The destruction of the Temple represented a crisis for the rabbis and the people on many levels. It was a physical disaster leading to the dispersal and death of many Jews. The destruction also presented a halakhic dilemma, a crisis of Jewish law. Since so much of Jewish practice involved the Temple, Jewish law had to be completely reworked in the

[1] *This quote comes from the second passage in which the root* **"***darash***"** *is found in the Tanakh.*
[2] *Renee Bloch, "Midrash," in Jacob Neusner, ed.* **Origins of Judaism** *Vol. XI part I. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990). p. 164.*
[3] *Genesis 25:22. Translation by Harold Fisch,* **The Holy Scriptures***. (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 1998).*
[4] *Per Fisch translation, "If it be so, why am I thus?" The Malbim understands this translation as: "If so, why am I in the world?"*
[5] **Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text***. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).*
[6] *Genesis 25: 23.*

absence of sacrifices. Furthermore, the destruction of the Temple presented a theological crisis regarding why God would allow such a tragedy to happen and whether God still loved and protected the Jewish people. The historical trauma produced an urgent crisis of meaning. Midrash sought to answer Rebecca's question: "If so, why this me?" by articulating: given these painful events, who am I, and how do I live in this kind of world?

In addition to the historical calamity of this period, the rabbis responded to crises within the Torah text itself. The starting point of Midrash is problems within the verses themselves, like grammatical incongruities, unclear words or missing details. In responding to these "crises," the rabbis simultaneously addressed the crises of their time and bridged the gap between the biblical and rabbinic periods.

As Dr. Barry Holtz wrote, "Primarily we can see the central issue behind the emergence of Midrash as the need to deal with the presence of cultural or religious tension and discontinuity. Where there are questions that demand answers and where there are new cultural and intellectual pressures that must be addressed, Midrash comes into play as a way of resolving crisis and reaffirming continuity with the traditions of the past."[7]

Asking Existential Questions

With this backdrop, Midrash became a vehicle for the rabbis to ask existential questions about God. By couching their questions within the biblical narratives, Midrash provided a safe vehicle for asking difficult questions of God that would have been too dangerous to ask directly. Several well-known texts broach these questions. For example, in Genesis Rabbah (a midrashic collection edited in the 5th century) Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai gives the following interpretation of Genesis 4:10:

> "Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: This is a difficult thing to say, and it is impossible to say it clearly. Once two athletes were wrestling before the king. If the king wants, they can be separated, but he did not want them separated. One overcame the other and killed him. The loser cried out as he died: 'Who will get justice for me from the king?' Thus: 'The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the land.'(Genesis 4:10)." [8]

By using the metaphor of the king failing to intervene in the wrestling match, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai was able to ask why God does not stop human conduct and thereby hold God responsible for such evil. The rabbi admitted that he would be unable to ask this question (or make this implicit criticism of God) without the vehicle of Midrash. Like the athletes in the parable, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai wrestled with God and the theological questions raised by the crisis of his time.

Dr. David Stern notes that obfuscation is a common feature of Midrash in general and the *mashal* (parable) in particular. "This model of the *mashal* sees the literary form as one typically used in political or religious oppressive situations to express controversial or dangerous beliefs that were better not articulated openly, or could not be, either for political or doctrinal reasons." [9]

In this sense, Midrash is particularly important for our own time. Like the rabbis after the destruction of the Temple, we face a cataclysmic tragedy that calls into question our core beliefs. The Holocaust raises these same theological questions: Why does God not intervene to prevent human evil? Why does God not protect good people? Does God still love us? How can we maintain our faith in an evil world? The questions asked by the rabbis, although ancient, could not be more contemporary. In this sense, Midrash can help us in our own God wrestling.

[7] *Barry Holtz, "Midrash," in* **Back to the Sources** *(New York: Touchstone Publishers, 1984). p. 179.*
[8] *Genesis Rabbah 22:9*
[9] *David Stern, "The Rabbinic Parable and the Narrative of Interpretation," in Michael Fishbane, ed.,* **The Midrashic Imagination** *(Albany: Statue University of New York, 1993). p. 82.*

Human Initiative

In Rebecca's story, crises and existential questions led her to seek out God. In many cases within the Bible, God takes the first step and speaks to people, but here *she* takes the initiative and reaches toward God who has been distant from her until this point. Likewise, Midrash emphasizes human initiative in the divine-human encounter. *Human* actions and creativity deepen the relationship with God.

One parable in *Eliahu Zuta*, a midrashic collection written between the seventh and tenth centuries, illustrates this point:

> "A king of flesh and blood had two servants whom he loved completely. He gave each of them a measure of wheat and a bundle of flax. The intelligent one what did he do? He wove the flax into a cloth and made flour from the wheat, sifted it, ground it, kneaded it, and baked it and arranged it on the table, spread upon it the cloth and left it until the king returned. The stupid one did not do anything. After a time, the king returned to his house and said to them: 'My sons, bring me what I gave you.' One brought out the table set with the bread and the cloth spread upon it, and the other brought the wheat in a basket and the bundle of flax with it. Oh what an embarrassment! Oh what a disgrace! Which do you think was most beloved? The one who brought the table with the bread upon it… (Similarly) when God gave the Torah to Israel, God gave it as wheat from which to make flour and flax from which to make clothing through the rules of interpretation." [10]

Interestingly, the king (who represents God) begins by showing love to his servants/sons by giving them these gifts but then disappears without an explanation. During that absence, the wise son (who represents the people Israel) takes the initiative and works the raw materials of Torah into artistic creations through the process of Midrash. This handiwork is pleasing to the king/God when he returns. The human activity of interpretation becomes the vehicle for sustaining the divine-human relationship when God cannot be found. This Midrash acknowledges that God may feel distant at times in our lives, but God does not permanently disappear. God will return and be pleased with how we lovingly transformed the Torah. Midrash becomes a vehicle for expressing love in the divine-human bond, which is mutual. God showed love for the people of Israel by giving them the Torah, and the people show love for God by interpreting it.

This reciprocity is striking. The simplicity of the parable masks how radical it is. One might expect that when the king comes back, he would favor the son who preserved the gifts intact rather than the son who changed them. A lender generally expects an item to be returned by the borrower in its original condition. Likewise, many religious traditions maintain that the human role is *not* to reread or interpret scripture but accept it literally and abide by the rules. However, according to this Midrash and the spirit of Jewish writings over the centuries, the Torah was not lent to the people but given freely as a gift; human beings are not only allowed but expected to transform it as a means of expressing love for their Creator.

The reciprocity of the divine-human relationship is especially noteworthy in contrast to Christianity. Rabbi Dr. Reuven Kimmelman notes that in Christianity, God gave God's only son as a sacrifice that expressed divine love for people. This sacrifice is so extreme that there is nothing comparable that a person can give God in return. This gift cannot be reciprocated but only accepted in gratitude. By contrast, in Judaism God gave the Torah as an expression of divine love, and one can easily reciprocate by interpreting the Torah – making wheat into flour and weaving flax into cloth.[11]

[10] *Literally, God gave the Torah to Israel, God only gave it as wheat from which to make flour and flax from which to make cloth through a general rule followed by a detail and a detail followed by a general rule, and a general ruled followed by a detail and a general rule. These are the 4th, 5th and 6th of R. Ishmael's 13 rules of interpretation.*

[11] *Reuven Kimmelman,* **The Hidden Poetry of the Jewish Prayerbook**. *(Our Learning Company, 2005). Lecture 7.*

The importance of the human role in the divine-human relationship is seen in many places in Midrash, most notably in the first of the Ten Commandments – the quintessential moment of God's revelation. The Mekhilta begins its interpretation of the First Commandment with the following parable:

> "Why were the Ten Commandments not written in the beginning of the Torah? A parable was given. To what may this be compared? To a king who entered a province said to the people, 'May I be your king?' The people said to him: 'You have not done anything good for us that you should rule over us.' What did he do? He built the (city) wall for them, he brought in the water (supply) for them, and he fought their wars. He said to them: 'May I be your king?' They said to him: 'Yes, yes.' Likewise, God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, divided the sea for them, sent down manna for them, brought up the well for them, brought quail for them, and fought for the war with Amalek. Then God said to them: 'Am I to be your king?' And they replied, 'Yes, yes.'"[12]

Here, in God's most forceful display of revelation, the Midrash notes the power of the people. In order for God to rule over the people, they had to accept God's rule. In this parable, God needs to establish credibility with the people before being accepted. God's authority derives from the people's affirmation. In this sense, the human-divine relationship is truly a partnership – wherein God rules and the people uphold God as their ruler.

God is clearly the senior partner in the relationship. In the Midrashic metaphor, God is the king and we are the subjects, or alternately God is the parent and we are the children. However, God's seniority does not diminish the importance of the human role in the relationship. We are not passive but active partners in the joint task of bringing Torah to the world.

Bringing God Close

Rebecca's seeking elicits a response from God and calls God into interaction with her. Likewise, the midrashic process does not merely pass the time while the king/God is away. Rather it beckons the king/God back home. Midrash gives people a way to feel God's presence through the text. As Stern notes, midrash does not merely "aim at discovering meaning in the text but at restoring the absent presence, the guarantor of meaning. Its real aim is the restoration of a feeling of intimacy and relationship with the estranged text, and therefore with God."[13]

This point can be illustrated by a midrash in Lamentations Rabbah (a fifth century compilation):

> "R Abba bar Kahana said: This situation may be likened to a king who married a lady and wrote her a long *ketubah* [wedding contract] that enumerated: 'So many state-apartments I am preparing for you, so many jewels I am preparing for you, and so much silver and gold I give you.' The king left her and went to a distant land for many years. Her neighbors used to vex her saying, 'Your husband has deserted you. Come and be married to another man.' She wept and sighed but whenever she went into her room and read her *ketubah*, she would be consoled. After many years, the king returned and said to her, 'I am astonished that you waited for me all these years.' She replied, 'My lord king, if it had not been for the generous *ketubah* you wrote me, then surely my neighbors would have won me over.' So the nations of the world taunt Israel and say, 'Your God has no need of you; he has deserted you and removed His presence from you. Come to us, and we shall appoint commanders and leaders

[12] *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael. Tractate Bahodesh, Chapter 5.*
[13] *Stern, p. 92.*

> of every sort for you.' Israel enters the synagogues and houses of study and reads in the Torah, 'I will look with favor upon you … and I will not spurn you.' (Leviticus 26: 9-11) and they are consoled. In the future, the Holy One, blessed be He, will say to Israel, 'I am astonished that you waited for me all these years,' and they will reply, 'If it had not been for the Torah which you gave us … the nations of the world would have led us astray.' Therefore it is stated, 'This do I recall and therefore have hope.' (Lamentations 3:21)" [14]

By reading the *ketubah*, the wife in this story was able to feel her husband's love despite the neighbors' taunts, and she maintained hope that eventually he would return to her completely. Likewise, Midrash allows the people of Israel to experience God's love through the Torah and feel God's closeness, even in a brutal world. Midrash fosters hope in the coming of the messianic era where God's presence will be felt more fully and directly in the redeemed world.

As Stern notes,[15] this story leaves unanswered many theological questions. It does not explain why the king went away for so long or when he will be returning. The Midrash cannot answer those questions (and nor can we). The Midrash is remarkably honest about the challenge of living in this world where God can feel distant. Nevertheless, people can feel close to God and have faith. They can experience God's love and express love for God. Midrash gives them a way.

Finding Meaning

When speaking to Rebecca, God gave her an explanation for her situation that linked her with the larger historical narrative. God did not eliminate her pain, but she was comforted to see her suffering as part of a greater purpose in her life. Similarly, by interpreting the Torah, the rabbis uncovered God-given meaning in their lives. Their pain was not removed; they still lived under excruciatingly difficult circumstances, but they found strength in seeing their lives as part of a whole that God lovingly created and would ultimately redeem. The people thereby were connected to God and each other, to their ancestors and descendants who would share a sacred task.

For example, the Mekhilta offers the following interpretation of the last words of the second of the Ten Commandments:

> "Rabbi Natan says: 'To them that love Me and keep My commandments.' These are the people of Israel who live in the land of Israel and give their lives for the sake of the commandments. 'Why are you being led out to be decapitated?' 'Because I circumcised my son.' 'Why are you being led out to be burned?' 'Because I read in the Torah.' 'Why are you being led out to be crucified?' 'Because I ate unleavened bread.' 'Why are you receiving one hundred lashes?' 'Because I shook the *lulav*,' as it is written, 'That I was wounded in the house of those who love me' [Zechariah 13: 6]. These wounds caused me to be beloved of my father in heaven."[16]

Here God is not the source of suffering (although God does not intervene to stop it). God does not want the people to suffer, yet the people's fidelity to God and their tradition despite suffering makes them beloved in God's eyes. The children of Israel can experience God's love even amid pain because they know that they are fulfilling their purpose of "loving God and keeping the commandments."

While pain is not removed, it is made bearable in the context of greater meaning. The eighteenth century Hassidic Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, whose town faced a deadly plague, prayed these words: "Master of the universe, I do not know what questions to ask. I do not expect You to reveal Your secrets to me. All I ask is that You show me one thing: what this moment means to me and what You demand of me. I do not ask why I suffer. I ask only do I suffer for Your sake."

[14] *Eicha Rabba 3:101 (Buber edition), cited in Stern, ibid.*
[15] *Ibid. p. 88.*
[16] *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Bachodesh, Chapter 6.*

Midrash answers Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's prayer. Through the process of Midrash, the rabbis show precisely "what this moment means" and "what God demands" of them. Although the Midrash cannot adequately answer the question "Why do I suffer?" it reassures the people in pain that God is with them.

Renee Bloch explains:

> "*Midrash* always involves a living Word addressed personally to the people of God and each of its members, a Word which makes clear the divine wishes and demands and calls for a response, never theoretical, and a commitment: the fidelity of a people and each of its members to the demands which the Word makes manifest. Revealed at a specific point in history, this Word is nevertheless addressed to people of all times. Thus it ought to remain open indefinitely to all new understanding of the message, all legitimate adaptations to all situations … So long as there is a people of God who regard the Bible as the living Word of God, there will be *midrash*."[17]

Contemporary Implications

Today, daily life is far more comfortable and secure than it was in biblical and rabbinic times, yet like our ancestors we have witnessed catastrophes of cataclysmic proportions. We, too, face historical struggles as well as personal crises. These moments prompt us to wrestle with existential and theological questions. Like our predecessors, we long for closeness with God yet often feel distant. We seek the deeper purpose of our lives – both in pain and joy.

For us as for the rabbis, Midrash can be a vehicle that brings us closer to ultimate meaning. Through creative interpretation, we can uncover God's presence in our lives. We can feel God's love through the gift of Torah and express our love in return. We can find comfort in our struggles by discovering a higher purpose. Like Rebecca, through seeking we can "walk with God."

[17] *Bloch, p. 33.*

GOD IN MIDRASH – TEXT 1

שמות רבה פרשה ג:ו

ויאמר אלהים אל משה, אמר רבי אבא בר ממל אמר ליה הקב"ה למשה שמי אתה מבקש לידע, לפי מעשי אני נקרא פעמים שאני נקרא באל שדי, בצבאות, באלהים, בה', כשאני דן את הבריות אני נקרא אלהים, וכשאני עושה מלחמה ברשעים אני נקרא צבאות, וכשאני תולה על חטאיו של אדם אני נקרא אל שדי, וכשאני מרחם על עולמי אני נקרא ה', שאין ה' אלא מדת רחמים שנאמר (שמות לד) ה' ה' אל רחום וחנון, הוי אהיה אשר אהיה אני נקרא לפי מעשי.

ר' יצחק אומר א"ל הקב"ה למשה אמור להם אני שהייתי ואני הוא עכשיו ואני הוא לעתיד לבא, לכך כתיב אהיה שלשה פעמים...

Shemot Rabbah Parashah III:6 [based on Exodus 3:6]

AND GOD SAID [TO MOSES] I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS [THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, THE GOD OF ISAAC, THE GOD OF JACOB]. R Abba b. Mammel said: God said to Moses, "You wish to know my name? Well, I am called according to my work. Sometimes I am called 'Almighty God', 'Lord of Hosts', 'God', 'Lord'. When I am judging created beings I am called 'God' and when I am waging war against the wicked I am called 'Lord of Hosts'. When I suspend judgment for man's sins I am called 'Almighty God [*el shaddai*]' and when I am merciful to my world I am called 'Adonai', for Adonai is the attribute of mercy, as it is said: 'The Lord, the Lord, God, merciful and gracious [Exodus 34:6]'. Hence I AM THAT I AM in virtue of my deeds."

R Isaac said: God said to Moses, 'Tell them that I am now what I always was and always will be'; this is why the word *ehyeh* is written three times…

Compare:

פסיקתא דרב כהנא יב:כה

ד"א אנכי י"י אלהיך (שמות כ'). א"ר חננא בר פפא נראה להם הקב"ה פנים זעופות, פנים בינוניות, פנים מסבירות, פנים שוחקות. פנים זועמות למקרא, כשאדם מלמד את בנו תורה צריך ללמדו באימה. פנים בינונית למשנה. פנים מסבירות לתלמוד. פנים שוחקות לאגדה. אמ' להם הקב"ה אע"פ שאתם רואין כל הדמוייות הללו, אלא אנכי י"י אלהיך (שמות כ').

Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 12:25 [based on Exodus 20:2]

I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD. Hanania bar Papa said: The Holy Blessed One appeared to them with an angry face, and with a neutral face, and with a friendly face, and with a smiling face. The angry face was for Torah: when a person teaches their son Torah, they should do so with awe. The neutral face was for Mishnah. The friendly face was for Talmud. The smiling face was for *aggadah* [Midrash]. The Holy Blessed One said to them, even though you see all of these different faces I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Look up the quotations in their context. What does the context add?**
- **What do God's names say about God in the first Midrash?**
- **What names would you give to the faces in the second Midrash?**
- **Do you think there might be other names for God? If so – what might they be?**

GOD IN MIDRASH – TEXT 2

מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בחדש ה

אנכי ה׳ אלהיך. למה נאמר, לפי שנגלה על הים כגבור עושה מלחמות, שנאמר (שמות טו) ה׳ איש מלחמה. נגלה על הר סיני כזקן מלא רחמים, שנאמר (שמות כד י) ויראו את אלהי ישראל, וכשנגאלו מה הוא אומר, וכעצם השמים לטוהר; ואו׳ (דניאל ז ט י) חזה הויית עד די כרסון רמיו, ואומר נהר דינור נגד ונפק מן קדמוהי וגו׳. שלא ליתן פתחון פה לאומות העולם לומר, שתי רשויות הן. אלא אנכי ה׳ אלהיך, אני במצרים, אני על הים, אני בסיני אני לשעבר, אני לעתיד לבא, אני לעולם הזה, אני לעולם הבא. שנאמר (דברים לב לט) ראו עתה כי אני אני הוא, ואומר (ישעי׳ מו ד) ועד זקנה אני הוא, ואומר (ישעיה מד ו) כה אמר ה׳ מלך ישראל וגואלו ה׳ צבאות אני ראשון ואני אחרון.

Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael Bahodesh 5 [based on Exodus 20:2]

I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD. Why is this said? Because at the sea he appeared to them as a mighty hero doing battle, as it is said: "The Lord is a man of war [Exodus 15:3]." At Sinai he appeared to them as an old man full of mercy. It is said: "And they saw the God of Israel etc. [Exodus 24:10]." And of the time after they had been redeemed, what does it say? "And the like of the very heaven for clarity [Exodus 24:10]." Again it says: "I looked until thrones were placed [Daniel 7:9]." And it also says: "A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him etc. [Daniel 7:10]."

So as to ensure the nations of the world do not claim that there are two authorities, the Torah states: "I am the Lord your God. I am the One who was in Egypt, and I am the One who was at the sea. I am the One who was at Sinai. I am the One who was in the past and I am the One who will be in the future. I am the One who is in this world and I am the One who will be in the world to come, as it is said, 'See now that I, even I, am he' etc [Deuteronomy 32:9]." And it says: "Even to old age I am the same [Isaiah 46:4]." And it says: "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his redeemer the Lord of Hosts: I am the first and I am the last [Isaiah 44:6]."

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Look up the quotations in their context. What does the context add?**
- **How else has God appeared in Jewish history?**
- **How can God be one and yet multiple? What does it mean that we understand God in this way?**
- **Do you think there might be other names for God? If so – what might they be?**

GOD IN MIDRASH – TEXT 3

מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בחדש ו

לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני. למה נאמר, לפי שנאמר אנכי ה׳ אלהיך. משל למלך בשר ודם שנכנס למדינה, אמרו לו עבדיו, גזור עליהם גזרות. אמר להם לאו, כשיקבלו את מלכותי, אגזור עליהם גזרות, שאם מלכותי לא יקבלו, גזרותי לא יקבלו. כך אמר המקום לישראל, אנכי ה׳ אלהיך – לא יהיה אלהים אחרים. אמר להם, אני הוא, שקבלתם מלכותי עליכם במצרים, אמרו לו, כן. וכשם שקבלתם מלכותי עליכם, קבלו גזרותי: לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני. רבי שמעון בן יוחאי אומר, הוא שנאמר להלן (ויקרא יח ב) אני ה׳ אלהיכם, אני הוא שקבלתם מלכותי עליכם בסיני; אמרו לו, הן והן; קבלתם מלכותי, קבלו גזרותי: לא יהיה לכם אלהים אחרים על פני.

Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael Bahodesh 6 [based on Exodus 20:2-3]

YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME. Why is this written, since it is written, "I am the Lord your God?" This can be compared to a human king who entered a country. His servants said to him: "Decree upon them decrees." He said to them, "No, when they will accept my rule, then I will decree upon them decrees, because if they do not accept my rule, they will not accept my decrees." Similarly, God said to Israel, "I am the Lord your God" and "Do not have any other gods before me." God said to them, "I am the One whose rule you accepted in Egypt, is that right?" They said to him: "Yes." [God continued] "So just as you accepted my rule upon you, accept my decrees: You shall have no other gods before me."

Compare:

תלמוד בבלי, שבת פח.א

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר, אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה – מוטב, ואם לאו – שם תהא קבורתכם.

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a

AND THEY STOOD UNDER THE MOUNTAIN. R Abdimi b Hama b Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy Blessed One turned the mountain upside down over them like a barrel, and said to them, "If you accept the Torah, that is good: and if not, here is where you will be buried!"

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Look up the quotations in their context. What does the context add?**
- **How does the passage from the Midrash differ from the passage in the Talmud?**
- **What does that difference say about how we can understand God?**
- **Do you think there might be other ways to envisage God? If so – what might they be?**

GOD IN MIDRASH – TEXT 4

פסיקתא דרב כהנא יב:כה

א״ר לוי נראה להם הקב״ה כאיקונין הזו שיש לה פנים מכל מקום, אלף בני אדם מביטין בה והיא מבטת בכולם. כך הקב״ה כשהיה מדבר כל אחד ואחד מישר׳ היה אומ׳ עמי הדבר מדבר, אנכי י״י אלהיכם אין כת׳ כאן, אלא אנכי י״י אלהיך (שמות כ׳) א״ר יוסי בר׳ חנינא ולפי כוחן של כל אחד ואחד היה הדיבר מדבר עמו. ואל תתמה על הדבר הזה, שהיה המן יורד לישראל כל אחד ואחד היה טועמו לפי כוחו, התינוקות לפי כוחן, והבחורים לפי כוחן, הזקנים לפי כוחן. התינוקות לפי כוחן, כשם שהתינוק הזה היונק בשדי אמו כך היה טועמו, שנא׳ והיה טעמו כטעם לשד השמן (במדבר יא: ח). והבחורים לפי כוחן, שנ׳ ולחמי אשר נתתי לך לחם ושמן ודבש האכלתיך (יחזקאל טז: יט). והזקנים לפי כוחן, שנ׳ וטעמו כצפיחית בדבש (שמות טז: לא). ומה אם המן כל אחד ואחד לפי כוחן היה טועם לפיו, בדיבר כל אחד ואחד שומע לפי כוחן.

Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 12:25 [based on Exodus 20:2]

I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD…Rabbi Levi said that the Holy Blessed One appeared like one of those icons which has faces everywhere; a thousand people can look at it, and it looks back at each one. In the same way, when God spoke, each individual could say, "the speaker is speaking to me!" It does not say "I am the Lord your God" with "you" in the plural; it says "you" in the singular.

Rabbi Yosi bar Hanina said: God's speech came to each individual according to their capacity. Do not be surprised at this: when the manna descended for Israel, each person tasted it according to their own capacity. Infants tasted it according to their capacity, the young according to theirs, elders according to theirs. To infants according to their capacity it tasted like their mothers' milk, as it says: "It tasted like rich cream [Num. 11:8]." To the young it tasted according to their capacity, as it says: "My bread, which I gave you: bread, and oil, and honey [Ezekiel 16:19]." To elders it tasted according to their capacity, as it says: "The taste of it was like wafers made with honey [Ex. 16:31]." In the same way as the manna tasted in each person's mouth according to their capacity, so each individual heard God's speech according to their capacity.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Look up the quotations in their context. What does the context add?**
- **How else might God have appeared at Sinai?**
- **How can God be one and yet multiple? What does it say that we understand God in this way?**
- **Do you think there might be other ways to 'taste' God? If so – what might they be?**

Every man has a name
Zelda

every man has a name
given to him by God
& given to him by his father and his mother
every man has a name
given to him by his height & the way that he smiles
& given to him by his clothing
every man has a name
given to him by the mountains
& given to him by his walls
every man has a name
given to him by the constellations
& given to him by his neighbors
every man has a name
given to him by his sins
& given to him by his longing
every man has a name
given to him by his enemies
& given to him by his love
every man has a name
given to him by his celebrations
& given to him by his work
every man has a name
given to him by the seasons of the year
& given to him by his blindness
every man has a name
given to him by the sea
& given to him
by his death.

The Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

God in Halakhah

GOD IN HALAKHAH

Rabbi Daniel S. Nevins

In physics, one frequently studies the rules of motion with a "given" assumption that simplifies the process of study. *Assuming* the absence of gravity, a vacuum, and the lack of friction, objects can be expected to move at a specific velocity with a precise force. Reality, of course, is much messier. Objects interact in unpredicted ways, yielding a physical reality which is difficult to understand. Nevertheless, the laws of physics remain in force, governing each movement with great power and even beauty. While the simplicity of the "given" may be necessary to begin studying physics, it is the complexity of reality which makes this discipline achieve its greatest value.

So too is it with another system that describes rules of motion. We call this system "halakhah," which means "pathway." The halakhah is designed to work under certain "givens." For example, it initially assumes that the People Israel has theocratic sovereignty over the Land of Israel, and that our religious worship is centered still upon the daily operation of the holy Temple in Jerusalem. Within these assumptions, halakhah can prescribe and even predict the conduct of the entire nation of Israel living in covenant with God.

In the thirteenth century, the great legalist and philosopher Maimonides wrote a code of halakhah called *Mishneh Torah* ("Repetition of the Law") which worked under this assumption. He described the function of the Jewish king, the Sanhedrin and the entire range of sacrifices, despite the fact that none of these institutions had existed for the past twelve centuries. In this idealized reality, God's presence is clear and unquestioned. God provides the Land, the rain and food, the Temple and all of the blessings enjoyed by Israel.

As in physics, in halakhah one moves from this idealized vision to a far more complicated reality. Halakhah today addresses a world without a Temple, in which Jewish law is considered optional by most of the world's Jews, including the vast majority of the residents of Israel. Our question is whether God's presence can still be discerned in a system which is so far removed from its ideal state.

Put another way, when the Temple was destroyed and the people of Israel were exiled, what became of God? Without the central shrine, God would seem to have exited the stage of history. Indeed, the book of Deuteronomy (31:18) describes exile in terms of God "hiding the presence" from the people of Israel. Without the Temple, God's dwelling place, there would seem to be no further manifestation of God's presence among the people. How then, did the people of Israel manage not only to survive, but to thrive, during two millennia of dispersion?

The answer, paradoxically, is the halakhah, or Jewish law. No matter that the "givens" of Jewish existence have been taken away. No matter that the halakhic assumptions of a Temple and a theocracy are no longer true, and not even desired by the majority of today's Jews. Nevertheless, it is the law which has allowed Jews in disparate cultures and centuries to maintain their collective identity. And it is the law which has allowed Israel to feel God's presence even in the bleakest of circumstances. In the years following the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. a new class of Jewish leaders entitled "rabbis" boldly asserted the continued presence of God within the community of Torah study.

This concept is stated emphatically in Tractate Berakhot (8a): "From the day the Temple was destroyed, the Holy Blessed One has no place in His world other than the four cubits of halakhah alone." The fixed physical shrine has been replaced by a mobile, dynamic expression of the covenant. In Tractate Avot (3:6) Rabbi Halafta states: "Wherever ten Jews sit and study Torah, God's presence dwells in their midst." In Abrahamic fashion, he then lowers the threshold so that the same can be said wherever five Jews study Torah together, or even three, or even two, or even one. Where there is Torah study, there is God. The Torah has replaced the Temple as divine abode. But what, exactly, is the halakhah?

Simply stated, halakhah refers to Jewish law. Yet there are other Hebrew synonyms for Jewish law: *mishpat* ("justice"), *din* ("judgment"), and, of course, Torah ("instruction"). What need is there for an additional term? Each word has its

own associations. *Mishpat* alludes to justice with a capital J—the abstract ideal of a good society. *Din* refers to specific rulings, but also to the stringent quality of the law. Torah of course includes a world of associations linking human teaching with its divine origin. What then of *halakhah*? This term literally means "pathway"; it is thus a metaphor of motion. The law is not a fixed object, neatly contained on a bookshelf. Just as God is infinite and irreducible, and just as the people Israel is constantly adapting to the demands of covenantal life, so too the connective tissue that links Israel to God is dynamic. That vibrant connection is known as halakhah.

Moses repeatedly asserts the association of God's presence amidst Israel with the people's observance of the law. In chapter four of Deuteronomy (verses 7-8), he commands his people to "cling to the Lord your God," for what other nation has God so close nearby, or has such righteous laws and statutes? Implicit in Moses's sermon is his belief that when the people of Israel maintains righteous law, then God is in their midst.

The Jewish people has privileged religious practice over abstract faith as the way to welcome God's presence. As Rabbi Joseph Karo states in the opening words of his famous code, the Shulchan Arukh, "A person should strengthen himself to rise like a lion in the morning to serve his creator!" By following the daily discipline of the halakhah, a person welcomes God into his or her life. Even meditation is used by the rabbis to enhance, rather than to replace, the discipline of serving God through the halakhah.

In the blessing prior to the recitation of Shema, Jewish liturgy describes God's love in legal terms. God shows great love for "his people" by gifting them with Torah and commandments. In the first paragraph of the Shema, Israel is instructed to show love for God by studying the law and by observing its commandments. Enshrined in the central creed of Judaism is thus the faith that the halakhah binds Israel to God in love. Even the words of the Shema are less about theology than about fidelity. "Understand this, Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!" This famous statement tells us little about the nature of God, but much about the loyalty expected of Israel towards God.

Ironically, the Rabbis felt that occasion could arise in which God's presence would be disruptive of their practice of legal interpretation. In one of the most startling passages in rabbinic (or even religious) literature, the Rabbis tell God to stay out of their deliberations, for "the law was given at Sinai, and is no longer determined by a heavenly voice" (Bava Metzia 59b). While this might seem disrespectful, in truth the Rabbis felt that their greatest service to God was not in emulating the prophets, but rather in constructing a portable and durable place for God in the law. At times the law requires submission, but there are also moments in which religious leaders need to assert their own authority, even in apparent conflict with divine instruction.

From the rabbinic perspective, God has provided all of the tools necessary to interpret the law: biblical text, oral tradition, and logic. Well, nearly all of the tools! There are more than 300 points in the Talmud where the Rabbis are unable to resolve the law. In such cases the Talmud simply states an acronym: *Teyku—Tishbi Yitareitz Kushyot Uba'ayot*—the messianic harbinger, Elijah the Tishbite, will resolve all remaining problems and questions. Has God absented from the law in such points of ambiguity? Not at all! Each unresolved legal issue increases yearning for the redemption. When the messiah arrives, some will be most eager to see the Temple rebuilt, others to see the dead resurrected, and still others the onset of world peace. But one senses that the Rabbis are most eager to greet the messiah with their thorniest halakhic questions. Only by resolving these legal matters will God's presence become completely manifest in the law.

Until the messianic era, it is the responsibility of rabbis to interpret the halakhah. How are they to do this? What values, what procedures and what texts are the foundation of sacred law? "The Lord will establish you as His holy people, as He swore to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways (Deuteronomy 28:9)."

The foundation of halakhic process, as indicated in this verse, is to fulfill God's promise that Israel shall become a holy people. Israel exists to *become* holy (Leviticus 19:2); only the rebel Korach could claim that Israel already *is* holy (Numbers 16:3). Observance of the commandments and following God's path are the tools provided by God in order to fulfill our covenantal mandate.

It is significant that this verse differentiates between observing the commandments and walking in God's ways. The latter verb, from which we derive the notion of halakhah, implies that there is more to walking with God than simply fulfilling the mitzvot. Indeed, the Midrash reads this verse as a requirement that Israel emulate God's compassion and patience: "Just as God is patient with sinners and accepts their repentance, so should you be patient with each other when it benefits the other, but not be patient when another is suffering (Midrash Eliahu Rabbah 24)."

As such, the goal of the halakhic process is to lead the people of Israel toward their destiny as a holy people. This process requires halakhic guides to challenge and criticize at times, and to offer compassion and patience at other times. Halakhah is a living process by which the eternal truths of Torah govern the conflicted and messy lives of human beings.

Rabbis who accept responsibility for halakhic interpretation must always keep in mind the goal of guiding their fellow Jews towards holiness through the mechanism of *mitzvot*. In an era when personal autonomy has effectively become the regnant theology, halakhah seeks to restore a sense of humility in the Jewish soul. The imposition of limits that control the diet, the speech and the habits of every Jew is meant to sanctify life. This is why many *mitzvot* are accompanied by the blessing "*asher kidshanu bimitzvotav*." God makes us holy through His commandments.

Halakhic process constrains the individual to follow paths of practice, both ritual and moral, which come from our tradition of Torah. As such, halakhah is essentially a conservative force. Textual and lived precedents are the normative guides for halakhic process. Yet this very same process must never be reduced to a formalistic application of rules. The rules are called righteous, after all (Deuteronomy 4:8). The very heart of the halakhic process is to challenge its practitioners to walk in God's ways, emulating the values of justice and compassion which suffuse the Torah.

There have been times in Jewish history in which the halakhah was criticized for being not a forum for welcoming God, but a substitute for the divine presence. This was the initial complaint of the Hassidim, a charismatic early modern sect. The Hassidim never rejected the law per se, but rather objected to the formalistic observance of its dictates. For example, the verse (Leviticus 6:2) "*Zot Torat ha-olah*" literally means, "This is the instruction of the burnt offering [*olah*]," but the Hassidim read the final object as a verb: "This is the Torah that ascends." They complained that many pious Jews offered an arid expression of Torah study and prayer that could never ascend. Like a bird coated in oil, their halakhah had been stripped of its defining quality—the ability to soar to God. The Hassidim did not reject the law; they rejected the formalistic application which reduced halakhah to an artless arithmetic.

Just as God's presence can be exiled from the Land of Israel, so too can God be exiled from the halakhah. It is the duty of all Jews to approach the law not only as a legal or even moral discipline, but also as an expression of deep spiritual connection to God. The rabbis referred to this progression as moving from observing the "Torah from reverence" to "Torah from love."

Psalm 19 states that "The teaching of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul" and continues to claim that God's instruction leads to wisdom, joy and enlightenment. The halakhic process leads to these benefits by restricting individual autonomy and challenging each Jew to pursue the covenantal promise of becoming holy to God.

GOD IN HALAKHAH

The term halakhah, "pathway," implies a deliberate and calm rate of progress. Not skipping, nor leaping nor scampering, but walking. Not stopping, nor digging in, but walking. This metaphor of movement illuminates the great power of our legal tradition.

Precedent, both textual and practical, is the point of origin that sets the course for our walk with God. But the vision of redemption is what gives purpose and orientation to the path ahead. *Piskei Halakhah*[1] which do not grow organically from precedent disrupt the path and endanger the collective nature of this Jewish journey. But a rear-facing walk that fails to view our covenantal goals and prefers to return to some edenic past threatens to endanger the entire future of our people.

The *posek*[2] must demonstrate deep knowledge and reverence for halakhic precedent. He or she should exhibit great humility, but should also recall the teaching of Hillel: "Do not say that a matter cannot be understood, for in the end it will be understood (Mishnah Avot 2:4)." Rather, the *posek* should survey the available arsenal of texts and practices in order to equip the Jewish people to continue on its collective path to holiness.

On one level, the authority of halakhah is even throughout the system. Nevertheless, there is an established differentiation between rules which are Biblical, and those which are rabbinic. Rulings which are understood to be of Biblical origin and which have been reaffirmed by rabbinic interpretation are assumed worthy of the greatest respect and fidelity. If the tension between our goal of holiness and our respect for precedent becomes too great, the posek must employ interpretive ingenuity in order to maintain reverence for the Torah while giving relevant religious guidance to the people of Israel. Topics that have elicited such reinterpretation in modern times have included slavery, ethnic cleansing, the laws of *mamzerut*,[3] and the subjugation of women.

Daniel Boyarin writes about discovering a "usable past" which may involve "finding ways to contextualize and historicize recalcitrant and unpalatable aspects of the culture such that we can move beyond them." He adds that, "for that past to be usable, it must carry conviction (at least for me) that it is a plausible reconstruction based on the data before us."[4] What is true for an academic scholar is equally valid for a religious leader whose goal is to guide current and future Jews ever closer to the covenantal ideal of holiness.

Halakhah cannot be practiced alone. The covenant between God and Israel is collective. Even after the incident of the golden calf, Moses rejects God's offer to wipe out Israel and start afresh with him. Therefore, the collective responsibility of Israel for the covenant is enormous.

Tragically, the people of Israel has had persistent difficulties observing even the most fundamental tenets of the covenant, such as the prohibition of idolatry. Yet, flagrant violations of the covenant did not succeed in changing its terms. The people were ignored by God, chastised by the prophets and exiled, but they were always welcomed to return in repentance to God.

Thus it would be false to suggest that popular abandonment of the *mitzvot* has the capacity of changing the terms of the covenant. Judaism remains a collective enterprise growing out of three millennia of Torah and *mitzvot*, and stretching ahead toward the redemption. Individuals who abandon the practices and beliefs of Judaism do not have the capacity to alter God's covenant with Israel.

[1] *Halakhic rulings.*
[2] *The person making the halakhic ruling*
[3] *These relate to the legal position of the issue of illegal marriages.*
[4] *Daniel Boyarin,* **Carnal Israel**, *University of California Press, 1993 p.20.*

Nevertheless, it is evident that the collective understanding of holiness has significant theological and normative power:

- In ancient times, spoken prayer was devalued in comparison to animal sacrifice. Two millennia after the destruction of our Temple this "service of the heart" is understood as superior.
- In ancient times, gentiles were often viewed as the profane opposite of holy Israelites. Today we realize that other religious cultures can guide their best practitioners toward holiness, and that our own holy Torah can be distorted into a tool of intolerance and even violence. We balance humility towards other people with pride in our sacred tradition.
- In ancient times, Jewish men described the socially subservient status of women as religiously ordained and perhaps biologically determined. Today our collective understanding of holiness has clarified that the covenant includes men and women equally, and that all share equal dignity as creatures fashioned in the image of God.
- In ancient times, homosexual intimacy was understood to be an abomination—a direct attack upon the Torah's teaching of holiness. Today, Conservative *poskim* are struggling to understand the predicament of gay and lesbian people and to investigate how the Torah's lessons of holiness can govern their lives.

Popular practice cannot abrogate the tradition, but the collective Jewish judgment of how to become a holy nation can motivate *poskei halakhah* to interpret our tradition in novel ways that are not only usable, but are also challenging and conducive to a life of holiness.

When the Temple was destroyed, God's holy presence (Shekhinah) went into exile with the people of Israel. In every place where Judaism is practiced, God is present. Wherever the Torah is studied, God is present. In every kitchen where kashrut is kept, God is present. Every time that a person bends her will to the challenge of Torah, God is present. Every instance that a person expresses compassion for his neighbor, God is present. Our actions determine our access to the divine. This is the core of halakhic faith. God may not have a physical point of access in our world. But in the practice of halakhah, the Holy Blessed one of Israel is never absent.

תלמוד בבלי, בבא מציעא נט. ב

תנא: באותו היום השיב רבי אליעזר כל תשובות שבעולם ולא קיבלו הימנו. אמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי – חרוב זה יוכיח. נעקר חרוב ממקומו מאה אמה, ואמרי לה: ארבע מאות אמה: אמרו לו: אין מביאין ראיה מן החרוב. חזר ואמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי – אמת המים יוכיחו. חזרו אמת המים לאחוריהם. אמרו לו: אין מביאין ראיה מאמת המים. חזר ואמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי – כותלי בית המדרש יוכיחו. הטו כותלי בית המדרש ליפול. גער בהם רבי יהושע, אמר להם: אם תלמידי חכמים מנצחים זה את זה בהלכה – אתם מה טיבכם? לא נפלו מפני כבודו של רבי יהושע, ולא זקפו מפני כבודו של רבי אליעזר, ועדין מטין ועומדין. חזר ואמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי – מן השמים יוכיחו. יצאתה בת קול ואמרה: מה לכם אצל רבי אליעזר שהלכה כמותו בכל מקום! עמד רבי יהושע על רגליו ואמר: לא בשמים היא. – מאי (דברים ל׳) לא בשמים היא? – אמר רבי ירמיה: שכבר נתנה תורה מהר סיני, אין אנו משגיחין בבת קול, שכבר כתבת בהר סיני בתורה (שמות כ״ג) אחרי רבים להטת. – אשכחיה רבי נתן לאליהו, אמר ליה: מאי עביד קודשא בריך הוא בההיא שעתא? – אמר ליה: קא חייך ואמר נצחוני בני, נצחוני בני.

Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59b

It was taught: On that day [of the debate regarding the ritual purity of an oven] Rabbi Eliezer replied with every legal retort in the world, but they [the other rabbis] didn't accept his view. He said to them, "If the halakhah is according to my view, this carob tree will prove it" - the carob tree was uprooted from its place by one hundred cubits (some say, 400 cubits!). They replied to him, "You can't prove it with a carob tree!" He said to them, "If the halakhah is according to my view, this stream of water will prove it" - the water flowed backwards. They replied to him, "You can't prove it with a stream of water!" He retorted to them, "If the halakhah is according to my view, the walls of the study hall will prove it" - the study house walls started to cave in until Rabbi Yehoshuah rebuked them: "Scholars are arguing with each other—what is your part in this?" They didn't fall, out of respect for Rabbi Yehoshua, but they didn't straighten out from respect for Rabbi Eliezer, and they remain thus. [Rabbi Eliezer] came back and said, "If the halakhah is according to my view, from the heavens they will prove it!" A divine voice called out, "What's with you and Rabbi Eliezer? The law is always in accord with him!" Rabbi Yehoshuah got up on his feet and said, "It is not in heaven! [Deuteronomy 30]"

What "is not in heaven?" Rabbi Yirmiah says, since the Torah was already given at Mount Sinai, we no longer listen to heavenly voices, for it says, "to follow the majority. [Exodus 23]"

Rabbi Natan found Elijah and said to him, "What did the Holy One do at that moment?" He replied, "[God] laughed and said, "My children have beaten me, My children have beaten me!"

(Translation by Rabbi Nevins)

GOD IN HALAKHAH – TEXT 1

משנה אבות ג:ו

רַבִּי חֲלַפְתָּא בֶן דּוֹסָא אִישׁ כְּפַר חֲנַנְיָה אוֹמֵר, עֲשָׂרָה שֶׁיּוֹשְׁבִין וְעוֹסְקִין בַּתּוֹרָה, שְׁכִינָה שְׁרוּיָה בֵּינֵיהֶם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (תהלים פב), אֱלֹהִים נִצָּב בַּעֲדַת אֵל. וּמִנַּיִן אֲפִלּוּ חֲמִשָּׁה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (עמוס ט), וַאֲגֻדָּתוֹ עַל אֶרֶץ יְסָדָהּ. וּמִנַּיִן אֲפִלּוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (תהלים פב), בְּקֶרֶב אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט. וּמִנַּיִן אֲפִלּוּ שְׁנַיִם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (מלאכי ג), אָז נִדְבְּרוּ יִרְאֵי ה' אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ וַיַּקְשֵׁב ה' וַיִּשְׁמָע וְגוֹ'. וּמִנַּיִן אֲפִלּוּ אֶחָד, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שמות כ), בְּכָל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַזְכִּיר אֶת שְׁמִי אָבוֹא אֵלֶיךָ וּבֵרַכְתִּיךָ:

Mishnah Avot 3:6

Rabbi Halafta from the village of Chanania says: where ten sit together immersed in Torah study, the divine presence dwells in their midst, for it says: "God stands in the divine assembly (Psalms 82:1)." [1] How do we know that this is so even for only five? For it says: "He has founded His stairway[2] on earth (Amos 9:6)." How do we know that this is so even for only three? For it says: "In the midst of the judges[3] He will judge (Psalms 82:1)." How do we know that this is so even for only two? For it says: "Then those who revere the Lord spoke one to the other and the Lord listened and heard (Malachi 3:16)." How do we know that this is so even for only one? For it says: "In every place where I mention my name, I will come to you there and bless you (Exodus 20:21)."

(Translation by Rabbi Nevins)

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Look up the context of the quotations. What does it add?**
- **Why do you think God's presence dwells particularly in the process of study?**
- **Can God's presence dwell in a larger group than ten, do you think? Why/why not?**
- **Have you ever felt God's presence when you study Babylonian Talmud?**

[1] *"Adat" or "Eidah," translated here as assembly, is also understood by the sages to refer to a minyan of ten.*
[2] *"Agudah," meaning stairway can also refer to the bunch of five fingers in a hand.*
[3] *"Elohim" can mean God, gods, or human judges. The latter sense is used here: amidst human judges—at least two of them—God is also present.*

GOD IN HALAKHAH – TEXT 2

תלמוד בבלי, ברכות ח.א

אמר ליה רבא לרפרם בר פפא: לימא לן מר מהני מילי מעלייתא דאמרת משמיה דרב חסדא במילי דבי כנישתא! אמר ליה, הכי אמר רב חסדא: מאי דכתיב (תהלים פ"ז) אהב ה' שערי ציון מכל משכנות יעקב – אוהב ה' שערים המצויינים בהלכה יותר מבתי כנסיות ומבתי מדרשות. והיינו דאמר רבי חייא בר אמי משמיה דעולא: מיום שחרב בית המקדש אין לו להקדוש ברוך הוא בעולמו אלא ארבע אמות של הלכה בלבד. ואמר אביי: מריש הוה גריסנא בגו ביתא ומצלינא בבי כנישתא, כיון דשמענא להא דאמר רבי חייא בר אמי משמיה דעולא: מיום שחרב בית המקדש אין לו להקדוש ברוך הוא בעולמו אלא ארבע אמות של הלכה בלבד.

Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 8a

Rava said to Rafram bar Papa: Let the master tell us the beautiful words said in the name of Rav Hisda regarding the synagogue! He replied to him: Thus said Rav Hisda: Understand the verse, "The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob (Psalm 87)" to mean: the Lord loves gates which are distinguished[1] by [study of] halakhah more than all of the houses of worship or study. This agrees with that said by Rabbi Hiyya bar Ami in the name of Ulla: Since the day the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One has no place in His world save the four cubits of halakhah alone.

(Translation by Rabbi Nevins)

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What is the difference between halakhah and worship?**
- **What is the difference between halakhah and study?**
- **Why do you think Rav Hisda made the distinction he made?**
- **Is there any special significance to 'four cubits'?**

[1] *Mitzuyanim—playing on the similarity between Tzion (Zion) and mitzuyan (distinguished).*

GOD IN HALAKHAH – TEXT 3

תלמוד בבלי, שבת פח.א

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר, אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה – מוטב, ואם לאו – שם תהא קבורתכם. אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא. אמר רבא: אף על פי כן, הדור קבלוה בימי אחשורוש. דכתיב (אסתר ט) קימו וקבלו היהודים, קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר.

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a

AND THEY STOOD UNDER THE MOUNTAIN. R Abdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy Blessed One turned the mountain upside down over them like a barrel, and said to them, "If you accept the Torah, that is good: and if not, here is where you will be buried!"

R Aha ben Ya'akov observed: Doesn't this undermine the authority of Torah?!

Rava said: No – because the generation accepted it during the days of Ahasuerus, as it says, "They established and accepted [Esther 9:27]" – this means, they established what they had already accepted.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Why would the incident with the mountain undermine the authority of Torah?**
- **Look up the Esther reference. What does it add?**
- **Does Raba's argument persuade you? Why/why not?**
- **We looked at the beginning of this passage in the Midrash session. Does its continuation change your understanding of it? How?**

GOD IN HALAKHAH – TEXT 4

תלמוד בבלי, ברכות יט.ב

תא שמע: גדול כבוד הבריות שדוחה [את] לא תעשה שבתורה. ואמאי? לימא: אין חכמה ואין תבונה ואין עצה לנגד ה' – תרגמה רב בר שבא קמיה דרב כהנא בלאו (דברים י"ז) דלא תסור. אחיכו עליה: לאו דלא תסור דאורייתא היא אמר רב כהנא: גברא רבה אמר מילתא לא תחיכו עליה, כל מילי דרבנן אסמכינהו על לאו דלא תסור, ומשום כבודו שרו רבנן.

Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 19b

Come and hear [we have been taught]: Great is human dignity, since it can override a negative commandment from the Torah. Is that really so? Should we not rather say, "There is no wisdom, no understanding and no advice which can hold up against God [Proverbs 21:30]?"

Rav bar Shabba said before Rav Kahana that this teaching concerns [the principle] "You shall not deviate from what they tell you."[1] They laughed at him, and said: "And isn't the commandment 'you shall not deviate' also from the Torah?"[2] Rav Kahana said: "When a great man says something, you should not laugh at it. The word [authority] of the Rabbis is [indeed] based on the negative commandment 'You shall not deviate', but they allow their word to be waived for the sake of [human] dignity."

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **According to Rav bar Shabba, what limits might there be on Rabbinic authority?**
- **According to Rav Kahana, what might those limits be?**
- **Do their two views differ?**
- **What implications do the principles in this passage have for halakhah?**

[1] Deuteronomy 17:11. The full context is: 'You shall come to the Kohanim, the Levites and the judges who will be in those days; you shall ask, and they shall tell you the word of judgment. You shall do what they tell you…according to the Torah they teach you and the judgment they tell you, you shall do; you shall not deviate from the thing they tell you, neither to the right nor to the left.' The Rabbis saw these verses as the source of their authority to make legislation. It looks as though Rav Shabba might be saying that the principle of human dignity can override Rabbinic authority, since it derives from a negative commandment.

[2] In other words – overriding a Rabbinic prohibition is just the same as overriding one from Torah!

The Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

God in Medieval Jewish Philosophy

GOD IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

Rabbi Joel Rembaum, Ph.D.

Introduction

As Judaism transitioned from the Rabbinic period to the Middle Ages, it carried forward an unsystematic conceptualization of God. While legal traditions had to an extent been organized with the development of Mishnah, Tosefta and the Talmuds, no similar process had emerged with regard to the non-legal traditions of the Midrash. It remained atomistically grounded in individual Biblical passages and organized according to the order of Scripture rather than any human-designed rational structure. Consequently, God, as perceived by pre-medieval Sages, emerged as a multi-faceted Deity with contradictory attributes. Rabbinic Judaism was unwavering in its monotheism and its absolute rejection of the notion that there were multiple divine entities in heaven. However, it did recognize the existence of angels and other spiritual entities that mediated between God and the world. And, while the God of the Rabbis was not material and not pantheistic, Rabbinic Judaism did tolerate midrashic and mystical notions that depicted God in very anthropomorphic ways.

Over the course of the first two Muslim centuries (ca. 650-850) Islamic thinkers began to absorb and integrate into their religious ideology principles of Greco-Roman philosophy and science. In so doing, they also opened the door for the introduction of Classical ideas and systems into Jewish thought. As a "daughter" monotheistic faith, Islam demonstrated that classical philosophy (long ignored by the rabbis as an expression of pagan culture and, hence, taboo) could offer new insights into metaphysical concepts and demonstrate the reasonableness of Scripture and Jewish beliefs. And so pious Jews began to read and interpret the likes of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, and systematized and rationalized notions of God and God's relationship to the world emerged.

We will see that the work of these thinkers represents a new departure in the way that Jews thought about God. We may also find their work challenging. It is complex, elevated and technical in its tone. As we read these thinkers today we need to understand that they operated in a culture which was radically different from our own. In the Middle Ages, culture was organized around the community rather than the individual. Status, class, livelihood and belief were all externally defined. The idea of individual autonomy, which was to take hold after the Enlightenment, had not yet appeared. Philosophy, regarded as "the handmaiden of religion", was called into service to help prove that Judaism was rational and reasonable – an honorable and noble tradition, to be respected and admired. Philosophical terminology and ideas were wedded to previously multi-faceted or contradictory Jewish theology in order to make – or to attempt to make – a coherent whole.

With this in mind, we can look at four of the leading Jewish thinkers of the period. They wrote their philosophical works in Arabic, not only because it was the idiom of expression of their day, but also because Arabic provided them with the technical language and the formulation of concepts they needed to present their thinking.

Saadia ben Joseph – Kalam

Saadia ben Joseph (Sa'id ibn Yusuf or Sa'adya al-Fayyumi, 882-942) was born in the Fayyum district of Egypt. A rabbinic Renaissance man who contributed in a wide range of cultural areas (law, polemics, Bible translation and commentary, grammar and linguistics, poetry, liturgy and philosophy), Saadia served as Gaon of the great academy of Sura in Iraq. The impact of his work was felt over the centuries, and his philosophical magnum opus, *Kitab al-'amanat wal-i'tikadat* (*Sefer ha-emunot v'ha-deot* in Hebrew, *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*) served as a paradigm for subsequent generations of Jewish thinkers who sought to harmonize reason and revelation. Saadia's eclectic philosophy draws upon key elements of Greek thinking as filtered through Islamic Kalam theology, especially that of the Mutazilite

school with its emphasis on affirming the unity of God and divine justice. In this way, Saadia attempts to demonstrate the rationality of Judaism. It is commonly noted that he was the first Jewish thinker since Philo of Alexandria (1st century C.E.) to develop such a harmonization of Judaism and Classical philosophy. In the *Kitab* Saadia intersperses his logical inferences and reasoned conclusions with frequent references to the Bible, quoting more than 1300 passages, seeking thereby to also demonstrate the rationality of scripture.

Like the Mutazilites, Saadia argues that the fact the world was created from nothing (*ex nihilo*) proves the existence of God. God, he says, is the Creator of all things. As Creator He is one and has no associate with him. God is an eternal being and not subject to form, quality, dimension, limit, place or time. God is immune to pain, unaffected by action and not subject to accidents. God does no injustice. Why, Saadia asks, did God create the world in the first place? He had no motive, since, as opposed to people, he had no benefit by creating. Saadia responds: It was an act of free will on God's part, to reveal and make manifest His wisdom and to benefit his creatures so they could obey him and be rewarded.

Standing on the highest rung of the ladder of knowledge, the idea of the Creator is the most abstract notion, the subtlest of all things knowable and the most exalted. It is impossible fully to fathom God's character. What can be said is that God transcends the physical universe and has no body. He is one – living, omnipotent and omniscient – and nothing resembles him. Nor does he resemble any of his creations. The aforementioned three qualities – vitality, omnipotence and omniscience – are, in fact, not separate, as God cannot be said to have multiple attributes. God is absolute oneness. We are compelled to express this oneness by using multiple terms because of the inadequacy of human speech. Were God to have a multiplicity of qualities, He would be subject to change and mutation; but God is, by definition, not subject to such effects. Both reason and Scripture affirm these conclusions. And, any statement in Scripture that is contrary to sound reason is meant to be taken in a figurative sense and not literally.

Saadia observes the suffering that humans experience and addresses the age-old question: How could a just God allow this condition to exist? He suggests that God granted the human species gifts that no other species have: profound knowledge and free will. As a result of the gift of knowledge, humans can create things of beauty, establish societies and comprehend sublime truths. But this gift also gives God the right to subject people to commandments and prohibitions, rewards and punishments, which are also for their benefit because they induce them to "choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19) and "depart from evil" (Job 28:28).

Saadia recognizes that humans, because of their very physicality, are weak and suffer from a variety of ailments. He notes, however, that along with a frail body, humans have an amazing soul, which gives them the capacity to attain knowledge of things material and spiritual. But could not a just God have created them without their susceptibility to pain and suffering? On one level Saadia implies that this is the nature of existence, and people have to learn to cope. Saadia adds, however, that this is actually also to man's benefit, because by coming to an understanding of pain and its effects, a person will appreciate the meaning of God's punishments and will be motivated to follow God's commandments to avoid such punishments.

Continuing, Saadia asserts that God gave man the "power and ability to execute what He had commanded him and to refrain from what He had forbidden him," that is – free will. Because God is innately just, He refrains from intervening in human decision-making. God's foreknowledge of human decisions does not move Him to act on that knowledge. There is no compulsion on God's part; humans remain accountable for their choices. God does not revel in punishing the rebellious; rather, He prefers that people choose to follow his commands. In keeping with rabbinic doctrine, Saadia tells us that God welcomes penitent sinners and offers them and the righteous amazing rewards in the world to come and at the time of the resurrection.

GOD IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

Solomon Ibn Gabirol – Neo-Platonism

As the premier exponent of Jewish Neo-platonic philosophy in the Middle Ages, the Spaniard, Solomon Ibn Gabirol (c. 1020-1058), expressed his philosophy in both technical philosophical writing and in poetry, the writing of the latter being his major means of financial support. The summary of his philosophy that follows is culled from two of his major works. One is the *Yanbu al-hayat* ("Fountain of Life"), the Arabic original of which is lost. It is called *Fons vitae* in the 12th century Latin translation and *M'kor hayyim* in a 13th century Hebrew translation of selections from the book. Since the *Fons vitae* contains no references to the Bible or the large corpus of Rabbinic works, Jewish authorship of this book was unknown until it was identified as Ibn Gabirol's work in the mid-1840's. It did not circulate widely in Jewish circles; in its Latin form, however, it did influence European Christian thinkers, who assumed the author was a Christian.

The second work is Ibn Gabirol's Hebrew poetic magnum opus, *Keter malkhut* ("Royal Crown"), where we find Ibn Gabirol's Neo-Platonism cast in Jewish terms and merged with Biblical and Rabbinic ideas. As Gershom Scholem has noted in his *Origins of the Kabbalah*, through Ibn Gabirol's widely read *Keter malkhut*, his Neo-Platonism had an impact on Medieval Jewish thought, especially that of the 12th and 13th century Kabbalists of Southern France and Spain.

Neo-Platonism uniquely focuses on the question of how a single, infinite, indivisible spiritual God – the One or the "First Author," as the Creator is called in the *Fons vitae* – could bring into existence the multifaceted and finite material world in which we live. It posits that the Deity emanated an intermediate entity, which in turn emanated another intermediary and so on, until, finally, as a result of the activity of the last of a chain of emanated intermediaries, our material world came into existence. In this system each succeeding intermediary is further removed from the pure spirituality of God and approaches materiality.

For Ibn Gabirol God is the First Author, the sublime, perfect and holy origin of all beings, who is not caused and who, alone, created the world from nothing. There are intermediary substances between the First Author and the final effect, without which there could be no union between the First Author and the final effect, and absent that union the final effect would not exist.

The nature of God, who is the hidden power and secret foundation of existence, is ultimately unknowable. God is the sustainer of world, the source of light, eternally living, all being having been created from the shadow of His light. The power of God is in all beings and nothing can exist without Him. He dispenses the abundance he has with him, and He is the source that maintains, envelops, and comprehends everything that is.

God exists but cannot be grasped by physical senses or by rational inquiry, and the depth of His secret cannot be discovered. God exists and has existed from before time and with no place. The power of the holy God penetrates all things, exists in all things and acts in all things beyond time. The essence of the First Author is infinite, and it is, therefore, not united with any one of the simple finite substances.

God is God of gods and Lord of lords, ruling in heaven and on earth. God's unity is absolute, there being no distinction between His divinity and His oneness, His pre-existence and His existence – for all is one secret, the difference in the names of the attributes notwithstanding. The First Author is the true unity in whom there is no multiplicity. The First Author does not comprise anything, is not mingled with anything and is not conjoined to anything. There is no accident in the essence of the First Author. God is the unknowable One, whose oneness can be neither increased nor diminished nor counted nor changed nor imagined.

God is wise, and His wisdom, which is the source of life, flows from Him. Compared to His wisdom, all other wisdom is folly. God is wise and more ancient than all primal things. God acquired His wisdom from no other entity, and from His wisdom God, like an artist, emanated a ready will that was prepared to draw the extant out of nothingness, drawing it from the source of light with no vessel – hewing, cutting, cleansing and refining, splitting the nothingness and fixing the extant, and hammering out the world, setting forth the heavens and the spheres. The First Author, sublime and holy, knows all things and all things exist in His knowledge.

God is the highest light, visible to the pure souls but obscured by sin from the eyes of sinners. God is light that is hidden in this world but visible in the world on high. God is light eternal, for which the intellect yearns, though it can see only its extremities and not its totality.

Judah Halevi

Born in Tudela, Spain, Judah Halevi (1075-1141) was a practicing physician, a sometimes businessman, and with Ibn Gabirol, one of the most important of the medieval Hebrew poets and an exponent of rationalistic Jewish thought. He was a proto-Zionist ideologue, for whom the Land of Israel and Jerusalem had an almost mystical capacity to generate a spiritual connection between God and the Jewish people. In fact, his Zionism flows out of a melding of classical Jewish ideas with certain notions that are embedded in the Greek science he studied.

While considered by many to be a philosopher, it is hard to fit Halevi into any specific philosophical school. His influential *Kitab al-khazari* (*Sefer ha-kuzari* in Hebrew, *Book of the Khazar* or *The Kuzari*) is composed as a dialog between the King of the Khazars, who converts to Judaism, and a rabbi – a structure reminiscent of Plato's *Dialogs*. In it Halevi draws on elements of various systems to argue, among other points, that philosophy, an intellectual endeavor initiated by human beings, is not the true pathway to God, but rather revelation, initiated by God and received and responded to by prophetically inspired people, is. For Halevi God is not known – God is experienced.

This approach is in evidence at the very beginning of the *Kuzari*. As opposed to the philosopher, the Christian scholar and the Muslim scholar, whom the Khazar king first queries regarding proper religious behavior, the rabbi does not begin with a statement about the nature of God. Instead, he declares: "I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles…who sent Moses with his law and subsequently thousands of prophets…." The rabbi tells the king that 600,000 men standing at Mount Sinai witnessed God's revelation of Torah, and this is far more conclusive evidence of the truth of Judaism than are the arguments of the philosophers for the truth of philosophy. The latter disagree among themselves as to which system is correct; 600,000 witnesses do not.

True to the tradition of Jewish philosophy, however, Halevi has the rabbi explain to the king how one cannot read the Bible's anthropomorphic references to God and God's attributes literally. All names and qualities used in the Bible to refer to God, with the exception of the Tetragammaton (YHVH), are one of three varieties of metaphors: "creative," that allude to the results of how God acts in the world (e. g. merciful, just), "relative," that speak of God with reverence (blessed, glorified) or "negative," that negate their opposites (e. g. living, first). Such terms do not imply that there is any kind of plurality in God, in no way contradict the notion of God's unity and do not touch on the divine essence. The Tetragrammaton is associated with terms that refer to God as Creator, who creates without any natural intermediaries and does so by His will alone. We may, however, refer to God's intelligence, says the rabbi, because that is not an attribute: "He is the essence of intelligence, and intelligence itself." The philosophical language in this discussion is most evident.

God's influence on the world is universal, but it is expressed in a unique and powerful way with regard to the people whom God imbued with the spirit of prophecy, the Jewish people, especially in the Land of Israel where the People Israel can most perfectly express that spirit. Halevi calls this concentrated flow of divine influence *al-amr al-ilahi* (Hebrew: *ha-inyan ha-elohi*, the Divine Entity). The rabbi explains to the king that when one reads in the Bible of the blessings God bestows upon the Israelites in the Holy Land when they live according to the Torah, the instrumentality of that bestowal is this Entity. Similarly, when the Biblical prophets receive communication from God it is through the same means. And, says the rabbi, they can act as receivers of this spiritual transmission because they have a trace of the Divine Entity within them. Further, says the rabbi, when Israel is once again in its land, living according to Torah, with the Temple rebuilt and the sacrificial system in operation, the Divine Entity will be drawn toward it and the blessings from God set forth in Scripture will flow down upon the people once more. Herbert Davidson has demonstrated that in this presentation Halevi is actually giving a spiritual interpretation to an Aristotelian view of the operation of the Active Intellect in the earthly realm. Halevi is thus using a philosophical notion to make a distinctly non-philosophical point, a process that is typical of his methodology.

The superiority of the prophet over the philosopher is most profoundly expressed when the rabbi teaches the king that the philosophers, through reason and speculation, comprehend *Elohim* (God) as guide and manager of the world. The souls of the prophets, however, through intuition and the power of prophecy, are penetrated by God's light, and they experience *Adonai* (the Eternal). They come in contact with angelic beings and are imbued with a new spirit. "It is thus," he says, "that man becomes a servant, loving the object of his worship, and ready to perish for His sake, because he finds the sweetness of this attachment as great as the distress in absence thereof." With these words Halevi has, seemingly, crossed the line from philosophy into mysticism.

Moses ben Maimon – Aristotelian

Though not the first Jew to accept Aristotle as the primary voice of ancient Greek philosophy, Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides, Rabbeinu Moshe Ben Maimon – Rambam, 1135-1204), who was born in Spain, became the great Jewish interpreter of Aristotelian thought. But he was more than a philosopher who wrote a major book of philosophy. He was a rabbi who served a major Jewish community – to all intents and purposes he was the Chief Rabbi of Egypt. The Rambam earned his living as a physician who treated the Vizier to the *Khalif* of Egypt and wrote a number of medical treatises; he was a Jewish legal scholar who compiled a major law code, wrote a commentary to the Mishnah, and prepared numerous responsa and pastoral letters on Jewish legal and spiritual matters; he was an ethicist who prepared a significant tractatus on Aristotleian-Jewish ethics; and, in his younger years, he dabbled in logic and astronomy.

It can be said that Rambam's life's goal was to bring harmony to a world that he viewed as chaotic and beleaguered by evil forces that could rend Jewish society and prevent Jews from achieving a state of blessedness in this world and the next. Thus, in his Commentary to the Mishnah he sought to harmonize Rabbinic Judaism with principles of contemporary philosophy, thereby demonstrating that Rabbinic Judaism was, indeed, a rational tradition. In the introduction to his great law code, the *Mishneh Torah*, he tells the reader that the chaos of the time has resulted in a Jewish legal tradition that is so confused that Jews cannot find religious guidance and instruction. His carefully organized and beautifully written Hebrew code achieved its goal, even though it did not become the last word in Jewish law as its author had intended. And the *Dalalat al-ha'irin* (*Moreh nevukhim* in Hebrew, Guide of the Perplexed), his philosophical magnum opus, was written for the student of Torah and philosophy who was confused by the apparent contradictions between the two. Rambam attempted to show that, in essence, the Biblical Moses and Aristotle were expressing the same ideas – all of which had their origin in the mind of God, albeit expressed in different ways. The student of both systems, thus harmonized, would achieve the pinnacle of human existence – the bliss of profound understanding of God and of cleaving to Him.

In the first book of the Guide Rambam addresses the language of the Bible, where we frequently find God described in very stark human and physical terms. All this anthropomorphic terminology, he says, it to be interpreted figuratively. The Biblical authors wrote this way because their audience would otherwise have difficulty with the absolute abstraction of a disembodied deity. God is a purely simple essence, not comprising any attributes and not subject to accidents. Therefore, the only statements we can make about God that can be taken literally are those that describe the results of God's actions, which Rambam terms "attributes of action." So it is that we can say that God acts wisely, but be cannot say that God is wise or that God has wisdom, because then God's unity would be compromised. And, if we cannot literally describe what God is, we can state what He is not. We cannot say that God is powerful, but we can say that God is not weak. Thus, Rambam negates his predecessors, noted above, who defined "essential attributes," qualities that were not superadded to the Divine Essence but were integral to that essence. Following the lead of Aristotle, Rambam holds that logically "essential attributes" imply a compositeness to God's nature which would compromise the principle of God's absolute unity and oneness.

In Book 2 Rambam turns to the matter of God as creator of the world. According to Aristotle, God is the unmoved mover; that is, God is unaware of, uninvolved in and unmoved by any action beyond himself. This being the case, according to Aristotle, God is not a Creator, and the universe could not have been created. Rather, it has been eternally static, the way it is now. This is a big problem for people who believe in the religion of the Bible, beginning, as it does, with God's creation of the universe. And it is a problem for Rambam; not so much because of the language of Genesis, but because of the implications the idea of God as non-creator would have for the truth of Torah. Rambam argues that, in fact, Aristotle never claimed to have proved this point. Since he did not, we can accept the words of the prophets who tell us that God did create the world. The issue for Rambam is this: If God did not create the world because it is not in His nature to change how the world runs, then God, similarly would not have intervened in the goings on to reveal Torah to Israel. If God does not create, then, for the same reason, He does not reveal. Rambam says if Aristotle had indeed proven that the universe was eternal and there was no creation, then this proof "undercuts the law at its root". Rambam, however, argues forcibly that God did create the world and, by the same token, revealed the Torah to Moses.

With regard to another aspect of God's involvement in the world, however, we see another side of Rambam's theology that views God's direct intervention as being more limited than the Bible or the Midrash would have it. The notion of divine providence, through which God intervenes in events to save or provide wonderful blessings for people, is a fundamental belief of traditional Judaism. Yet, here Rambam is more circumspect, seemingly trying to project the Aristotelian notion of a disengaged God. In Book 3 of the Guide he tells us that God emanates power from his intellect down to the human realm. But he then informs us that it is up to the human intellect to grasp that emanation and apply it for human benefit. People with more developed intellect will derive greater benefit, and those with less intelligence will derive less. In this way God is removed from the actual realization of the providence, and God cannot be directly held accountable for what transpires on earth. At the end of the Guide, however, Rambam suddenly, and surprisingly, reverses himself and presents God as an accessible model for human emulation. He declares that once the person of intelligence has gained the profound insight into God that is the culmination of metaphysical speculation, he realizes that the dominant component of God's nature is compassion, and this is the attribute the philosopher should make his own.

Conclusion

As we have seen, these four thinkers express their ideas about God in a very technical way. Because they are philosophers their relationship with the texts of our tradition is very different from that of their predecessors; because they consider the texts to be holy and true, they are at pains to prove their truth and their continued validity for people of intelligence. As we read the work of Jewish medieval philosophers today the scope and significance of their endeavor becomes clear. Their attempt to wed Judaism to philosophy demonstrates the depth of their loyalty to their tradition and the fundamental truths it contains.

GOD IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY – TEXT 1

SAADIA

Sefer Ha-Emunot ve-Hadeot Treatise 2 Exordium

The data with which the sciences start out are concrete, whereas the objectives that they strive for are abstract. Also there is reached in the field of scientific research a last terminal beyond which no further knowledge is possible. Every station reached by a person in the advance in knowledge consists of necessity of ideas more abstract and subtle than the preceding, the last constituting the most abstract and subtle of all…ignorance, on the other hand, has no such source from which it is derived, being merely the absence of knowledge.

I mean the idea of the Creator, exalted and magnified, must of necessity be subtler than the subtlest and more recondite than the most recondite and more abstract than the most abstract and profounder than the most profound and stronger than the strongest and more exalted than the most exalted, so that it would be impossible to fathom its character at all.

Sefer Ha-Emunot ve-Hadeot Treatise 2 ch.10

Were we, in our effort to give an account of God, to make use only of expressions that are literally true, it would be necessary for us to desist from speaking of God, as one that hears and sees and pities and wills, to the point where there would be nothing left for us to affirm except the fact of God's existence.

Sefer Ha-Emunot ve-Hadeot Treatise 2 ch. 13

Now when a person has achieved the knowledge of this lofty subject by means of rational speculation and the proof of miracles and marvels, his soul believes it is true and it is mingled with his spirit and becomes an inmate of its innermost recesses. The result is then that, whenever the soul walks in its temple, it finds it…moreover, his soul becomes filled with completely sincere love for God, a love which is beyond all doubt…that servant of God will also grow accustomed to remembering God in the daytime while doing work and at night while lying on the bed…nay, it will almost speak – I mean, his spirit – lovesick at the recollection of God, out of longing and yearning…nay, more, the mention of God will nourish the soul more than fatty foods and God's name will quench its thirst better than the juiciest fruit…the result of this is that when God affords it pleasure, the soul is grateful, and if God causes it pain, it endures it patiently.

Put it into your soul and grasp it with your mind.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Who, or what, is God, according to Sa'adia's views here?**
- **Is there any merit in talking about God in human terms? If so – what?**
- **What do you think Sa'adia means by 'the soul walks in its temple'?**
- **Why is there a distinction between putting something in your soul and grasping it with your mind?**

GOD IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY – TEXT 2

שלמה אבן גבירול – כתר מלכות א,ב,ט

נִפְלָאִים מַעֲשֶׂיךָ וְנַפְשִׁי יוֹדַעַת מְאֹד :
לְךָ ה׳ הַגְּדוּלָּה וְהַגְּבוּרָה וְהַנֵּצַח וְהַהוֹד:
לְךָ ה׳ הַמַּמְלָכָה וְהַמִּתְנַשֵּׂא לְכָל לְרֹאשׁ וְהָעֹשֶׁר וְהַכָּבוֹד:
לְךָ בוֹרְאֵי מַעֲלָה וּמַטָּה יָעִידוּ כִּי הֵמָּה יֹאבְדוּ וְאַתָּה תַּעֲמֹד:
לְךָ הַגְּבוּרָה אֲשֶׁר בְּסוֹדָהּ גִּלְּאוּ רַעְיוֹנֵינוּ לַעֲמֹד.
כִּי עֻצְמָה מִמֶּנּוּ מְאֹד:
לְךָ חֶבְיוֹן הָעֹז הַפּוּד וְהַיְסוֹד:
לְךָ הַשֵּׂם הַנֶּעְלָם מִמְּתֵי חָכְמָה. וְהַכֹּחַ הַסּוֹבֵל הָעוֹלָם עַל בְּלִימָה.
וְהַיְכוֹלֶת לְהוֹצִיא לְאוֹר כָּל תַּעֲלוּמָה:
לְךָ הַחֶסֶד אֲשֶׁר גָּבַר עַל בְּרוּאֶיךָ. וְהַטּוֹב הַצָּפוּן לִירֵאֶיךָ:
לְךָ הַסּוֹדוֹת אֲשֶׁר לֹא יְכִילֵם שֵׂכֶל וְרַעְיוֹן.
וְהַחַיִּים אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁלַט עֲלֵיהֶם כְּלָיוֹן...

אַתָּה אֶחָד. רֹאשׁ כָּל מִנְיָן. וְיָסוֹד כָּל בִּנְיָן:
אַתָּה אֶחָד. וּבְסוֹד אַחְדוּתְךָ חָכְמֵי לֵב יִתְּמָהוּ.
כִּי לֹא יָדְעוּ מַה הוּא:
אַתָּה אֶחָד. וְאַחְדוּתְךָ לֹא יִגָּרַע וְלֹא יוֹסִיף.
לֹא יֶחְסַר וְלֹא יַעְדִּיף:
אַתָּה אֶחָד. וְלֹא כְּאֶחָד הַקָּנוּי וְהַמָּנוּי.
כִּי לֹא יַשִּׂיגְךָ רִבּוּי וְשִׁנּוּי. לֹא תֹאַר וְלֹא כִּנּוּי:
אַתָּה אֶחָד. וְלָשׁוּם לְךָ חֹק וּגְבוּל נִלְאָה הֶגְיוֹנִי...

אַתָּה חָכָם. וְהַחָכְמָה מְקוֹר חַיִּים מִמְּךָ נוֹבָעַת.
וְחָכְמָתְךָ נִבְעַר כָּל אָדָם מִדָּעַת:
אַתָּה חָכָם. וְקֶדֶם לְכָל קֶדְמוֹן. וְהַחָכְמָה הָיְתָה אֻצְלְךָ אָמוֹן:
אַתָּה חָכָם. וְלֹא לָמַדְתָּ מִבַּלְעֶדֶיךָ. וְלֹא קָנִיתָ חָכְמָה מִזּוּלָתֶךָ:
אַתָּה חָכָם וּמֵחָכְמָתְךָ אָצַלְתָּ חֵפֶץ מְזֻמָּן. כְּפֹעַל וְאֻמָּן:
לְמְשׁוֹךְ מֶשֶׁךְ הַיֵּשׁ מִן הָאַיִן. כְּהַמְשֵׁךְ הָאוֹר הַיּוֹצֵא מִן הָעַיִן:
וְשָׂאַב מִמְּקוֹר הָאוֹר מִבְּלִי דְּלִי. וּפָעַל הַכֹּל בְּלִי כֶּלִי:
וְחָצַב וְחָקַק. וְטִהַר וְזָקַק:
וְקָרָא אֶל הָאַיִן וְנִבְקַע. וְאֶל הַיֵּשׁ וְנִתְקַע. וְאֶל הָעוֹלָם וְנִרְקַע.
וְתִכֵּן שְׁחָקִים בַּזֶּרֶת. וְיָדוֹ אֹהֶל הַגַּלְגַּלִּים מְחֻבֶּרֶת.
וּבְלֶלְאוֹת הַיְכוֹלֶת יְרִיעוֹת הַבְּרִיאוֹת קוֹשֶׁרֶת.
וְכֹחָהּ נוֹגַעַת עַד שְׁפַת הַבְּרִיאָה הַשְּׁפָלָה הַחִיצוֹנָה
הַיְרִיעָה הַקְּיצוֹנָה בַּמַּחְבֶּרֶת:

Solomon Ibn Gabirol - The Royal Crown (from stanzas 1, 2 and 9)

Mysterious are Thy works, my soul well knows:
Thine, Lord, is majesty, all pomp and power,
Kingship whose splendor yet more splendid grows
O'ertopping all in glory and wealth's dower.
To Thee celestial creatures, and the seed
Of earth-sprung kind concede
They all must perish, Thou alone remain,
The secret of Whose strength doth quite exceed
Our thought, as Thou transcendest our frail plane.
All might is thine, swathed in a mystic shawl
The fundament of all:
Hid from philosophers thy name: of Thee
That force which poised the universe on nought;
Thou canst bare secrets, in the searchlight caught,
Thy love prevails, for all thy creatures free.
Thine, too, that goodness in so rich a hoard
For them that fear Thee stored.
Wonders are thine no mind may comprehend,
And life for which decay shall ne'er decree the end…

Thy Name is One – of all the primes the Prime,
Base of all algebraic argument,
A Unity beyond account, sublime,
That leaves the schoolmen lost in wonderment:
Uniquity, that neither wanes nor grows,
No plus, no defect knows:
Oneness not gained from accident, nor told,
On which no change, no factor may impose
Nor attribute, nor surrogate; to hold
In logic's bounds that Oneness strict defined
Eludes my wearied mind….

Wise art Thou – aye, from Thee doth wisdom flow
A fount of life: that wisdom which is thine
The mind of brutish man can never know,
A wisdom, demiurge of thy design
Or e'er prime matter was, delighting Thee
Primeval equally;
Wisdom no master taught Thee, not acquired….
No tool nor vessel had that master-mind
Yet dredged it from light's source, shaped, cleaned, refined,
Called non-being to fissiparous spawn,
Bade substance fix itself, bade cosmos stand
Congealed, of heaven's tracts the measure spanned,
And laced, with powerful loops, a tent for spheres,
To charge the lowest hem, for each to each adheres.

(Translation by Raphael Loewe)

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Who, or what, is God, according to Ibn Gabirol's views here?**
- **Why might it be significant that God's name is 'hid from philosophers'?**
- **How does Ibn Gabirol perceive the process of creation?**
- **How might humans relate to God, in this scheme?**

GOD IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY – TEXT 3

ספר הכוזרי מאמר ראשון י–כה

אחר כך קרא לחבם מחכמי היהודים ושאל אותו על אמונתו.

אמר לו החבר: אנחנו מאמינים באלהי אברהם יצחק ויעקב המוציא את בני ישראל ממצרים באותות ובמופתים ובניסים, והמכלכלם במדבר, והמנחילם את ארץ כנען, אחר אשר העבירם את הים והירדן במופתים גדולים, ושלח משה בתורתו, ואחר כך כמה אלפי נביאים אחריו מזהירים על תורתו, מעידים בגמול הטוב לשומרה, ועונש הקשה לממרה אותה. ואנחנו מאמינים בכל מה שכתוב בתורה, והדברים ארוכים...תן לי להקדים לך הקדמות כי אני רואה דברי כבדים עליך ונקלים בעיניך...אילו היו אומרים לך כי מלך הודו איש חסד ראוי לרוממו ולתת כבוד לשמו ולספר מעשיו במח שיגיע אליך מצדק אנשי ארצו ומדותם הטובות, ושמשאם ומתנם באמונה, ההיית חיב בזה?

אמר הכוזרי: ואיך הייתי חייב בו, ואני מסופק אם צדק אנשי הודו מעצמם ואין להם מלך, או צדקתם מחמת מלכם, או משני הפנים יחד?

אמר החבר: ואם היו באים אליך שלוחיו בתשורות הודיות, אינך מסתפק שאינם נמצאים אלא בארץ הודו בארמנות המלכים, בכתב מפורסם שהוא מאתו, ועמו רפואות שהן רפואות אותך מחליך, ושומרות עליך בריאותך, וסמי המות לשאוניך והנלחמים בך, שאתה יוצא להם בהם וממית אותם מבלי כלי מלחמה, היית חייב להיות סר אל משמעותו ואל עבודתו?

אמר הכוזרי: כן הוא, והיה הספק הראשון סר ממני אם יש לאנשי הודו מלך אם לא, והייתי אז מאמין שמלכותו ודברו נוגעים אלי...

אמר החבר:..וכן פתח משה לדבר עם פרעה כשאמר לו אלהי העברים שלחני אליך, ר״ל אלהי אברהם יצחק ויעקב מפני שהיה אברהם מפורסם אצל האומות, וכי התחבר אליהם דבר האלהים והנהיג אותם ועשה להם נפלאות, ולא אמר אלהי השמים והארץ שלחני אליך, ולא בוראי ובוראך. וכן פתח אלהים דבריו אל המון ישראל: ״אנכי ה׳ אלהיך אשר הוצתיך מארץ מצרים״ ולא אמר ״אני בורא העולם ובוראכם״. וכן פתחתי לך מלך הכוזרי כאשר שאלתני אל אמונתי, השיבותיך מה שאני חייב בו וחייבין בו כל קהל ישראל, אשר התברר אצלם המעמד ההוא בראות עיניהם, ואחר כן התקבלה הנמשכת שהיא כמארה העין.

JUDAH HALEVI - THE KUZARI I: 10-25 (HEBREW TRANSLATION: JUDAH IBN TIBBON)

He [the Kuzari] then invited one of the wise men of Israel [a Rabbi] and asked him what he believed. The Rabbi replied: We believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who brought the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles; who fed them in the desert and gave them the land of Canaan as an inheritance after taking them across the sea and the Jordan by way of great miracles, who [first] sent Moses with his Torah, and then thousands of prophets after him advising how to observe his Torah, testifying to its good reward for those who observe it and the dire punishment for those who pervert it. And we believe in everything written in the Torah, which is of considerable length… Allow me to set out some preliminary matters, for I can see that my words hang heavy upon you, and yet you deem them light….if you were told that the king of India was an upright man, deserving of your admiration and respect, and you heard that his people were righteous and proper and correct in their business dealings, would that bind you to respect him? The Kuzari said: How could I be bound to respect him without knowing whether the righteousness of the Indian people is their own, or due to their king, or both? The Rabbi replied: But if his messengers came to you with gifts which you know can only be obtained in India from the royal palace, and accompanied by a letter stating they are from him, along with drugs which cure your illnesses, and preserve your health, and deathly poisons for your enemies which enable you to kill them without any weapon, would this make you beholden to him? The Kuzari said: Certainly, for now I would stop doubting that the Indian people have a king, and I would believe that his kingship and his word affect me... The Rabbi said…This is the same way that Moses spoke to Pharaoh when he said, "The God of the Hebrews has sent me to you" – that is, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For Abraham was well known among the nations, who knew that the Divine Spirit was in contact with the Patriarchs, and that God led them and their families, and performed miracles for them. Moses did not say, "The God of heaven and earth sent me to you," nor did he say, "Your Creator and mine sent me." And in the same way, God spoke to the assembled masses of Israel: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" and did not say, "I am the Creator of the world and your Creator also." And I spoke to you in the same way, O King of the Khazars, when you asked me about my belief. I answered you in the way I am bound to do, which is the same way as the community of Israel is bound to do; for their belief stems from personal experience of what they saw, and after that, through an uninterrupted chain of tradition which is equivalent to that experience.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Who, or what, is God, according to Halevi's views here?**
- **Do you consider the first paragraph to be a summary of Judaism? Why/why not?**
- **Why do you think the Rabbi uses the imagery of the King of India?**
- **Do you think the 'uninterrupted chain of tradition' still continues today? Why/why not?**

GOD IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY – TEXT 4

רמב"ם, משנה תורה, הלכות יסודי התורה א–ו

א יסוד היסודות ועמוד החכמות לידע שיש שם מצוי ראשון, והוא ממציא כל נמצא, וכל הנמצאים משמים וארץ ומה שביניהם לא נמצאו אלא מאמתת המצאו.

ב ואם יעלה על הדעת שהוא אינו מצוי אין דבר אחר יכול להמצאות.

ג ואם יעלה על הדעת שאין כל הנמצאים מלבדו מצויים הוא לבדו יהיה מצוי, ולא יבטל הוא לבטולם, שכל הנמצאים צריכין לו והוא ברוך הוא אינו צריך להם ולא לאחד מהם, לפיכך אין אמתתו כאמתת אחד מהם.

ד הוא שהנביא אומר וה' אלהים אמת, הוא לבדו האמת ואין לאחר אמת כאמתתו, והוא שהתורה אומרת אין עוד מלבדו, כלומר אין שם מצוי אמת מלבדו

כמותו.

ה המצוי הזה הוא אלהי העולם אדון כל הארץ, והוא המנהיג הגלגל בכח שאין לו קץ ותכלית, בכח שאין לו הפסק, שהגלגל סובב תמיד ואי אפשר שיסוב בלא מסבב, והוא ברוך הוא המסבב אותו בלא יד ובלא גוף.

ו וידיעת דבר זה מצות עשה שנאמר אנכי ה' אלהיך, וכל המעלה על דעתו

שיש שם אלוה אחר חוץ מזה, עובר בלא תעשה שנאמר לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני, וכופר בעיקר שזהו העיקר הגדול שהכל תלוי בו.

Rambam - Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah 1-6

The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to be aware of the fact that there is a First Existent, who brought all existence into being. And everything that exists – heaven and earth and everything in between – only came into existence because of the actuality of His being.

Should one imagine that He does not exist – nothing else would be capable of existing.

Should one imagine that everything which exists ceased to exist except for Him – He would continue to exist, and the end of their existence would not mean the end of His. For everything that exists has need of Him, but He has no need of them, not a single one of them. Hence, his actuality is not like the actuality of any of them.

This is what the prophet [Jeremiah 10:10] means when he says, "Adonai, God, is truth" – He alone is truth [that is, He has actuality], and no other being has truth [actuality] like His. And this is what the Torah means when it says, "There is no other except Him" – that is, there is nothing which possesses true existence either like Him, or except Him.

That Existent is the God of all eternity, the master of the world. He imparts motion to the sphere with a power that has no end and no finitude, a power which is unceasing, for the sphere constantly revolves, and it would be impossible for it to do so if there were no power to impart motion to it; and He, Blessed be He, is that power, moving it with neither hand nor body.

And it is a positive commandment to be aware of this – as it says: "I am the Lord your God [Exodus 20:2]" - and anyone who imagines there is any other God apart from Him transgresses a negative commandment, as it says: "You shall have no other gods before Me [Exodus 20:3]" and [in addition] denies a fundamental principle, since this is the great principle on which everything else depends.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Who, or what, is God, according to Rambam's view here?**
- **Why do you think Rambam brings the concept of truth [actuality] into the discussion?**
- **Why do you think it is a positive commandment to be aware of God?**
- **Can one love the God Rambam portrays in this text? How?**

[1] *The Hebrew word Rambam uses is 'emet', which we understand today as meaning 'truth'. It had something of this sense in medieval Hebrew also, but the word 'actuality' is closer to what Rambam would have meant. The root meaning underlying the word is 'steadiness'.*

GOD IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

יִגְדַּל אֱלֹהִים חַי וְיִשְׁתַּבַּח, נִמְצָא, וְאֵין עֵת אֶל מְצִיאוּתוֹ.
אֶחָד וְאֵין יָחִיד כְּיִחוּדוֹ, נֶעְלָם, וְגַם אֵין סוֹף לְאַחְדוּתוֹ.
אֵין לוֹ דְּמוּת הַגּוּף וְאֵינוֹ גוּף, לֹא נַעֲרוֹךְ אֵלָיו קְדֻשָּׁתוֹ.
קַדְמוֹן לְכָל דָּבָר אֲשֶׁר נִבְרָא, רִאשׁוֹן וְאֵין רֵאשִׁית לְרֵאשִׁיתוֹ.
הִנּוֹ אָדוֹן עוֹלָם לְכָל נוֹצָר, יוֹרֶה גְּדֻלָּתוֹ וּמַלְכוּתוֹ.
שֶׁפַע נְבוּאָתוֹ נָתַנוֹ, אֶל אַנְשֵׁי סְגֻלָּתוֹ וְתִפְאַרְתּוֹ.
לֹא קָם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה עוֹד, נָבִיא וּמַבִּיט אֶת תְּמוּנָתוֹ.
תּוֹרַת אֱמֶת נָתַן לְעַמּוֹ אֵל, עַל יַד נְבִיאוֹ נֶאֱמַן בֵּיתוֹ.
לֹא יַחֲלִיף הָאֵל וְלֹא יָמִיר דָּתוֹ, לְעוֹלָמִים, לְזוּלָתוֹ.
צוֹפֶה וְיוֹדֵעַ סְתָרֵינוּ, מַבִּיט לְסוֹף דָּבָר בְּקַדְמָתוֹ.
גּוֹמֵל לְאִישׁ חֶסֶד כְּמִפְעָלוֹ, נוֹתֵן לָרָשָׁע רָע כִּרְשָׁעָתוֹ.
יִשְׁלַח לְקֵץ הַיָּמִין מְשִׁיחֵנוּ, לִפְדוֹת מְחַכֵּי קֵץ יְשׁוּעָתוֹ.
מֵתִים יְחַיֶּה אֵל בְּרֹב חַסְדּוֹ, בָּרוּךְ עֲדֵי עַד שֵׁם תְּהִלָּתוֹ.

YIGDAL

Exalted and praised be the living God;
He exists, and His existence is timeless.
He is One and there is no unity like his -
- He is mysterious, and His oneness infinite.
He has nothing resembling a body, and no physical substance;
His holiness is unique.
He was there before anything He created;
He is the First, though he had no beginning.
See, He is the Master of the world;
To every created thing he shows his greatness and his majesty.
He gave the flow of prophecy
to the people whom he treasured, who are his glory.
There has never arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses,
who saw his very likeness.
God gave a Torah of truth to His people
by way of the faithful prophet of his household.
God will not change, nor will he exchange his law
for any other one, forever and ever.
He sees and knows our secrets:
He sees the outcome of a thing at its outset.
He rewards the kind and loving man according to his deeds;
He brings upon the wicked man evil corresponding to his own.
At the end of days he will send the Messiah
to redeem the ones who wait faithfully for his deliverance.
God will revive the dead in his abundant lovingkindness;
Blessed is his glorious name for all eternity.

The Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

God in Hassidut

GOD IN HASSIDUT

Reb Mimi Feigelson

Introduction

Leit atar panuy minei u-melo kol ha'aretz k'vodo.

These two statements, which mean, "There is no place vacant from Him"[1] and "The whole world is filled with His glory" provide a starting point for observing how God reveals Himself and functions within Hassidic thought. This God is an immanent God, a God who dwells within the world and is always present and accessible to all.

It is impossible to speak of the Hassidic conception of God without taking into consideration the divine tradition Hassidism inherited from its predecessors, particularly from kabbalah. To ignore that inheritance would be like talking about a person without taking into consideration that they were born into a particular family and underwent a particular upbringing and education. The dictum of *Massechet Avot* (Ethics of our Fathers), "Know where you come from and where are you going to" pertains to the realm of thought just as much as to the life of any individual - even if the place one is "going to" may turn out to be dramatically different from the place of origin. This is particularly true of the relationship between Hassidut and the Lurianic kabbalah created by Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (the "Ari") in sixteenth-century Tzfat.

In the Lurianic understanding of creation a catastrophe occurred in the Divine realm – one which manifested in the shattering of the divine vessels that contained God's light. This lead to the falling of the shards of these vessels, which subsequently actualized in the material/physical world we experience today. The residue of the light that the shards held is our means of experiencing the Divine in this world. For the Lurianic mystic, creation was a disaster that needs to be set right, and hence the mission of one's life is to elevate these shards back to their supernal source. The completion of such a mission would lead to the obliteration of the physical world and the restoration of the primordial Divine universe.

Yet the Hassidic God has a very different account of the events of creation. The teachings of the founder of the Hassidic movement, Rabbi Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov (known as the Besht)[2] as evolved in the Beit Midrash of his student and successor, the Maggid of Mezritch[3] present a God yearning for revelation and relationship. For this God, the "shattering of the vessels" was not a regrettable mistake, but, rather, an intentional act. The fracture which took place at creation was deliberately intended by the Divine, in order to enable His manifestation. The broken shards, which are embedded in the core of all that is visible to the human eye, are both the source of the immanent God and the means to encounter the Divine in every aspect of the human experience.

The ramifications of this reinterpretation are multi-faceted and inform the very foundations of Hassidic thought. In this essay we will focus on some specific areas in which the Hassidic God reveals himself differently to the way which was previously perceived.

Abandonment of the "neutral zone"

The Rabbinic tradition divides our lives between the religious/devotional and the mundane. In fact, the reality is three-fold – there is a realm of *mitzvah* (whether a negative or positive commandment) and a realm of *aveirah* (all transgressions). Between these two is a 'neutral zone' – all that which is neither an explicit mitzvah nor an explicit aveirah. In the pre-Hassidic world it was clear that God actively resided in the first tier, was impartial to the middle one, and was removed from the third.

[1] *In this essay, God will be referred to using the masculine singular pronoun. However, this should not stand in the way of our shared understanding that God transcends gender definitions.*
[2] *The acronym 'Besht' means 'Master of the Good Name'. The Besht lived from 1700-1760.*
[3] *Rabbi Dov Ber, d. 1772, also known as Ha-Maggid Ha-Gadol – The Great Preacher.*

In the fourth chapter of his pivotal work, the *Tanya*, Reb Shneur Zalman of Liadi[4] likens the observance of mitzvot to hugging a king. The only way a king can reveal himself to the masses is by virtue of leaving his palace completely garmented. But it is clear to all that when a person hugs the king, their interest is not in the king's garments, nor even in the king's body. Their arms may sense the fabric of the king's robes, or even perceive the king's heartbeat, but it is really the essence of the king, rather than the king's physical body, that the person wants to touch.

Reb Shneur Zalman would ask of us no less when addressing the mitzvot. The mitzvot are the King's garments, the means by which God reveals Himself to us. They are necessary in order for us to be able to embrace the Almighty. We are asked to embrace the King, while never letting go of the vision that it is the King's essence, cloaked by the garments/mitzvot, which we actually yearn for. Hence, we adhere to the mitzvot while continuing to aspire to ascend to that which surpasses the boundaries of the human experience. For the God of the Hassidim, then, the mitzvot are a temporary necessity brought about by the limitations of the human condition.

We could challenge this interpretation by asking Reb Shneur Zalman about the King's intimate relationships. There will be those who will only see the king in formal garb, but some will see him in informal attire as well. His queen and his personal servant may even see him naked. I believe we could present to Reb Shneur Zalman the possibility of the servant of God, perhaps the mystic, aspiring to encounter the King beyond the veil of garments/mitzvot. Cleaving to the King (*d'vekut*) and the union of the King and Queen (*yichud*) could be perceived as transcending the realm of mitzvah.

Another re-formulation of the 'neutral zone' is found in the teachings of Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev[5] in his monumental work, the *Kedushat Levi*. He states that according to the halakhah, a sefer Torah (Torah scroll), must be complete in order to be able to fulfill the obligation of reading from a sefer Torah. There can be no words missing, not even a letter or part of a letter. Reb Levi Yitzchak asks, why is it if two letters are stuck together the Torah scroll is also rendered incomplete?

He answers by explaining that there is the Torah of the black letters and the Torah of the white spaces. Currently we live a reality dictated by the Torah of the black letters, but time will come when we will actually read and live the Torah of the white spaces. If two letters are stuck together though, that Torah is incomplete! Yes, we should adhere to the Torah of the black letters, but simultaneously we have an obligation to maintain the integrity and wholeness of the Torah of the white spaces. By doing so, and by not crowding the words, letters or spaces, we hold on to the vision of the time to come. While there are those who choose to limit their current religious life to the Torah of the black letters, Reb Levi Yitzchak would beg of you to embrace the Torah of the white letters as well.

We are now able to see another reading which sanctifies that which is perceived as "other" – neither mitzvah nor aveirah. If God resides in all, there is no space that is vacant of His presence. It follows, then, that God is present in all three realms simultaneously and equally! This might be understood to mean that there is no difference between the three realms, which could be perceived as an invitation to enter into the realm of sin. Nonetheless, the Hassidic movement *has* maintained its adherence to halakhah throughout the generations. Perhaps this is why Reb Shneur Zalman did not take the next step posed to him by our challenge. Instead, the Hassidic movement used this understanding as a means to sanctify things which have no apparent halakhic status rather than abandoning the halakhic endeavor.

The abandonment of the neutral zone – the gap between mitzvah and aveirah - operates to transform everyday living itself into a religious act based on one axiom – the power of the human mind and intention. God is available and present in any moment. The Besht is quoted as saying, "A person is where their mind is." Therefore if a person's consciousness is aligned to being in the presence of God, indeed that moment is transformed into a holy moment!

[4] *The founder of Chabad. He died in 1812.*
[5] *d. 1809. Reb Levi Yitzchak allows us to observe the fusion of a Hassidic master (a non-geographic charismatic leader) and a local rabbi (a geographic rabbinic leader). He will at times embrace halakhic paradigms to embrace spiritual questions.*
[6] *The Seer of Lublin , known as the 'Chozeh'. He died in 1815.*

Democratization

This principle also lends itself to the notion of democratization. God is no longer the inheritance of the learned, pious and scholarly. Rather, since God dwells equally in all, God belongs equally *to* all. The center of religious life shifts out of the Bet Midrash – particularly, away from the pages of the traditional Jewish texts – and is placed instead with the masses who go to work every day and engage in the mundane. God becomes a partner in *all* human actions, no longer in only the designated religious ones. God no longer exclusively dwells in the midst of the Torah scholars. It is in the stories of the wood-choppers, the water-carriers and the social outcasts who are engaged in unknown acts of lovingkindness (*hesed*) that our new heroes are created. They are now the ones who befriend the Almighty and represent His will on earth.

Miracles

The God of the Hassidim also challenges us to address the realm of miracles. In Martin Buber's novel 'Gog and Magog' he describes how in the courtyard of the Rebbe of Lublin[6] miracles would roll under the table! The world does not progress in a linear manner. Nor, for that matter, does reality. Time is not linear. God, as manifested in the Hassidic teachings, is not limited to what the eye can see or the mind can perceive. Our consciousness is what on the one hand determines the scope of our experience of the Divine. Nonetheless, it does not limit the possibilities of the Divine to reveal Himself in the world. God has a will that needs to be actualized in the world. It is our choice whether or not to align ourselves with it.

A personal God

For the majority of the Hassidic Masters, God is a personal God. He has an individual and unique will in regard to each and every individual. Every person was planted in the world to fulfill a specific mission. In the same manner that God has multiple names and each one of these names is a prism in which God reveals Himself, we would have to say that every person is a manifestation of God, embodying a uniqueness which cannot in any way be replicated. One might ask, "Is this a mission that is affixed from the moment of conception?" and would have to answer, "Yes, this is what I was sent into the world to do." One might ask, "Can one's mission change throughout their lifetime?" and for that, too, one could answer "Yes".

I have heard (following the Hassidic tradition, in which teachings were transmitted orally long before they were printed) a Hassidic teaching from my Teacher and Rebbe, in the name of the Komarno Rebbe[7]. The Komarno Rebbe is known for his mystical and Kabbalistic teachings. He left us with 16 books, among them a commentary on the Zohar and a journal of his mystical dreams. He asks, 'Why is it that it is so hard for people to know what it is that they were sent to the world to do?'

To this he replies:

> "It is taught that at Mount Sinai there were 600,000 core souls. As history unraveled, chips of these core souls descended into the world. In the past every Jew's soul was a chip of one of these core souls. It used to be that the soul of each separate individual would be constituted from a single chip, and their soul would be required to actualize one single mission in the world. As we progress towards the end of time, souls are sent down into the world as configurations of multiple 'soul-splinters', no longer one distinguishable chip.[8]"

[7] *Yitzhak Isaac Safrin of Komarno. He died in 1874.*
[8] *Note that he does not read the verse as being about 600,000 males over the age of twenty, which is its literal meaning in Torah.*

This would explain why some people are drawn simultaneously in multiple directions, each seemingly a viable Divine-oriented calling. It may be that in different chapters of our life different "soul-splinters" will take prevalence and dictate our daily life and decisions. Our life choices will continuously be perceived as Godly, though, if they are a representation of our aspiration to serve the Divine.

Darkness

There is one more realm where the God of the Hassidim is often perceived to reside – the realm of the Darkness. This is often described in terms of *Mitzrayim* ("Egypt"), as a metaphor for a contracted consciousness.

For a moment we need to return to our Lurianic heritage. According to the Kabbalah of the Ari, in order for the world to be created God had to vacate Himself from Himself in order to create a "*chalal panuy*" (a vacant space) so that Creation could occur. The Hassidic masters have understood this model in two different ways. The first says that the world was originally all God, and He vacated Himself into Himself, hence creating a space where He was not. Into that space, a world manifested.[9] This is my understanding of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov's[10] reading of creation.

Rabbi Nachman's reading suggests a deep theological depression and darkness. If God created the world in a space that He vacated of Himself this means that our primordial memory of God is one of absence! Rebbe Nachman is continuously wrestling with a paradox: his desire is to encounter a Divine entity that needs to remove Himself in order to reveal Himself! For Rebbe Nachman, darkness, absence and abandonment are true states, preconditions of human reality in the world.

If we wish to embrace this paradigm, we need to remember that the darkness and abandonment are precisely the states which ultimately enable God to manifest in the world. They are enabling factors of a greater good. An interesting metaphor to make this paradigm more concrete is to think of a dance. The dynamic of an ecstatic dance is that there is a moment where both feet are in mid air, a moment that creates a vacant space between the dancer and the dance floor. In that moment, the void is what defines the dance. In this understanding of the 'chalal panuy', then, God danced the world into existence.

An alternative reading that has been posed in Hassidic teachings talks of God retracting Himself into Himself until the point of manifestation. The realm of 'supernal ideas' descends gradually from the most ethereal until it finally manifests as something concrete[11]. When embracing this reading we witness a reality in which we return to the phrases with which I opened this essay: *Leit atar panuy minei* and *melo kol ha'aretz k'vodo* – "There is no place vacant from Him" and "The whole world is filled with His glory". God is in all places and there is nowhere, anywhere, which is void of the Divine presence. We are called upon to maximize our intellectual capacities when attempting to embrace God, even as we experience our sense of absentness. For God is never absent.

A Hassidic voice that articulates this condition of experiencing darkness, absence and abandonment in multiple sites throughout his teachings is Reb Menachem Nachum.[12] In the *Ma'or Einayim* ("Light of the Eyes"), which is a compilation of his teachings, primarily teachings about the Torah portions but also on sections of the Talmud, he adopts phraseology such as "Ya'akov" (versus "Yisrael") and "Mitzrayim" (versus "Eretz Yisrael") to suggest a state of contracted consciousness, a state in which an individual no longer feels the presence of God or can see the value of their uniqueness.

Reb Menachem Nachum's teachings hark back to the notion of *nefila* ("falling") which is an intrinsic part of the Lurianic understanding of creation. However, instead of the Divine shards falling into this world in order to enable God to reveal Himself, he understands the "falling" to refer to the lapse of a person's state of God-consciousness. In this moment of darkness, when we do not experience God's presence, what can we hold on to?

[9] This interpretation lends itself to a more Aristotelian understanding of creation, in which the leaps between pairs of "form" and "matter" create vacant spaces and therefore gaps in the presence of God.
[10] 1772 – 1810. He was the great –grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov.
[11] This is similar to the Neoplatonic understanding of creation
[12] Reb Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, also known as the 'Chernobler Rebbe', 1730 – 1797.

There are two pegs that Reb Menachem Nachum offers us to hang on in these moments. The first is to have faith in the notion of *Leit atar panuy minei u-melo kol ha'aretz k'vodo*. No matter where a person is, no matter how far and distant they feel from God, God is there. Not only is God there but in the deepest depths of darkness only God can rescue us. Paradoxically it is in this most devastating state of being that one can experience the ultimate connection with God.

The second peg avails itself to us in less critical conditions. Here, Reb Menachem Nachum teaches us that there are moments that we 'fall out of grace,' so to speak, not for any mishap on our behalf but in assistance of someone else. Over and over again Reb Menachem Nachum teaches that at times we find ourselves in locations that are so foreign to us that we cannot begin to imagine why we are there. The feeling of foreignness can be geographic, psychological, intellectual or spiritual. Reb Menachem Nachum will tell us that there are Divine sparks which fell at the moment of creation which are waiting there for us to lift them up. He teaches, using a similar understanding to that of the soul clusters that we encountered in the Komarno Rebbe's teaching above, that the sparks are connected to our soul-root. This being so, we are the only ones who can descend to raise them up. In this reading our descent, which challenges us, is in fact harnessing us in the service of the Almighty, and in our falling we are doing holy work.

Conclusion

It is important to remember that the Hassidic movement, with its plethora of masters and teachers, communities and traditions, shares the truth *B'chol d'rachecah da'ehu* – "in all your ways you are to know Him."[13] All ways are legitimate and eligible for encountering and serving God. Hassidism is not monolithic in its practice, theology or perception of the Divine. However, the movement shares a fundamental truth – the belief that cleaving to God is not only the labor of the mystic but the gift of every single yearning individual.

As told in the name of multiple Hassidic Masters, God - not only the Hassidic God, but God, as God - dwells wherever we allow Him to dwell.

Ashrei yoshvei bey'techa! – Blessed are all those that dwell in your Home.

[13] *Proverbs 3:6*

GOD IN HASSIDUT – TEXT 1

מאור עיניים פרשת יתרו

והנה צריך האדם שגם בנפלו ממדריגתו יתאמץ לעלות אל ה׳ באותו מדריגה שהוא עכשיו כי צריך להאמין שמלא כל הארץ כבודו ולית אתר פנוי מיניה ואפילו במדרינגה שהוא עכשיו יש גם כן השם יתברך כי לית אחר פנוי מיניה רק שהוא מצומצם מאוד וזהו (תהלים קי״ג, ג׳) ממזרח שמש עד מבואו וגו׳ שהצדיק נקרא שמש כמאמר עד שלא שקעה שמשו של עלי זרחה שמשו של שמואל וכו׳ הרי שהצדיק נקרא שמש וזהו ממזרח שמש דהיינו שהמוח שלו בהיר וזך ודבוק בהשם יתברך עד מבואו דהיינו כשמסתלק הבהירות ונפל ממדריגתו ולעולם צריך להיות מהולל שם ה׳ ולהתאמין לעלות אל השם יתברך באותו מדריגה שהוא עכשיו:

...ובמה יבוא להשם יתברך כשנפל ממדריגתו שהרי ניטל ממנו המוחין והדעת אף שהשם יתברך הוא מלא כל הארץ כבודו דהיינו אפילו במקום שהוא כל הארץ שכולו ארציות שהוא רק חומר עב אף על פי כן מלא כבודו יתברך והנה השם יתברך נקרא חיי החיים דהיינו שכל החיים שבעולם בהמות חיות ועופות ומין האדם החיות שלהם הוא השם יתברך וזהו חי החיים שהוא יתברך החיות של כל החיים ויחשוב כשנפל ממדרגתו הלא חי אני ומי הוא החיות שלי הלא הבורא יתברך ונמצא יש כאן גם כן הוא יתברך אך שהוא מצומצם מאוד:

Ma'or Einayim, Commentary on parashat Yitro

So, even when a person falls from their level[1], they must nonetheless strive to ascend to Hashem from whatever level they are now at. Because one must believe that *the whole earth is full of His glory and there is no place vacant from him*. Whatever the level at which a person currently finds themselves, Hashem's strength (may He be blessed) is there, since *there is no place vacant from him*; it is just that He is very much condensed [*metzumtzam*]. This is what it means when it says [Psalm 103:3] 'From the rising of the sun until its setting' – the *tzaddik*[2] is called the sun, since his mind is clear and pure, clinging to Hashem (may He be blessed) until its setting – that is, when the clarity disappears and he falls from his position. Yet he must strive to make God's name praised, and make every effort to ascend to Hashem (may his name be blessed) from the level at which he now finds himself…

…and with what can a person come to Hashem (may he be blessed) when he has fallen from his level? Because his consciousness and knowledge will have been taken from him. But *the whole earth is full of His glory* – and so Hashem (may he be blessed) – which means, even in a place which is the whole earth – all earthliness, merely crude matter – even so, it is *full of His glory*. And Hashem (may He be blessed) is called the 'Life of all Life' – that is, He (may He be blessed) is the life force of all the life in the world. He is the life force of wild beasts, and animals, and birds, and the human species. Their life force *is* Hashem. And this is the 'Life of all Life' – that Hashem (may he be blessed) is the life force of all life. Hence when a person falls from their level, they can think: Indeed, I am alive! And who is my life force? Is it not Hashem (may He be blessed)? And so he will find that even here [at the level where he is], there *is* Hashem (may He be blessed) – it is just that He is very much condensed.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What is to be learned from falling, according to the Ma'or Einayim?**
- **Can a tzaddik also fall? How?**
- **What should a person do when they have fallen? How?**
- **What does the Ma'or Einayim mean by saying 'God is their life force'?**

[1] The Hebrew word here is madrega, which also means 'a step' (in a series of stairs) or 'stage', or 'state'.

[2] Note that for the Ma'or Einayim a tzaddik is anyone who chooses to live a life of devotion – not necessarily a great Hassidic master or scholar (which is what the term comes to mean later in Hassidut)

GOD IN HASSIDUT – TEXT 2

מאור עיניים פרשת יתרו

והטעם למה צריך ליפול ממדרגתו הוא כך דהנה יש נשמות נפולים יש שנפלו משׁשׁת ימי בראשׁית ויש שנופלים בכל דור ודור ומתגלגלים והם נע ונד ואינם יכולים לבוא אל השׁם יתברך כי אין להם במה לבוא שבחיים חיותם עסקו בהבלי עולם הזה ולא עשׂו כלום וכשהצדיק נופל ממדריגתו ואחר כך קם כמאמר (משׁלי כ״ד, ט״ז) שׁבע יפול צדיק וקם וכשׁקם ועולה אל השׁם יתברך מעלה עמו אותם נשׁמות הנ״ל והנה אינו יכול להעלות אלא אותן נשׁמות שׁהם משׁרשׁו ולכן צריך כל אדם ליפול ממדריגתו כדי להעלות נשׁמות שׁהם משׁרשׁו והבן:

Ma'or Einayim, Commentary on parashat Yitro

And the reason a person must fall from their level is as follows: there are fallen souls. Some have been falling since the six days of Creation; others fall in every generation and are reincarnated – they wander about and are unable to come to Hashem (may He be blessed). They have nothing to enable them to do so, since during their lives they squandered their essence on the vanities of this world and achieved nothing. Yet when a *tzaddik*[1] falls from his position and after that rises up again (as it says [Proverbs 24:16] "A *tzaddik* can fall seven times and rise up") – when he rises up again and ascends to Hashem (may He be blessed), he raises up with him those [fallen] souls. Note, though, that he can only raise up those souls which belong to his soul root[2]. This why every person must fall from his position – so as to raise up the souls from his soul root. And understand this!

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **How does this passage explain the difficult moments in our lives?**
- **What does this passage say about the shared responsibility we have for each other?**
- **What is the role of the tzaddik?**
- **Who has been a tzaddik in your life and picked up your fallen soul?**

[1] Note that for the Ma'or Einayim a tzaddik is anyone who chooses to live a life of devotion – not necessarily a great Hassidic master or scholar (which is what the term comes to mean later in Hassidut).

[2] According to some mystical traditions there were 600,000 "soul roots" which stood at Sinai. Every person is a manifestation of one facet of a "soul root". Therefore we each have not only a biological family but a 'soul root' family.

GOD IN HASSIDUT – TEXT 3

קדושת לוי פרשת וישלח

ויאמר לא יעקב יאמר עוד שמך כי אם ישראל כי שרית עם אלהים ואנשים ותוכל. הענין, כי יש אדם שהוא דבוק תמיד בהבורא ברוך הוא אפילו כשהוא מדבר עם בני אדם ויש אדם שהוא דבוק בהבורא ברוך הוא בעת שעוסק בעבודתו ובתורתו ובמצותיו אבל כשמדבר עם בני אדם אינו יכול לדבק מחשבתו להבורא ברוך הוא והבחינה הא' נקרא ישראל, כי הוא אותיות ישר אל וגם לי ראש והבחינה הב' נקרא יעקב יו"ד עקב. וזהו לא יעקב וכו', כי אם ישראל כי שרית עם אלהים, כלומר שאתה דבוק באלהים אפילו כשאתה מדבר עם בני אדם וזהו עם אלהים ואנשים, ותוכל לדבק מחשבתך תמיד להבורא יתברך:

KEDUSHAT LEVI, COMMENTARY ON PARASHAT VA-YISHLACH

"And he said: thy name shall be called no more Ya'akov, but Yisrael, for thou hast contended with God and with men, and hast prevailed'. [Genesis 32:29] The point being made here is that there are people who are constantly cleaving to the Creator, blessed be He, even when they are talking to other people; and there are people who are cleaving to the Creator, blessed be He, when engaged in His service and His Torah and His *mitzvot*, but when they speak with people, they are unable to cleave their thoughts to the Creator, blessed be he. And one level is called "Yisrael", for it is the letters of "*Li Rosh*" [my head], and the second level is called Ya'akov "*Yud Ekev*" [yud, the heel]. And this is "no more Ya'akov but Yisrael, for thou hast contended with God" – meaning, that you are cleaving to God even when you speak with other people. And this is "with God and with men and hast prevailed", to cleave your thoughts always to the Creator, blessed be He.

(Translation by Reb Mimi Feigelson)

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **According to this passage, what are the two different ways of being connected to God?**
- **Which is better? Why?**
- **What, according to this passage, do Jacob's two names mean?**
- **How does this challenge us in our everyday lives?**

GOD IN HASSIDUT – TEXT 4

תניא פרק ד'

כך התורה ירדה ממקום כבודה שהיא רצונו וחכמתו יתברך ואורייתא וקודשא בריך הוא כולא חד ולית מחשבה תפיסא ביה כלל. ומשם נסעה וירדה בסתר המדרגות ממדרגה למדרגה בהשתלשלות העולמות עד שנתלבשה בדברים גשמיים ועניני עולם הזה שהן רוב מצות התורה ככולם והלכותיהן ובצרופי אותיות גשמיות בדיו על הספר ארבעה עשרים וארבעה ספרים שבתורה נביאים וכתובים כדי שתהא כל מחשבה תפיסא בהן ואפי' בחי' דבור ומעשה שלמטה ממדרגת מחשבה תפיסא בהן ומתלבשת בהן.

ומאחר שהתורה ומצותיה מלבישים כל עשר בחי' הנפש וכל תרי"ג אבריה מראשה ועד רגלה הרי כולה צרורה בצרור החיים את ה' ממש ואור ה' ממש מקיפה ומלבישה מראשה ועד רגלה כמ"ש צורי אחסה בו וכתיב בצנה רצון תעטרנו שהוא רצונו וחכמתו יתברך המלובשים בתורתו ומצותיה..

ומתלבשת בהקב"ה ממש דאורייתא וקב"ה כולא חד. ואף שהתורה נתלבשה בדברים תחתונים גשמיים הרי זה כמחבק את המלך ד"מ שאין הפרש במעלת התקרבותו ודביקותו במלך בין מחבקו כשהוא לבוש לבוש אחד בין שהוא לבוש כמה לבושים מאחר שגוף המלך בתוכם. וכן אם המלך מחבקו בזרועו גם שהיא מלובשת תוך מלבושיו כמ"ש וימינו תחבקני שהיא התורה שנתנה מימין..

From the Tanya (chapter 4)

And so the Torah came down from the place of her glory at the will and wisdom of the Holy One, Blessed be He. And the Torah and the Holy One, Blessed be He, comprise one entity, which human thought is incapable of grasping. But from there, she journeyed through the 'secret places of the stairs'[1], from level to level, through the interconnected chain of the worlds until she became arrayed in material things and worldly matters – the mitzvot of the Torah, and the laws relating to them, and the combinations of actual letters written with ink on a scroll [which became] the twenty-four books of the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings, so that human thought could grasp them. Even speech and action, which are on a lower level than human thought, are capable of grasping her and being clothed in her.

And since the Torah and her commandments clothe the ten qualities of the human soul and all of its 613 organs, from head to foot, the whole soul becomes truly 'bound up in the bundle of life' with Hashem, and Hashem's light envelops it and clothes it from head to foot – as it says, 'My rock, in whom I shelter'…

Torah is truly dressed in Hashem, since Torah and the Holy One, Blessed be He, are one and the same. For although the Torah is clothed in lower, material things, it is as if one was embracing a king – that is, it makes no difference to the closeness and intimacy with the king whether the king is wearing one robe or many robes during the embrace - it is still the king who is inside them. And it is the same if the king embraces a person, whether his arm is clothed with garments or not, as it says 'his right hand embraces me' – that is the Torah, which was given from God's right hand…

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **According to Reb Shneur Zalman (the author), why did the Torah descend?**
- **What, according to him, is the purpose of the mitzvot?**
- **Torah is one of the 'king's' robes – do you think there are others? What are they?**
- **Has there been a time when you felt yourself embraced by, or embracing, God?**

[1] *A quotation from the Song of Songs (2:14) – the word for 'stairs' in Hebrew is "madrega" and is translated here as 'level'. It can also mean 'stage' or 'state'.*

GOD IN HASSIDUT – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

The *Bat Ayin,* R' Avraham Dov of Avritch, was one of the Hassidic leadership who made aliyah to Israel in 1777. One day a stranger entered his *Chazter* [courtyard] in the city of Tzfat and the Rebbe, R' Avraham ran to greet him. The Hassidim couldn't hear what they spoke of, but as soon as the stranger left, the Rebbe returned to his study and did not emerge for three weeks. The Hassidim were puzzled – who was that person, what did he and the Rebbe discuss, and why did the Rebbe lock himself in his study for three weeks? Their puzzlement grew when the Rebbe finally emerged and commanded his Hassidim to prepare the most amazing *Tish* [a Rebbe's table].

The Hassidim did as they were told. They ate and drank and sang and danced. But the whole time, all they really wanted to know was - who was the stranger? What did he and the Rebbe discuss? Why did the Rebbe lock himself in his room for three weeks and why he finally emerged from his study?

At last one of the Hassidim mustered up the courage to ask the Rebbe "WHY???"

The Rebbe silenced the song and dance and began: "Many years ago, while still in Avritch, I would always sit for hours with anyone that came from Eretz Yisrael. I would question them about the Holy Land and what it was like to live there. One day a *Shaliach D'rabbanan* (a charity collector) showed up and we talked endlessly. When he stood to leave I begged him, "Please, tell me more!" He said to me, "I've told you everything." But I insisted, "Tell me more!" He said to me, "What more can I tell you. When you stand at *Ma'arat Hamachpelah* [the cave of Machpelah] along with the Patriarchs and Matriarchs you will know." And he turned to leave. I begged of him, "Please, tell me more!" He said, "What more can I tell you? When you stand at *Kever Rachel* [Rachel's tomb] and cry with her, you will know." And again he turned to leave. I continued to beg, "Please, tell me more!" He said, "I've told you all I can. When you get there you will see for yourself, even the stones are precious stones. Even the stones are made of emeralds and rubies and diamonds!" And with this he left.

"So you see," the Rebbe turned to his Hassidim, "when I arrived, everything was exactly as he said it would be. Everything… but the stones… they were regular stones, they weren't precious stones at all! I could never understand why he lied to me. Why the last thing he told me was not true.

"Three weeks ago, he walked into the *Chatzer* and despite the passage of 20 years, I recognized him immediately. I ran to him and said, "Everything you told me was true, but the stones! Why did you lie to me? Why did you tell me they were precious stones when they are not?! He looked at me and said with dismay and surprise: "What? They're not?"

"So I locked myself in my study and I began to cry. Every day I would cry and look out at the stones. Today, finally, while looking out of the window I realized that every stone was precious. Every stone was an emerald or a ruby or a diamond!"

The Avritcher Rebbe had to cry in order to transform his sight. And you? Will the transformation happen through joy? Through prayer? Through dance? Through learning? What will it take for you to sign yourself in the Book of Life?

The Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

God in Modern Jewish Thought

GOD IN MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT

Rabbi Elliot Dorff, Ph.D.

Our Conceptions of Reality

This essay will describe a number of modern Jewish conceptions of God. Most of us, even those of us who assert a belief in God, are not used to thinking about God very much.

Moreover, people who believe in God mean many different things by the word "God," and they differ even more widely in the role that that belief plays in their lives and what it means in terms of their actions. Conversely, people who deny belief in God mean to state many different things in describing themselves that way, and their denial may be a pervasive part of their lives - they fight belief in God as often as they can and with as many people as they can - or it may be just a minor aspect of their lives.

This is all very confusing. After all, if people mean very different things by the word "God," they presumably mean very different things by asserting or denying belief in God. Furthermore, the kind of evidence we would look for to convince us of their belief or denial depends crucially on what they mean to assert or deny in the first place. One can legitimately wonder whether people actually share anything when they speak about God or whether God-talk is a series of people using their own private languages, languages that can only be understood and assessed by others if they have the patience to ask each person many questions about what they mean by "God" and why they believe whatever they assert about God.

Actually, though, the situation, while complex and maybe even confusing, is not as hopeless as these musings may make it seem. That becomes evident when we think first not about God, but rather about human beings, a much more familiar subject. We do not need to delve into the many complicated issues about how we know ourselves and others – questions addressed by philosophers and psychologists – but a few easily understood aspects of our knowledge of other human beings will help us understand various thinkers' conceptions of God and how they try to justify them.

For ease of reference, I will use myself as one example of a human being. Here is a list of just some of the ways people think of me:

1. To my parents, I am their son.
2. To my wife, I am her husband.
3. To my children, I am their father.
4. To my grandchildren, I am their grandfather.
5. To my friends, I am their friend.
6. To my students, I am their teacher.
7. To the other members of the American Jewish University faculty, I am a colleague.
8. To the members of the Board of Directors of Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles, I am a Past President and current fellow Board member.
9. To the organizers of this project, I am a participant.
10. To the readers of this essay, I am an author.

And so on, and so on.

My point is simply that although I am just one person, people have very different conceptions of me based on their varying interactions with me. Some may know about a few aspects of me that are not obvious from their own experience with me. My students, for example, may know that I have a wife, children, and grandchildren because I sometimes talk about them in class or because they see photographs of them on my desk when they come into my office. They may even have been curious enough to check the university's website to find out more about me than is evident in class. Major aspects of my life, though, are just not part of their picture of me. (I remember being absolutely shocked when I saw my ninth-grade science teacher outside the classroom in a shopping mall. Without thinking about it, I just presumed that he lived all his life at school!)

Moreover, nobody's conception of me is complete. The people closest to me – my wife and children – have, to be sure, a fuller and richer (philosophers call that a "more adequate") conception of me than my students do, for my wife and children have interacted with me far more than my students have, and they have done so in many different settings. Even so, my wife and children do not know most of my colleagues at work or in the volunteer activities that I do, and I happen to know that they have read precious little of what I have written. That is not a fault of theirs; they are just interested in different things than the ones I have chosen to write about. For that matter, as experts in psychology will tell you, I do not have a full conception of myself either. Therapy would expand my self-knowledge, but even then it would be partial, for I can never fully know what is in my subconscious. Furthermore, I can never fully know what positive or negative impact I have had on others.

Another point to note is that the grounds for believing a particular conception of me depend crucially on what the conception is. So, for example, if someone who does not know my family wants to discover whether I was actively involved in my children's upbringing as a father, interviewing my adult children would be an obviously relevant source of information, while talking to one of my college students now, who was not even born at the time my wife and I were raising our children, is not. Even the testimony of my children has to be evaluated for its probity, for they may be more generous or more critical in what they say than what an objective observer at the time – if there were one – would say is warranted. Furthermore, as any family therapist will tell you, the four of them may well remember events differently and/or may feel very differently about how I fared as a father. So all the usual rules of evidence, including identifying relevant and trustworthy information and evaluating whatever one learns for its biases, apply to any conception of a person.

One last point will be helpful for our discussion of modern Jewish conceptions of God. Because we have the faculty of memory, our pictures of other human beings can often remain the same long after we lose track of them. That is clearly true for my memory of many of my friends and students in years past and, I presume, it is equally true of their memories of me, unless we happen to see each other years later. If, however, we are still interacting with each other, it is probably important to adjust our images of each other so that our current interactions reflect the new realities. That is clearly the case with parents and children: as children mature, parents need to change their image of them and their expectations of them, or there will be trouble! My point here, then, is that sometimes it is very important to update one's former image of a person in order to reflect the changed circumstances of our relationship.

The implications of this human analogy are hopefully clear. If we have multiple conceptions of human beings, where, after all, one can point to one physical body as the person in question, how much the more will that be true of God, where no such physical body exists. Furthermore, if various people can and do have multiple and widely varying conceptions of a person, all the more should that be true of God, who presumably is open to interaction with everyone. In fact, in light of the number of people who profess a belief in God, it is amazing that there are not vastly more conceptions of God than there are.

The relevant and trustworthy sources of evidence for any one of those conceptions will depend on the particular description of God, just as it does with human beings. If God is defined as "the Creator of the universe," for example, the evidence depends on theories of astrophysics. Questions like these are then relevant: Did the world come into being at a given moment, or has it existed eternally? What evidence is relevant to deciding that question – or is the answer to that question completely beyond human capability to know? If, for the sake of argument, physicists find grounds to believe in the Big Bang, is that equivalent to a belief in God as the Creator? On the other hand, if God is portrayed as a powerful and loving, covenantal partner with the People Israel, as most Jewish sources do, what kinds of evidence can and should we look for to make belief in such a divine Partner reasonable? However we answer that question, the nature of the evidence will clearly be different from what we need to demonstrate a divine creative force.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need to be willing to reconsider our images of God in the past - and especially those of our childhood - in light of our more mature thinking and our added experiences as adults. God may

have been "the Man on the Mountain with the flowing white beard" when we were seven or eight, but that will not do for seriously religious and intellectually alive adults – any more than second- or- third-grade mathematics or English skills will suffice for an adult.

Because by most definitions God is not limited or physical, and because many conceptions of God assert that God is infinite and inherently mysterious, it will be no surprise that no conception of God will be totally adequate to our experience. In fact, we would expect conceptions of God to be less adequate than any of our conceptions of a human being. That is certainly true for the varying modern Jewish conceptions of God that we are about to consider. Nevertheless, they are proposed by people who are uniformly intelligent, spiritually aware, and religiously and intellectually serious. So even if every one of these depictions of God leaves some questions unanswered and some things to be desired, they will hopefully stimulate readers to reconsider and reevaluate their own understandings of God and perhaps even to alter them for the time being – until yet further considerations and experiences motivate readers to change them yet again in the ongoing wrestling with God that is serious religious faith.

Because this essay is intended to be an overview of modern Jewish conceptions of God, in what follows I will briefly describe the basic approach of a number of modern Jewish thinkers; I make no pretensions to covering all modern Jewish conceptions of God nor to describing the ones I do discuss in full. I am also not evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each theory. Readers interested in following up on any or all of these thinkers can read more in the books I list in the bibliography at the end of this book. This overview, though, will hopefully give readers a taste of at least some of the major modern Jewish approaches to God so that readers can decide how they want to carry their own exploration of this topic further.

Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983): God as the Power that Makes for Salvation

Mordecai Kaplan is arguably the twentieth-century Jewish thinker that set the agenda for all others engaged in modern Jewish thought, for he took modernity seriously and thus challenged all who would disagree with him to show how their competing views could be reasonably held in the modern world of scientific advances and religious freedom. He maintains that traditional views of God as a Person who chooses and commands the People Israel are simply the product of the ancients' anthropomorphisms. Moderns need to get beyond these human depictions of God to the demonstrable experiences that motivated them, for it is only those experiences that a modern, scientific person can ground in empirical data.

Using our everyday experiences, he defines God as "the power that makes for salvation," that is, the forces within nature and our own human experiences that actualize potential in both nature and people. "Salvation" here does not mean saving from sin, as Christians think that Jesus does; it rather means saving from the limitations and frustrations of life – from illness, poverty, ignorance, immorality, prejudice, etc. So God is the force that transforms the acorn into the oak tree, a bad baseball player into a good one, and an immoral person into a moral one. God is also the natural force that created the universe in the first place and enables it to continue functioning.

Because God is a force of nature and not a person, God cannot command anything. Kaplan therefore understands Judaism's moral laws as norms built into nature and thus presumably incumbent on all human beings. Judaism's ritual commandments he interprets as "folkways" that are critically important for a people's sense of self-identity and therefore should be taught, practiced, and creatively enhanced. They should not, however, be seen as laws to be enforced, for modern societies do not legally require people to identify with any religion, much less to practice a given religion in a particular way. Moreover, because the whole point of folkways is to give people a positive sense of their identity, enforcement would be counterproductive.

Richard Rubenstein (1924-): God after the Holocaust

Another thinker who depicts God as the forces of nature is Richard Rubenstein. Kaplan, though, depicts God in very positive terms: God is identified with those forces in nature that enable us to actualize potential for good. He almost totally ignores the existence of evil in our lives, except as a factor to be overcome. Rubenstein, in sharp contrast, roots his view of God in the Holocaust, a manifestation of evil if there ever was one. He maintains that the fact that God did not intervene to prevent the slaughter of millions of innocents finally and indubitably proves that the traditional Jewish notion of a God who intervenes in history is false. The only part of the traditional God we can still legitimately believe in is the God of nature, but that God is not necessarily benevolent. On the contrary, the communities and rites of Judaism are important not so much to celebrate happy events, but to enable us to cower together and gain strength from one another as we cope with the tragedies in life, tragedies like illness, earthquakes, hurricanes, etc.

Although I will not be describing other "post-Holocaust theologies", there are many theological responses to the Holocaust, including some that reaffirm a very traditional depiction of God. Rubenstein, however, was the first and arguably the most radical Jewish theologian to grapple with the Holocaust as part of his understanding of God. Readers interested in other approaches to God after the Holocaust should consult the Dorff and Newman anthology listed in the bibliography.

Harold Kushner (1935-) and Harold Schulweis (1925-): God as the Good

Kushner and Schulweis, like Rubenstein and unlike Kaplan, are keenly aware of the problem of evil. Schulweis is particularly focused on the Holocaust, as is Rubenstein, while Kushner is motivated by personal tragedies, like the premature death of his son. Unlike Rubenstein, however, and very much in tune with Kaplan's spirit, both Kushner and Schulweis locate God in the efforts to overcome evil and to create good. Schulweis takes this furthest by asserting that God should no longer be thought of as a noun, but rather a predicate: acts are godly, and we should speak of godliness rather than a being called God. Even Schulweis, however, uses the term "God" in his later writings, differentiating Elohim, the God of nature, from Adonai, the personal God of care and goodness.

Martin Buber (1878-1965): God as My Partner in Dialogue

Buber's view of God is virtually the polar opposite of Kaplan's and Rubenstein's. God, for Buber, is highly personal. He famously distinguishes between two kinds of relationships that we have with other human beings, with animals, and even with trees. In "I-It" relationships, the I uses the It. For example, if I hire someone to paint my house, I use him to get my house painted, and he uses me to earn a living. There is nothing wrong with such relationships; in fact, life would be impossible without them. However, if that is the only kind of relationship that we have with other human beings, we have lost what is distinctly human in us – namely, the ability to relate to others for the sake of the relationship itself. He calls this "I-Thou" relationships. All human "I-Thou" relationships (e.g., parents-children, spouses, friends) inevitably include some I-It elements in them. The only absolutely pure I-Thou relationship that humans can have, Buber maintains, is with God. People might *try* to use God to obtain some goal of theirs, but they will never succeed, for God cannot be used. The only authentic relationships we can have with God is of the I-Thou sort. We learn to have such relationships through the I-Thou encounters we have with other human beings ("Every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou") and through reading the ways in which other people had true encounters with God, especially the accounts of the biblical Prophets and the Hassidim, and Buber therefore writes extensively on both of those Jewish groups.

Emanuel Levinas (1906-1995): God as the Source of Moral Duty

A view of God very close to Buber's is that of Emanuel Levinas, a French Jewish post-modern Jewish philosopher. Like Buber, Levinas sees God as a Person whom we encounter. Unlike Buber, however, Levinas maintains that every time we encounter any other human person or God, the very presence of the other imposes on us infinite responsibility for the other. Thus the I-Thou relationship, which for Buber is always in flux and therefore can never be shaped by fixed legal requirements, is for Levinas the very source of duties – indeed, infinite duties – to both other humans and to God.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972): God as Wholly Other

God, according to Heschel, can be encountered in three ways: through nature, through God's word in the Bible, and, most importantly, through sacred deeds. While Kaplan concentrated on the creative forces of nature to find and identify God, Heschel instead focuses on the sublime, the mystery and the glory of nature and the reactions that those aspects of nature engender in us – namely, wonder, awe, and faith. The sublime is "that which we see and are unable to convey" (*God in Search of Man*, p. 39); it produces in us a response of wonder – "Wow!" The mystery to which Heschel refers is not what we do not yet know, which would lead to inquiry; it rather is the surprise that anything exists at all, which engenders in us a sense of awe or radical amazement – "Oh!" The glory is "the presence, not the essence, of God; an act rather than a quality; a process, not a substance." It is the experience of God's abundance of goodness and truth, which produce in us a response of faith – "Yes!"

"God is more immediately found in the Bible as well as in acts of kindness and worship than in the mountains and forests" (*ibid.*, pp. 311-312). But Heschel is anything but a fundamentalist: "The surest way of misunderstanding revelation is to take it literally" (*ibid.*, pp. 178-179). Instead, one must one must see the Bible as the record of human beings being overwhelmed by God and trying to describe their admittedly inadequate understanding of such experiences in their own words: "As a report about revelation, the Bible itself is a *midrash* [interpretation]" (*ibid.*, p. 185). Revelation is therefore an ongoing process, in which the Bible gives each of us a clue of God's meaning for our lives each time we study it.

Finally, the most effective way to find God, according to Heschel, is through obeying the commandments and through worship. Piety is a primary way to attain faith: "A Jew is asked to take a *leap of action* rather than *a leap of thought*" (*ibid.*, p. 283). Simply obeying the commandments, though, can lead to "religious behaviorism"; to avoid that, one must fulfill the commandments with focused attention (*kavvanah*), and one must root one's observance in theological awareness, one's *halakhah* in *aggadah*.

All of these paths to God, however, are only clues to something beyond experience. Ultimately, God is "an ontological presupposition" – that is, a fact about being that we must presuppose before we ever experience anything, let alone think about it. In that way, God is like "thing" or "movement," both of which we must presuppose before we can experience anything, let along think or talk about it. "The meaning and verification of the ontological presupposition are attained in rare *moments of insight*" (*ibid.*, p. 114), and the God we encounter through such clues and in such moments is ultimately unknowable: "Our starting point is not the known, the finite, the order, but *the unknown within the known*, the infinite within the finite, *the mystery within the order*" (*ibid.*). God is, then, wholly other from what we know in human experience, but God can be discovered if we are sensitive enough to the clues in nature, the Bible, and in sacred deeds and worship and if those lead us to the insight of the reality of God behind all those phenomena and His importance for our lives.

Elliot Dorff (1943-): God as the Covenanted Partner of the People Israel

While Elliot Dorff asserts a belief in a personal, transcendent God, as Heschel does, Dorff maintains that we can know this God in many of the same ways we use to gain knowledge in other aspects of our lives. We can use reason to know God, not through the hypothetical reasoning typically used in scientific experimentation, but rather through the non-hypothetical reasoning a jury uses, for example, in seeing that the evidence fits one pattern rather than another and thus decides for one party or the other. Because God is understood as a person, however, the Jewish tradition wisely depends more on the methods we use to come to know persons – namely, by speaking with them and by doing things with them. In *Knowing God: Jewish Journeys to the Unknowable*, he therefore includes chapters about how to understand God speaking to us (revelation); our speaking to God (prayer); God doing things with us (God acting in history); and our doing things with and for God (the life of fulfilling the commandments). He then discusses how we can and should image God based on those sources of knowledge. As he stresses in his theory of law, however, our experience of God as Jews is not only personal, but is rather communal, for God is our covenanted partner in a marriage-like covenant with the full duties of both parties that such a covenant implies. Law properly understood provides the ongoing structures for the relationship between God and the People Israel while yet being flexible enough to change as the relationship between the parties changes.

Marcia Falk and Ellen Umansky: God as Feminine

Feminism has affected not only Jewish law and Jewish educational and institutional structures, but also Jewish theology. Roots of the feminine aspects of God embedded in the Presence of God (*Shekhinah*, a feminine noun), articulated in Rabbinic and Kabbalistic texts, ground modern explorations of what it means to take seriously that God is infinite and therefore neither is nor has a body. If one is going to depict God at all in human terms, then, one must do so in both male and female images, recognizing all the while that neither is adequate to the reality of God. That has led people like Marcia Falk to suggest non-human images for God altogether (a spring of water, for example), and it has led other feminist theologians like Ellen Umansky to explore what it would mean to assert both masculine and feminine images of God in both our thought and our prayers.

Conclusion: Looking Back, Looking Forward

If history is any guide, the theologies of the future will respond to the new realities of life in general and of Jewish life in particular. If the Holocaust, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the ongoing challenges of how to live as Jew in the modern (and, some would say, post-modern) world were the factors that shaped Jewish theologies of the twentieth century, the new visions of God in the twenty-first century will inevitably reflect the lives of the people thinking about God and interacting with God now. As we do so, the theologies of the past – including not just those of the twentieth century but also those of the Bible, Rabbinic Literature, the Middle Ages, and the early modern period should serve as a resource for us to become sensitive to the aspects of life and of the transcendent element in our experience that motivate speaking of God in the first place.

GOD IN MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT – TEXT 1

KAPLAN

The idea of creativity…has functioned in Jewish life as an antidote to the pessimism which experience with the evils of life tends to engender. We are so accustomed to think of God as the creator of the world that it is hard for us to associate the idea of godhood with any being not conceived as endowed with superlative powers of creation. It is, nevertheless, a fact that in primitive religion, and even in the more developed religions of polytheism, a notion of godhood was seldom associated with the power to create. The psychological origin of the belief in God as creator is undoubtedly wish-fulfillment of man's desire to transform his environment when he realized his own impotence to do so….

The Sabbath is regarded in Jewish tradition as celebrating the creation of the world. The modern equivalent of that interpretation of the day would be the use of it as a means of accentuating the fact that we must reckon with creation and self-renewal as a continuous process. The liturgy speaks of God as 'renewing daily the works of creation'. By becoming aware of that fact, we might gear our own lives to this creative urge in the universe, and discover within ourselves unsuspected powers of the spirit.

The belief in God as creator, or its modern equivalent, the conception of the creative urge as the element of godhood in the world, is needed to fortify the yearning for spiritual self-regeneration…There can hardly be any more important function for religion than to keep alive this yearning for self-renewal and to press it into the service of human progress. In doing that, religion will combat the recurrent pessimism to which we yield whenever we misjudge the character of evil in the world. It will teach us to live without illusion and without despair about the future, with clear recognition of the reality of evil and creative faith in the possibility of the good…

Religion should indicate to us some way whereby we can transform the evils of the world, if they are within our control, and transcend them, if they are beyond our control. If we give heed to the creative impulse within us which beats in rhythm with the creative impulse of the cosmos, we can always find some way of making our adjustment to evil productive and good.

Mordechai Kaplan, "God as the Power that Makes for Salvation", taken from "Contemporary Jewish Theology," ed. Elliott Dorff and Louis Newman, OUP, New York 1999.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **How would Kaplan describe God?**
- **Does Kaplan's God have any limitations?**
- **How do you think human beings can relate to Kaplan's God?**
- **To what extent are you persuaded by Kaplan's view of God?**

GOD IN MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT – TEXT 2

Buber

As experience, the world belongs to the primary word *I-It*. The primary word *I-Thou* establishes the concept of relation[ship].

The spheres in which the world of relation arises are three. First, our life with nature. There, the relation sways in gloom, beneath the level of speech. Creatures live and move over against us, but cannot come to us, and when we address them as *Thou*, our words cling to the threshold of speech.

Second, our life with men. There the relation is open and in the form of speech. We can give and accept the *Thou*.

Third, our life with spiritual beings. There the relation is clouded, yet it discloses itself; it does not use speech, yet begets it. We perceive no *Thou*, but nonetheless we feel we are addressed and we answer – forming, thinking, acting. We speak the primary word with our being, though we cannot utter *Thou* with our lips.

The *Thou* meets me through grace – it is not found by seeking. But my speaking of the primary word to it is an act of my being, is indeed the act of my being.

The relation to the *Thou* is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge and no fancy intervene between the *I* and the *Thou*. Desire itself is transformed, as it plunges out of its dream into the appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about…

Every particular *Thou* is a glimpse through to the eternal *Thou*; by means of every particular *Thou* the primary word addresses the eternal *Thou*. Through this mediation of the *Thou* of all beings, fulfillment of relations and non-relations comes to them; the inborn *Thou* is realised in each relation and consummated in none…

Men do not find God if they stay in the world. They do not find Him if they leave the world. He who goes out with his whole being to meet his *Thou* and carries to it all being that is in the world, finds Him who cannot be sought.

Martin Buber, "I and Thou", taken from "Contemporary Jewish Theology," ed. Elliott Dorff and Louis Newman, OUP, New York 1999.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **How would Buber describe God?**
- **Does Buber's God have any limitations?**
- **How do you think human beings can relate to Buber's God?**
- **To what extent are you persuaded by Buber's view of God?**

GOD IN MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT – TEXT 3

Heschel

But how can we ever reach an understanding of Him who is beyond the mystery? How do we go from intimations of the divine to a sense of the realness of God?...

The roots of ultimate insight are found…not on the level of discursive thinking, but on the level of wonder and radical amazement, in the depth of awe, in the sensitivity to the mystery, in our awareness of the ineffable. It is the level on which the great things happen to the soul, where the unique insights of art, religion and philosophy come into being.

It is not from experience but from our *inability to experience* what is given to our mind that certainty of the realness of God is derived…Our certainty is the result of wonder and radical amazement, of awe before the mystery and meaning of the totality of life beyond our rational discerning. Faith is the *response* to the mystery, shot through with meaning; the response to a challenge which no one can for ever ignore. "The heaven" is a challenge. When you "lift up your eyes on high" you are faced with the question. Faith is an act of man who *transcending himself* responds to him who *transcends the world…*

God is the great mystery, but our faith in Him conveys more understanding of Him than either reason or perception is able to grasp…This, indeed, is the greatness of man: to have faith. For faith is an act of freedom, of independence of our own limited faculties, whether of reason or sense-perception. It is *an act of spiritual ecstasy*, of rising above our own wisdom.

…The certainty of the realness of God does not come about as a corollary of logical premises, as a leap from the realm of logic to the realm of ontology, from an assumption to a fact. It is, on the contrary, a transition from an immediate apprehension to a thought, from a preconceptual awareness to a definite assurance, from being overwhelmed by the presence of God to an awareness of His existence. What we attempt to do in the act of reflection is to raise that preconceptual awareness to the level of understanding.

In other words, our belief in the reality of God is not a case of first possessing an idea and then postulating the ontal counterpart of it…our belief in His reality is not a leap over a missing link, but rather a *regaining*, giving up a view rather than adding one, going behind self-consciousness and questioning the self and all its cognitive preconceptions. *It is an ontological presupposition*.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "God in Search of Man," taken from "Contemporary Jewish Theology," ed. Elliott Dorff and Louis Newman, OUP, New York 1999.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **How would Heschel describe God?**
- **Does Heschel's God have any limitations?**
- **How do you think human beings can relate to Heschel's God?**
- **To what extent are you persuaded by Heschel's view of God?**

GOD IN MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT – TEXT 4

Falk

One of the more heated debates that have arisen in response to my creation of alternatives to the traditional blessing form concerns the fact that my blessings do not directly address God in the second person. The question of whether Jewish prayer *needs* to address God as 'you' is a highly charged one, perhaps even more provocative than the feminist challenge to the gendered God. Vigorous protests arise when one questions the exclusive authority of the 'I-Thou' address of divinity; there is a widely held assumption that this is the only legitimate mode for Jewish prayer…

While I would agree that relationship is an important element of theology, I do not see why it is necessary to envision God as a transcendent Other in order to affirm relationship. This view certainly fails to account for the deep sense of connectedness I personally feel when I am in touch with my participation in the greater Whole of creation. Moreover, the conception of God as transcendent Other is based on a hierarchical construct of God and world that can be highly problematic for modeling relationships, especially from a feminist perspective, since it provides the theological underpinning for the hierarchical dualisms – including the foundational dualistic contrast of male and female – that characterize and plague Western culture. It hardly seems coincidental that, when the relationship between God and world is depicted in the tradition in sexual terms, God is envisioned as male and the world – often represented by the human community or the people of Israel – is depicted as female.

...I would say that I do not believe an anthropomorphic view of the divine is necessary for the foundations of a moral life…instead, I would suggest that we bring human relations *directly* into our liturgy by explicitly affirming in that liturgy our interpersonal values, and by using prayer as an occasion to make commitments to live according to those values….

Marcia Falk, "Further Thoughts on Liturgy as an Expression of Theology," taken from "Contemporary Jewish Theology," ed. Elliott Dorff and Louis Newman, OUP, New York 1999.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **How would Falk describe God?**
- **Does Falk's God have any limitations?**
- **How do you think human beings can relate to Falk's God?**
- **To what extent are you persuaded by Falk's view of God?**

GOD IN MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

…My root experience is that God means one thing to me in moments of thought and another in moments of prayer and action. When *thinking* about God, "God" signifies, among other things, the superhuman (and maybe supernatural) powers of the universe; the moral thrust in human beings; the sense of beauty in life; and the ultimate context of experience…In contrast, when I experience God in prayer or action, the God I encounter is a unique personality who interacts with the world, most especially in commanding everyone to obey the laws of morality and the People Israel to observe the *Mitzvot*. It is the one, unique God who cannot be reached by generalization…

…We learn most about other people and we foster relationships with them through doing things together and through talking with them. Observation and cogitation have limited value in such contexts. Since God in the Jewish tradition is both personal and unique, human experience would suggest that we use common action and verbal communication in seeking knowledge about God…

Revelation adds to our knowledge of God by framing and informing our present experience with God through the insights and experiences of our ancestors. Neither the original revelation, nor its traditional interpretations, nor the continuing testing of that tradition with our own experience is alone sufficient; the key to using revelation as a source of knowledge of God is the *interaction* between the original revelation and its ongoing interpretation…

The other side of learning about God through verbal communication is prayer. On a personal level, prayer is often difficult; on a philosophical level it is complex. And yet in both the personal and philosophical realms it can be highly enriching…

…Both the abstract God of the intellect and the personal God of action, revelation and prayer are legitimate and complementary conceptions of God, and we need both to be true to the totality of our experience as human beings and Jews.

Dorff, "In Search of God", taken from "Contemporary Jewish Theology," ed. Elliott Dorff and Louis Newman, OUP, New York 1999.

The Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

God and Us

GOD AND US

Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg

Master of the universe I will sing a song to you.
Where will I find you? And where will I find you not?
Where I go, there you are. Where I stay, there are you.
Only you, you alone, You again, and only you.
Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev[1]

God's Being

"I am the Lord your God" isn't a commandment. It doesn't have to be. The deepest experiences don't need to spell out their own implications. We know.

I remember moments when I have been most in love with life, when I have felt bound in a spirit of thankfulness with the leaves, the trees, the hillside and the night, when I have lain down so that my heart would sing next to where the grass sings, and have got up and walked on in joy. That moment of prostration has been an act of fealty, when I have made my vows to life: "I promise not to hurt you; I promise to carry the love of you with me. So may you be with me when I need you." I know that I have forgotten since, sometimes for years at a time; I know I have behaved faithlessly. But I have never for a second considered the command to be abrogated by which I am bound to love and honour life.

There are other kinds of realisation, different moments of commandment. I remember the picture of the young girl and the bird. It was during a prolonged and vicious drought in Africa and the girl was struggling to reach the camp where a relief organisation was supplying food and water. She had only a very little further to go, but her strength had come to an end and she sank, her body folded over her empty stomach in helpless abandonment. The bird, a vulture, sat scarcely a few yards a way and watched. It knew: the girl would never reach the food and water. Surely we, like the photographer, are commanded: "If you do not carry such children with you..."

"I am the Lord your God" is not expressed in the imperative. It instructs us to do absolutely nothing. Yet once the reality behind these words has been experienced, once we have in any way felt the presence of God in our lives, we are utterly commanded. There can be no thought or action which is not, explicitly or implicitly, a response to the deepest reality we know. We can call it by many names, God, Allah, transcendent being, the consciousness that comprehends all life. But however we name it, it is present, whether we are aware of it or not, in every interaction and in all consciousness at all times.

Moments of awareness, and for most of us awareness is rare and momentary only, belong to the great treasures of our experience. We cherish them like the presentiments of a great love. They are the stars by which we navigate our existential darkness. All such moments are revelation and form part of a continuum with Sinai. For as Rebbe Yehudah Aryeh Lev of Ger, the *Sefat Emet*, explains, in those seconds when God spoke "All creation was focussed upwards toward the root of its vitality...When God said 'I am the Lord your God' all created beings understood the words to be addressed specifically to them...Then everything was perfected as is right." Any moment in which any consciousness apprehends the universal being is therefore connected to the same communion as Sinai.

Faith is a way of experiencing life. It is often misrepresented. It is not a dogma only, a set of mental convictions that certain propositions are true. It is not a master plan for how to play chess with life's contradictions or an escape route from life's anguish. For faith is in the living, including the doubt, the anxiety, the pain and the long periods of ignorance and forgetting between short moments of knowledge and realisation. Thus faith is never an entitlement to complacency.

1 **In The World Of A Hasidic Master: Levi Yitzhak Of Berditchev** *by Samuel H. Dresner p. 106-7 (Shapolsky Publishers, New York 1986)*

Neither can faith ever justify zealotry. To disregard life, to insult, wound and kill in the name of God is to betray the very God in whose name the deed is perpetrated. For how can the living God, whose presence is manifest in all consciousness, be served by killing? How can God be present potentially among my people, in my land, in my consciousness, and not potentially in your people, your country and your heart also? For there is no Jewish God, no Muslim God, no Christian God, no "your God" and no "my God" but only God.

On the contrary, faith is always a moral challenge, a constant struggle to be faithful to life. As the *Sefat Emet* goes on to explain, in the moment when God speaks and creation hears, "No one is capable of committing wrong. For nature itself prevents anyone from transgressing the intention of the Creator." In the moment of knowledge, when we understand that we and all life belong to God, we are filled with such reverence for life that our only desire is to honour and cherish it. All selfishness, all desire to do wrong and to hurt, is abrogated.

The problem is that the moment falls away and we forget. We live in a world of concealment and hold weakly to the memories of rare and exceptional experiences of beauty that are soon contradicted and eroded. It is in this muddled and jaded reality that our faithfulness is constantly put to the test. It is tried in the rush hour, at the supermarket, in the way we talk to our family, and in our responses to difference, indifference and hatred.

Everything we do matters. An ugly deed always drives something precious away. The incident may be completely trivial. The other day I had a misunderstanding with a man on the pavement. I thought he was waiting for me, so I slowly backed my car out of the drive. He thought I was waiting for him and walked on. The next moment he was right next to my car window shaking his fist. Although I had no intention of behaving rudely, I had become part of an unpleasant interaction and felt ugly, as if on some level of being I had inflicted damage. Such incidents happen to us every day and leave behind them a wake either of violence or of grace. This is not even to speak of the great divisions and hatreds which afflict humanity.

On the other hand, a moment of beauty brings the hidden wonder of life into conscious recognition. Outside, a jay sits on a pine branch, a small bird hops into a nest; the tree is filled with life. Ultimately the same being whose vitality traverses all worlds holds us together as fragments among all the countless manifestations of the same consciousness. Here is God's presence in the birds, in the tree and in between us.

That presence is latent, too, in the care we feel for another person. I watch a child hug her grandmother outside the school and run off into the playground. Tenderness, compassion and understanding invoke a deeper sense of being; we are drawn together by what transcends us all and which, in our loving, we all serve.

Every moment of life presents the challenge of faithfulness or betrayal.

But there are, mercifully, unanticipated experiences of beauty and grace. However brief and transient to us, the eternal vitality flows through them like water along a hillside stream. Silenced and awakened, our spirit recognises that being which encompasses and enfolds it. God is speaking to us, the everlasting "I am." We renew our vows to life.

Hinneni

At the heart of life a voice is singing. We heard it when we walked that dusk along the canal, when the tiny grey-brown cygnets climbed out of the water onto their mother's back and she hid them under her feathers and carried them beneath her wings. The voice answers nothing and says everything, without uttering a single word.

A voice is singing. Perhaps one shouldn't say "voice" because there are no lips and there is no sound. The world is filled with the paradox of its silence: "Day utters speech to day and night communicates knowledge to night" reads the Psalm, before continuing, "There is no speech; there are no words; their voice isn't heard at all."[2] For there is nothing that offers an explanation.

Part of the problem is that we want so much of God that we forget God in thinking of what we want. We don't hear because what we're listening for is something else. Perhaps it's the Bible's fault for leading us to expect revelation in similar proportions, or at least a word from heaven the way God used to bestow it on the prophets. But what if God has long since done with that kind of disclosure? What if it never actually happened quite like that? What if it never occurred that way even in ancient times, but the creators of narratives recorded it thus - with all that speaking, acting, stretching forth of mighty hands, deliverance and wrath, because they understood that God had indeed been present in some decisive form, had been the essence and the inspiration of their history, and all other kinds of language had failed them in trying to describe the silent absence of God's utter manifestation?

We crave answers: "Answer us on the day we call" begins the evening service. "Answer us, father of orphans; answer us, judge of widows," concludes the penitential prayer. The words are at once an impassioned demand for a response, and an articulation of the baffled anguish of the moment: "God, in the midst of all this sorrow and confusion, help us!" But God appears recalcitrant and no voice speaks from the sky. Or maybe God isn't that kind of God. For God descends in no obvious way either to explain the past or to indicate the future.

Struggling to live with what we can't understand, we often impose fictions on the silence, making it noisy with our justifications. How many people think, despite themselves, when someone dies before their time: "The way he lived his life, always running"; or, less cruelly, "God wants her in heaven"; or, more simply, "There must be reasons for everything in God's book." Maybe such constructs do ease the pain of suffering. After all, what comfort is there in the thought that fate is largely random, that what happened may have occurred for little, if any, reason at all? But that doesn't suffice to make those statements true. They are born of our anguish, of our incapacity not to know, of the need to turn life into a coherent story. The process of composing them about our own sufferings and struggles, with ifs and buts and maybes, may lie at the heart of our search for meaning. But proposed as truths which explain the destiny of others, they are frequently harsh and sometimes punitive, even if not consciously intended in that way. Thus they aptly reflect life's own imponderable cruelties, to accommodate which we require them. We need the stories to silence the silence of what we don't know.

Yet at the heart of life a voice is speaking. We heard it together in the hospital room when my friend said with his characteristic frankness and courage, "It's *Ne'ilah* now; this is the end."

But the voice says nothing about either the why or the wherefore and we badly need explanations. Abraham wants an explanation. "Should the judge of all the earth not do justice!" he demands.[3] He even argues God down to the concession that the city of Sodom should be saved for the sake of a just ten righteous people within it. But what the text fails to address is why God should allow even a single innocent person to burn to death? The next morning Abraham looks out at the rising smoke from the city in flames. One wonders what might be his thoughts.

Moses wants to know the answer. At the moment of his greatest achievement, when he saves Israel from God's wrath after they make the golden calf, chastising the people for their sin and God for God's destructive intentions, he demands of heaven: "Make known to me your ways." According to rabbinic tradition, what he actually asks is the old question why the wicked so frequently prosper while the righteous have to suffer. But even the Talmud can produce no credible answer.[4]

Job wants to know why. His pain is terrible enough, but what goads him into fury are the lies his so-called friends keep telling him about God. It isn't true, he insists, that everything conforms to a single pattern in which suffering means

[2] *Psalm 19:4*
[3] *Genesis 18:25*
[4] *Exodus 33:13, and Talmud Berachot 7a*

punishment, and the punishment invariably fits the crime. No, he conceals not a single secret sin which could justify this misery. God does eventually vindicate Job and admonishes his friends for speaking falsely about the deity. But God fails to provide Job with any logical explanation of all his gratuitous pain; God offers him no alternative interpretations. There is only the inscrutable wonder of creation. "Only"; but it is enough, that voice singing at the heart of creation.

So, if Abraham, Moses and Job receive none, why should we obtain answers? Yet it is almost impossible to escape the compulsion to seek them. How can one say, in the face of misery and injustice, that there is a God, yet maintain that that God is not implicated, is not the why and the wherefore? What use then is God, if "believing in God" justifies nothing and fails to explain anything? Wouldn't it be simpler to concede and agree with the atheist?

But a voice is speaking at the heart of creation. It is not there for use or function. It is, because it is. It is here in the tumultuous bird song of dawn; here it is in the sudden quietness at dusk. Stilling the restless, agitated mind, still in the stillness of the conscience, taut in the heart's attentiveness, reverberating in the soul that permeates and dissolves us, is this voice.

"Hinneni; here am I."

Who said that? Was it that voice again? No; it was me, experiencing myself addressed. But the voice itself is more like silence, endless being overheard in the process of its own articulation. It pervades all, all is interpenetrated with it; it transcends all, and all is transient within it; it is at once the entirety of love and the totality of destiny. When we hear it, all it says is "I am what I am." Or rather it says nothing, for names are merely human words and the voice is not merely human.

After all, it isn't actually true that all we want of God is explanations. We want God.

A young man is very ill. Others are asking "Why should this be?" For some time he, too, is haunted by that question, creating many painful answers. But at a crucial point, at a moment of healing, it loses its central relevance though never entirely absent from his thoughts. For he is listening to something else, if only for a few moments, if only now and not then, and then again for just a moment. The singing of the silence is embracing him.

"Hinneni," he says, "Here am I. This is me. I have nothing; will you have me just as I am?" It says, "But I am already with you; we have each other always." It says, "Look! The world is mine from the root to the leaf, from birth to death, from the earth to the sky." It says nothing at all.

Who was it who said "Hinneni"?

God, say something more! There are so many essential matters we need to hear you address!

On the pond in the dark two ducks are swimming close to one another. It seems at first as if they are silent, but between them is a constant, quiet chattering, an almost inaudible intimacy. It calms the spirit; it reassures the heart. Asking "What is that voice really saying?", demanding "Tell me more!", these are not the proper questions.

"Hinneni, I am what I am": Is there, ultimately, anything else that needs to be said? What it means is clear without demanding that every clause be set down. Each moment is subject to life's commandments: to respect, to honour, to love, and never through injustice or unkindness to be faithless.

In articulate silence; listen!

GOD AND US – TEXT 1

בראשית כב:א–יב

א וַיְהִי אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי: ב וַיֹּאמֶר קַח־נָא אֶת־בִּנְךָ
אֶת־יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ־לְךָ אֶל־אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אַחַד הֶהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ: ג וַיַּשְׁכֵּם
אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחֲבֹשׁ אֶת־חֲמֹרוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־שְׁנֵי נְעָרָיו אִתּוֹ וְאֵת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיְבַקַּע עֲצֵי עֹלָה וַיָּקָם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם
אֲשֶׁר־אָמַר־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים: ד בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם מֵרָחֹק: ה וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל־נְעָרָיו
שְׁבוּ־לָכֶם פֹּה עִם־הַחֲמוֹר וַאֲנִי וְהַנַּעַר נֵלְכָה עַד־כֹּה וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנָשׁוּבָה אֲלֵיכֶם: ו וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֲצֵי הָעֹלָה וַיָּשֶׂם עַל־יִצְחָק
בְּנוֹ וַיִּקַּח בְּיָדוֹ אֶת־הָאֵשׁ וְאֶת־הַמַּאֲכֶלֶת וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו: ז וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֶּנִי בְנִי
וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאַיֵּה הַשֶּׂה לְעֹלָה: ח וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה־לּוֹ הַשֶּׂה לְעֹלָה בְּנִי וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו: ט וַיָּבֹאוּ
אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־אָמַר־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּבֶן שָׁם אַבְרָהָם אֶת־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַיַּעֲרֹךְ אֶת־הָעֵצִים וַיַּעֲקֹד אֶת־יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיָּשֶׂם אֹתוֹ
עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ מִמַּעַל לָעֵצִים: י וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמַּאֲכֶלֶת לִשְׁחֹט אֶת־בְּנוֹ: יא וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מַלְאַךְ יְיָ מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם
וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם | אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי: יב וַיֹּאמֶר אַל־תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל־הַנַּעַר וְאַל־תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי | עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי־יְרֵא
אֱלֹהִים אַתָּה וְלֹא חָשַׂכְתָּ אֶת־בִּנְךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי:

Genesis 22:1-12

After these things, God tested Abraham: God said to him: "Abraham!" And Abraham said, "*hineini*." Then he said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah; sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains there, the one which I will tell you. Abraham got up early the next morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, along with Isaac his son; he chopped wood for the sacrifice and got up and went to the place God had told him of.

On the third day he looked up and saw the place from far away. He said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey and the young man and I will go on to there and bow down, and then come back to you." Abraham took the wood he had chopped for the sacrifice and gave it to Isaac his son [to carry], and in his own hand he took the fire and the sacrificial knife and they went off, both of them together.

Isaac said to Abraham his father, "Father?" and Abraham answered, "*hineini*, my son." Isaac went on, 'Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb to sacrifice?" Abraham answered, "God will provide the lamb, my son." And they went on, both of them together.

They came to the place of which God had told him, and Abraham built the altar there, and set out the wood, and bound Isaac his son and put him on the altar on top of the wood. Then he put out his hand and took the sacrificial knife to kill his son. An angel of Adonai called to him from heaven, saying, "Abraham! Abraham!" and he answered, "*hineini*". The angel said, "Do not lay hand upon the young man, and do not do anything to him; indeed, now I know that you fear God, for you have not witheld your son, your only son, from me."

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **How is Abraham's faith being challenged in this passage?**
- **What does Abraham mean when he says "hineini"?**
- **What is God's message to Abraham?**
- **What can we learn from this passage about how God might speak to us?**

GOD AND US – TEXT 2

שמות ג:א–יב

א וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת־צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתְנוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן וַיְנַהַג אֶת־הַצֹּאן אַחַר הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֹא אֶל־הַר הָאֱלֹהִים חֹרֵבָה: ב וַיֵּרָא מַלְאַךְ
יי אֵלָיו בְּלַבַּת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסְּנֶה וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה הַסְּנֶה בֹּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסְּנֶה אֵינֶנּוּ אֻכָּל: ג וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אָסֻרָה־נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת־הַמַּרְאֶה
הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מַדּוּעַ לֹא־יִבְעַר הַסְּנֶה: ד וַיַּרְא יי כִּי סָר לִרְאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסְּנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי:
ה וַיֹּאמֶר אַל־תִּקְרַב הֲלֹם שַׁל־נְעָלֶיךָ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹמֵד עָלָיו אַדְמַת־קֹדֶשׁ הִוא: ו וַיֹּאמֶר אָנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי
אָבִיךָ אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וֵאלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב וַיַּסְתֵּר מֹשֶׁה פָּנָיו כִּי יָרֵא מֵהַבִּיט אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים: ז וַיֹּאמֶר יי רָאֹה רָאִיתִי אֶת־עֳנִי
עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרָיִם וְאֶת־צַעֲקָתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נֹגְשָׂיו כִּי יָדַעְתִּי אֶת־מַכְאֹבָיו: ח וָאֵרֵד לְהַצִּילוֹ | מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וּלְהַעֲלֹתוֹ
מִן־הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא אֶל־אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וּרְחָבָה אֶל־אֶרֶץ זָבַת חָלָב וּדְבָשׁ אֶל־מְקוֹם הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי:
ט וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צַעֲקַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלָי וְגַם־רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַלַּחַץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: י וְעַתָּה לְכָה וְאֶשְׁלָחֲךָ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה
וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם: יא וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אָנֹכִי כִּי אֵלֵךְ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
מִמִּצְרָיִם: יב וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ וְזֶה־לְּךָ הָאוֹת כִּי אָנֹכִי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאֲךָ אֶת־הָעָם מִמִּצְרַיִם תַּעַבְדוּן אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים עַל
הָהָר הַזֶּה:

Exodus 4:1-12

Moses looked after the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, who was the priest of Midian; he led the flock out into the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of Adonai's appeared to Moses in a flame of fire in a bush; Moses looked and – behold! – the bush was all afire but it was not being consumed. Moses said, "I will turn from what I was doing and look at this great sight: why is the bush not burning up?"

Adonai saw that Moses had turned to see, and God called to him out of the bush, saying, "Moses! Moses!" and Moses answered, "*hineini*."

God said, "Do not come any closer; take your shoes off your feet, because the place you are standing on is holy ground." Then God said, "I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob", and Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look upon God. And Adonai said, "I have seen, truly seen, the suffering of my people who are in Egypt, and I have heard them cry out because of their oppressors, for I know their pain. I will come down to save them from the hand of Egypt and bring them up from that land into a land which is good and broad, a land flowing with milk and honey, the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites, the Emorites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites. Now – behold! – the cry of the children of Israel has come to me, and I have seen the tyranny with which the Egyptians tyrannize them. So now, come – I will send you to Pharaoh so you can bring out my people, the children of Israel, from Egypt.

Moses said to God, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" And God said, "I will surely be with you: this is the sign for you that I have sent you – when you bring the people out of Egypt you shall serve God on this very mountain."

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **How is Moses's faith being challenged in this passage?**
- **What does Moses mean when he says "hineini"?**
- **What is God's message to Moses?**
- **What can we learn from this passage about how God might speak to us?**

GOD AND US – TEXT 3

שמואל א:ג:א–טז

א וְהַנַּעַר שְׁמוּאֵל מְשָׁרֵת אֶת־יי לִפְנֵי עֵלִי וּדְבַר־יי הָיָה יָקָר בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם אֵין חָזוֹן נִפְרָץ: ב וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וְעֵלִי שֹׁכֵב
בְּמְקוֹמוֹ וְעֵינָיו [וְעֵינָיו] הֵחֵלּוּ כֵהוֹת לֹא יוּכַל לִרְאוֹת: ג וְנֵר אֱלֹהִים טֶרֶם יִכְבֶּה וּשְׁמוּאֵל שֹׁכֵב בְּהֵיכַל יי אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם אֲרוֹן אֱלֹהִים:
ד וַיִּקְרָא יי אֶל־שְׁמוּאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי: ה וַיָּרָץ אֶל־עֵלִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי כִּי־קָרָאתָ לִי וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא־קָרָאתִי שׁוּב שְׁכָב וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּשְׁכָּב:
ו וַיֹּסֶף יי קְרֹא עוֹד שְׁמוּאֵל וַיָּקָם שְׁמוּאֵל וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־עֵלִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי כִּי קָרָאתָ לִי וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא־קָרָאתִי בְנִי שׁוּב שְׁכָב: ז וּשְׁמוּאֵל
טֶרֶם יָדַע אֶת־יי וְטֶרֶם יִגָּלֶה אֵלָיו דְּבַר־יי: ח וַיֹּסֶף יי קְרֹא־שְׁמוּאֵל בַּשְּׁלִשִׁית וַיָּקָם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־עֵלִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי כִּי קָרָאתָ לִי וַיָּבֶן
עֵלִי כִּי יי קֹרֵא לַנָּעַר: ט וַיֹּאמֶר עֵלִי לִשְׁמוּאֵל לֵךְ שְׁכָב וְהָיָה אִם־יִקְרָא אֵלֶיךָ וְאָמַרְתָּ דַּבֵּר יי כִּי שֹׁמֵעַ עַבְדֶּךָ וַיֵּלֶךְ שְׁמוּאֵל
וַיִּשְׁכַּב בִּמְקוֹמוֹ: י וַיָּבֹא יי וַיִּתְיַצַּב כְּפַעַם־בְּפַעַם שְׁמוּאֵל | שְׁמוּאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל דַּבֵּר כִּי שֹׁמֵעַ עַבְדֶּךָ: יא וַיֹּאמֶר יי
אֶל־שְׁמוּאֵל הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי עֹשֶׂה דָבָר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר כָּל־שֹׁמְעוֹ תְּצִלֶּינָה שְׁתֵּי אָזְנָיו: יב בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אָקִים אֶל־עֵלִי אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר
דִּבַּרְתִּי אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ הָחֵל וְכַלֵּה: יג וְהִגַּדְתִּי לוֹ כִּי־שֹׁפֵט אֲנִי אֶת־בֵּיתוֹ עַד־עוֹלָם בַּעֲוֹן אֲשֶׁר־יָדַע כִּי־מְקַלְלִים לָהֶם בָּנָיו וְלֹא כִהָה
בָּם: יד וְלָכֵן נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְבֵית עֵלִי אִם־יִתְכַּפֶּר עֲוֹן בֵּית־עֵלִי בְּזֶבַח וּבְמִנְחָה עַד־עוֹלָם: טו וַיִּשְׁכַּב שְׁמוּאֵל עַד־הַבֹּקֶר וַיִּפְתַּח
אֶת־דַּלְתוֹת בֵּית־יי וּשְׁמוּאֵל יָרֵא מֵהַגִּיד אֶת־הַמַּרְאָה אֶל־עֵלִי: טז וַיִּקְרָא עֵלִי אֶת־שְׁמוּאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל בְּנִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי:

1 Samuel 3:1-16

The youth Samuel served Adonai in Eli's [the priest's] presence. Adonai's word was rare in those days, and visions were not widespread. One day, Eli was lying down in his place (his eyes had begun to dim, he could not see well). The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying in Adonai's temple, where the Ark was.

Then Adonai called Samuel, and Samuel said, "*hineini*". He ran to Eli and said, "*Hineini*, for you called me!" Eli replied, "I did not call you, go back and lie down", and Samuel did. Adonai called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "*Hineini*, for you called me!" Eli said, "I did not call you, my son, go back and lie down". Samuel did not yet know Adonai, and Adonai had not yet revealed his word to him. Adonai called again to Samuel, a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "*Hineini*, for you called me!" – and Eli understood that it was Adonai who had called to the youth.

Eli said to Samuel, "Go and lie down; and if he calls to you, say, "Speak, Adonai, for your servant is listening", and Samuel went and lay down in his place. Then Adonai came, and stood, and called, as he had done before, "Samuel, Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, Adonai, for your servant is listening."

Then Adonai said, "Behold! I am going to do something in Israel which will make both ears of anyone who hears it ring! On that day I will establish against Eli all that I have spoken about his family, and once I have begun, I will make an end. I have told him that I will judge his family forever on the iniquity he knew about – that his sons brought a curse upon themselves and he did not restrain them. Therefore I have sworn that the iniquity of Eli's family cannot be atoned for, neither by sacrifice nor by offering, ever."

Samuel lay down until the morning, when he opened the doors of Adonai's house; and he was frightened to tell the vision to Eli. Eli called to Samuel, "Samuel, my son!" – and Samuel said, "*Hineini*".

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **How is Samuel's faith being challenged in this passage?**
- **What does Samuel mean when he says "hineini"?**
- **What is God's message to Samuel?**
- **What can we learn from this passage about how God might speak to us?**

GOD AND US – TEXT 4

מלכים א:יט–כא

ט וַיָּבֹא־שָׁם אֶל־הַמְּעָרָה וַיָּלֶן שָׁם וְהִנֵּה דְבַר־יְיָ אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ מַה־לְּךָ פֹּה אֵלִיָּהוּ: י וַיֹּאמֶר קַנֹּא קִנֵּאתִי לַיְיָ | אֱלֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת
כִּי־עָזְבוּ בְרִיתְךָ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מִזְבְּחֹתֶיךָ הָרָסוּ וְאֶת־נְבִיאֶיךָ הָרָגוּ בֶחָרֶב וָאִוָּתֵר אֲנִי לְבַדִּי וַיְבַקְשׁוּ אֶת־נַפְשִׁי לְקַחְתָּהּ:
יא וַיֹּאמֶר צֵא וְעָמַדְתָּ בָהָר לִפְנֵי יְיָ וְהִנֵּה יְיָ עֹבֵר וְרוּחַ גְּדוֹלָה וְחָזָק מְפָרֵק הָרִים וּמְשַׁבֵּר סְלָעִים לִפְנֵי יְיָ לֹא בָרוּחַ יְיָ וְאַחַר הָרוּחַ
רַעַשׁ לֹא בָרַעַשׁ יְיָ: יב וְאַחַר הָרַעַשׁ אֵשׁ יְיָ וְאַחַר הָאֵשׁ קוֹל דְּמָמָה דַקָּה: יג וַיְהִי | כְּשְׁמֹעַ אֵלִיָּהוּ וַיָּלֶט פָּנָיו בְּאַדַּרְתּוֹ
וַיֵּצֵא וַיַּעֲמֹד פֶּתַח הַמְּעָרָה וְהִנֵּה אֵלָיו קוֹל וַיֹּאמֶר מַה־לְּךָ פֹּה אֵלִיָּהוּ: יד וַיֹּאמֶר קַנֹּא קִנֵּאתִי לַיְיָ | אֱלֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת כִּי־עָזְבוּ בְרִיתְךָ
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מִזְבְּחֹתֶיךָ הָרָסוּ וְאֶת־נְבִיאֶיךָ הָרָגוּ בֶחָרֶב וָאִוָּתֵר אֲנִי לְבַדִּי וַיְבַקְשׁוּ אֶת־נַפְשִׁי לְקַחְתָּהּ: טו וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֵלָיו
לֵךְ שׁוּב לְדַרְכְּךָ מִדְבְּרָה דַמֶּשֶׂק וּבָאתָ וּמָשַׁחְתָּ אֶת־חֲזָאֵל לְמֶלֶךְ עַל־אֲרָם: טז וְאֵת יֵהוּא בֶן־נִמְשִׁי תִּמְשַׁח לְמֶלֶךְ עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְאֶת־אֱלִישָׁע בֶּן־שָׁפָט מֵאָבֵל מְחוֹלָה תִּמְשַׁח לְנָבִיא תַּחְתֶּיךָ: יז וְהָיָה הַנִּמְלָט מֵחֶרֶב חֲזָאֵל יָמִית יֵהוּא וְהַנִּמְלָט מֵחֶרֶב יֵהוּא
יָמִית אֱלִישָׁע: יח וְהִשְׁאַרְתִּי בְיִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁבְעַת אֲלָפִים כָּל־הַבִּרְכַּיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־כָרְעוּ לַבַּעַל וְכָל־הַפֶּה אֲשֶׁר לֹא־נָשַׁק לוֹ: יט וַיֵּלֶךְ
מִשָּׁם וַיִּמְצָא אֶת־אֱלִישָׁע בֶּן־שָׁפָט וְהוּא חֹרֵשׁ שְׁנֵים־עָשָׂר צְמָדִים לְפָנָיו וְהוּא בִּשְׁנֵים הֶעָשָׂר וַיַּעֲבֹר אֵלָיְהוּ אֵלָיו וַיַּשְׁלֵךְ אַדַּרְתּוֹ
אֵלָיו: כ וַיַּעֲזֹב אֶת־הַבָּקָר וַיָּרָץ אַחֲרֵי אֵלִיָּהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֶשָּׁקָה־נָּא לְאָבִי וּלְאִמִּי וְאֵלְכָה אַחֲרֶיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ לֵךְ שׁוּב כִּי מֶה־עָשִׂיתִי
לָךְ: כא וַיָּשָׁב מֵאַחֲרָיו וַיִּקַּח אֶת־צֶמֶד הַבָּקָר וַיִּזְבָּחֵהוּ וּבִכְלֵי הַבָּקָר בִּשְׁלָם הַבָּשָׂר וַיִּתֵּן לָעָם וַיֹּאכֵלוּ וַיָּקָם וַיֵּלֶךְ אַחֲרֵי אֵלִיָּהוּ
וַיְשָׁרְתֵהוּ:

1 Kings 19:9-21

He came to a cave there, where he spent the night, and – behold! – the word of Adonai came to him, saying to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And Elijah answered, "I have been zealous, truly zealous, for Adonai of hosts, for the children of Israel have abandoned your covenant; they have destroyed your altars, and your prophets they have killed by the sword. I am the only one left, and now they seek my life so they can take it away."

He said: "Go out and stand on the mountain before Adonai". Behold! – Adonai went by, and a huge, strong wind broke the mountains to pieces and shattered the rocks before Adonai: but Adonai was not in the wind; after the wind came an earthquake: but Adonai was not in the earthquake. After the wind came a fire, but Adonai was not in the fire; and after the fire came the sound[5] of fine silence.

When Elijah heard, he wrapped his face in his robe and went out and stood at the entrance to the cave, and a voice came to him which said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And Elijah answered, "I have been zealous, truly zealous, for Adonai of hosts, for the children of Israel have abandoned your covenant; they have destroyed your altars, and your prophets they have killed by the sword. I am the only one left, and now they seek my life so they can take it away."

Adonai said to him, "Go back on your way to the desert of Damascus; when you get there, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. Anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi to be king over Israel and anoint Elisha the son of Shefat of Avel-Meholah to be a prophet instead of you. Those who escape from the sword of Hazael will be killed by Jehu; and those who escape the sword of Jehu will be killed by Elisha. I have left seven thousand people in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed to Baal and all the mouths which have not kissed him."

Elijah left, and found Elisha the son of Shafat who was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen, walking along with the twelfth; Elijah passed by him and threw his robe over him. Elisha left the cattle and ran after Elijah, saying, "Let me kiss my father and my mother and I will come after you." Elijah replied, "Go back – for what have I done to you?" And he went away from him, and took a yoke of oxen and butchered them, and boiled their flesh using the yoke; then he gave the meat to the people and they ate it. After that he got up, and went after Elijah and served him.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **How is Elijah's faith being challenged in this passage?**
- **What is God's message to Elijah?**
- **What is the significance of Elijah's conversation with Elisha?**
- **What can we learn from this passage about how God might speak to us?**

[5] *or 'a voice'*

The Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

God on the Frontier of Jewish Thought

EPILOGUE: GOD ON THE FRONTIER OF JEWISH THOUGHT

RABBI ALANA SUSKIN

This essay is a thinkpiece. It will stimulate discussion of various contemporary issues.

Walking with God: has such a thing ever seemed more difficult, any task more distant? In our communities, who do you know that feels comfortable talking about God, let alone admitting to having a relationship? And yet biologists tell us that, in fact, we are built to experience God. The geography of our brains is hardwired for transcendence.[1] So how is it that this experience has become so difficult to achieve?

On the one hand, we might look wistfully back and say, "Our ancestors [pick an era] did it much better than we do. We have to do things just the way they did." But nostalgia is a false God; Judaism tells us explicitly not to look backwards in that way. We read:

> "And you shall come to the priests the Levites, and to the judge who shall be in those days, and inquire; and they shall declare to you the sentence of judgment. And you shall do according to the sentence, which they of that place which the Lord shall choose shall declare to you; and you shall take care to do according to all that they inform you. According to the sentence of the Torah which they shall teach you, and according to the judgment which they shall tell you, you shall do; you shall not decline from the sentence which they shall declare to you, to the right hand, nor to the left."[2]

Rashi comments:

> "TO THE JUDGE WHO SHALL BE IN THOSE DAYS: even if he is not like the rest of the judges which came before him, you must listen to him…you have no judge except the one who passes judgment in your days."

In fact, contrary to the nostalgia currently epitomized by dancing Hassidim in black coats, the great commentator Maimonides plainly regards some of our past practices as less than ideal. In "The Guide for the Perplexed" he discusses why the Torah should command sacrifices. Surely sacrifice is a barbaric custom? He continues:

> "It is impossible to go from one extreme to the other….it is therefore according to the nature of man impossible for him suddenly to discontinue everything to which he has been accustomed. Now God sent Moses to make [the Israelites] a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6) by means of the knowledge of God….But the custom which was in those days general among all men… consisted in sacrificing animals in those temples which contained certain images, to bow down to those images, and to bum incense before them…
>
> It was in accordance with the wisdom and plan of God, as displayed in the whole Creation, that He did not command us to give up and to discontinue all these manners of service; for to obey such a commandment it would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that to which he is used… By this Divine plan it was effected that the traces of idolatry were blotted out, and the truly great principle of our faith, the Existence and Unity of God, was firmly established."

We see from this that the great Maimonides himself clearly holds the view that the Temple service was given to us not as something to which we should yearn to return, but as a way to wean us off from practices of the past. God's plan must then have always been to remove us from Temple worship. It appears, then, that "Before" is not always better, and indeed is sometimes worse.[3]

[1] *http://www.beliefnet.com/story/154/story_15451_1.html*
[2] *Deuteronomy 17:9-11.*
[3] *Maimonides,* **Guide for the Perplexed** *Book III, Chapter 32. Translated by M. Friedlander, 1904, Dover Publications, 1956 edition.*

Another tack we can take is to see the challenge of incorporating God with our new ideas about society both as a challenge and as a sign of progress. Our expanded interaction with non-Jews is the flip side of expanded opportunities for Jews; the difficulty we have with authority is the result of our greater freedoms; the struggle to include historically marginalized groups, whether women, or gay men or lesbians, or those with special needs, is because we are able to judge ourselves not yet up to par, and to ask what is it that God expects of us.

Many Jews operate in a milieu in which we have learned to feel silly talking about God. One can feel foolish trying to speak about an immanent God, a God who dwells with us, a personal God. Perhaps this is why, when we can stand to talk about God at all, some of us have gravitated towards the transcendent God, a God above us, disconnected from us, Who looks only at the big picture, a power of nature. This transcendent God is one which emphasizes the din, or judgment aspects of God: separateness, binary opposites, judging of ourselves and of others.

Judgment is not a bad thing. It leads to justice, and pursuit of the right and the good, but without the balance of hesed - love, connectedness - it also creates a world of black and white, sorely lacking in shades of gray. We are really only just beginning to struggle with inclusiveness: women, those with special needs, gays and lesbians, the intermarried. If we approach these challenges with a judgment-driven attitude, we say to ourselves: we must deal with these issues, because it is the right thing to do. From this perspective, we end up saying, "we need to deal with 'them.'"

But who is "them?" Jews married to non-Jews, Jewish women, Jewish gay men and Jewish lesbians, Jews in wheelchairs, Jews who are blind, or deaf or mentally challenged? Rather, there is no "them," there is "us." Immanence reminds us to say 'we". Our choice of language changes our approach, and as a direct effect upon how well we might be able to succeed at the task of inclusion.

Others of us, though, may be mired in immanence. If everything is God, how can we possibly sort out crystals and dream catchers, bits and pieces of other peoples' traditions, from a disciplined approach to God that could actually bring us closer in relationship? Perhaps the main problem if we overindulge in immanence is the difficulty in maintaining boundaries. Hesed without boundaries causes its own problems.

We need boundaries: they tell us who we are, strip away our illusions about ourselves, offer us a true mirror in the eyes of those on the other side. We must instill boundaries in ourselves, and respect them in others. They are the method by which we develop perspective. If one looks at the world, one must look from someplace, preferably not all from the same place. We don't want to have the same outlook on everything. A world in which all individuals have the same ideas, the same views, is the vision of the tower of Bavel that the rabbis abhorred. Commenting on the phrase "And the whole earth was of one language and one speech", the Rabbis in Midrash Rabba make it clear the "one language" was the result of suppressing any dissenting views.

The message of this midrash, then, is that when all speak with the same voice, they silence those who speak differently. This is an affront to God. This is the unity of fascism, censorship, dictatorship, control of others.

The struggle for God is to find the balance in which din and hesed are in harmony, in which we have both kinds of relationships to God; both love and awe, both intimacy and respect.

The challenges we face can be roughly collapsed into three general areas:

- Inclusion
- Connection/Boundaries
- Authority/Autonomy

Each of these operates on two levels. Each asks us to examine both our relationship to God, and our relationship to one another as Jews.

Inclusion: Hical'lut

The role of women has changed dramatically over the last 50 years. From the most liberal to the most conservative of denominations, the changes in women's status are not only broad and deep, but, sometimes despite the best efforts of some, ineradicable. Is there a precedent in our tradition for such a change in status, and what do these new roles teach us about our relationship to God?

An excellent resource for tracking the rabbinic change in the status of women is Rabbi Judith Hauptman's *Re-reading the Rabbis*.[4] She argues, in essence, that the rabbis over time attempted to move our tradition towards one which provided a greater role for women and which attempted to ameliorate the seemingly lesser status attached to them in the Torah.

As far back as the Torah itself, there is precedent for some sort of change in status for women. In Numbers 27:1-11, the daughters of Zelophehad petition Moses for a share in the inheritance of their dead father, who left no sons. Moses consults with God and is told, "The daughters of Zelophehad are right", and it becomes law that if a man dies without sons, his inheritance should pass first to his daughters and only then to other male members of his family.

The Midrash comments:

> "AND THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD DREW NEAR. When the daughters of Zelophehad learned that the land would be divided among the tribes to the males but not to the females, all of them gathered together to consult with each other. They said: God's mercy is not like the mercy of human beings. Human beings have mercy upon the male more than upon the female, but God is not thus; rather, God's mercy is upon both males and females, as the Torah says, '[God] gives mercy to all flesh.'" [5]

So we can argue that there are at least the initial stirrings of a precedent within Judaism for at least some minor changes in the role of women, but what precisely is our motivation for implementing the changes? What underlies the desire for the change in status? Who cares if men get to go to synagogue and pray three times a day? Who cares if they're obligated and women are not? One sometimes hears this very attitude voiced by women who live what they consider to be a more traditional lifestyle: "I'm busy. Who needs it?"

Of course, we acknowledge that there are many ways to be close to God, and that a more secluded role for women is one such way. But public prayer is at the heart of Judaism. In the sources, it is consistently the community which is the basic unit, not the individual, and not the family. If we are serious about our relationship to God, then we need to think carefully about what it means to pray publicly. When we include women in public prayer, we are insisting that in this broken, disconnected, modern world, our connection to God as a nation, as a community, is still important. As we sing joyfully on the High Holidays, ki anu amecha, v'atah eloheinu: surely we are your people, and you are our God. The second thing that we can learn from the shift of our perspective regarding those who are marginalized,is that God, too, wants a partner. In Hosea we read that Israel has abandoned God, but God loves Israel so greatly, that God seduces Israel to return, and then on that day Israel will no longer call God "*baali*" – my master, but "*ishi*" -my husband.

If the text of Tanach clearly says that in the era in which Israel truly accepts God in love, we will no longer call God master, but "my man" – quite literally we are saying that in the era of God's rule, we will no longer refer to God in terms of ownership. Israel is the beloved wife, and in our acceptance of our beloved, the beloved ceases to be master, and becomes an equal partner – the "zug" of "isha" – that is the partner of woman, and not the master. Hosea is implying quite

[4] *Judith Hauptman,* **Re-Reading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice**, *Westview Press, Colorado, 1998*
[5] *Sifre on Numbers 27:1, paragraph 133 of the Horowitz edition.*

strongly that the messianic ideal is that one not be over another – not even God! I can think of few more radical texts than this. The strong implication is that there is a value in an egalitarian affection. Not only that, but it would also appear that the flattening of hierarchy is a desirable goal.

Judaism has had a tendency since rabbinic times to see a certain group of people as "us" and anyone who doesn't fit neatly into that category as Jews, yes, but as Jews who are problematic, as "others" who need to be dealt with in some way, rather than as part of "us" with a voice in the proceedings. Yet there is a kabbalistic notion what we do as Jews directly affects God. The Sefer Ha-Bahir notes that there are two directions of interaction: that the flow from God influences us as we are open to it, but also that there is an upward sequence of sefirot which emanate from humans through which we influence the sefirot through an "awakening from below."

If we are unsuccessful at including all Jews in our community, there are pieces missing in our relationship to God. As long as there is a "them" and an "us" within the boundaries of Judaism, we are closing ourselves off from being the full community in relation to God. And just as we are then breaking our own community into pieces, we are also breaking God into pieces. Not only women, but gays, lesbians, those with special needs: all of these are people are "us."

Boundaries: Gvulin

Another matter which presses upon us is the question of how to deal with the growing numbers of intermarried Jews. Jewish law has never been wishy-washy on this topic[6]. We all know that as far as halakhah is concerned, and for good reasons, it's simply not permitted[7]. But that's a fairly bland answer to a more complex problem. The fact is, a significant number of us are marrying non-Jews, and we need to know what to do after the halakhic issues have been addressed. (How) do we welcome the Jewish partner; (how) do we welcome the non-Jewish partner?

Salman Rushdie, in his 2002 essay "Step Across This Line" writes as follows:

> "At the frontier our liberty is stripped away—we hope temporarily—and we enter the universe of control. Even the freest of free societies are unfree at the edge, where things and people go out and other people and things come in; where only the right things and people must go in and out. Here, at the edge, we submit to scrutiny, to inspection, to judgment. These people, guarding these lines, must tell us who we are."[8]

Intermarriage is our frontier in a rather literal way. It brings into our families and communities people who live based on ideas that are different from Jewish ones. They are not obligated to live according to mitzvot, and so the ways that they behave, too, are different. Together with these people, we raise our children. And we want to know, whose values will these children have?

This is only a question, though, if we start from the perspective that Jewish values are not generic goodness and common sense but rather that Jews have a mission of holiness. If we do not start from that perspective but rather from a universalistic one, we encounter other, troubling questions: What do we believe? Why be Jewish, and why not assimilate? Is Judaism more than an ethnicity? If we do think that Judaism is important, we need to be able to articulate why Jews are not simply an ethnic group (or, actually, many ethnic groups with some sort of relationship to one another). Why does it matter to be Jewish?

It is not because we are "better." Judaism has always held that the pious of the nations of the world have a place in the world to come. Rather, it is because we have a particular relationship with God, one which we can bring to the world.

[6] *For example see Ezra 10: 10 – 12.*
[7] *Barring some extreme circumstances that one would rather not invoke, such as mamzerut – the result of adulterous or incestuous relations.*
[8] *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at Yale University, February 25 and 26, 2002.*

We have a mission to repair the world in a particular way, and that way can only be reached through the discipline imposed on us by living a Jewish life. For example, there is nothing better or worse about being a world-class cellist than there is in being an Olympic level gymnast: however, except for the discipline it takes to do both, there is little in common. They are both beautiful but in different ways.

Jewish tradition tells us, "Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone."[9] A lot of people know that quote, but many people don't know how it continues: "Who is honored? The one who honors all God's creatures." The rabbis often used the term "briot", created ones, to refer to human beings, but the sense is of persons. We even have a phrase, "*Kavod* habriot" meaning "respect for others," which appears a number of times in the Talmud[10] . This principle is taken so seriously that it can override a negative commandment. Things don't get more serious than that.

These principles give us some clues as to what intermarriage can teach us about ourselves and how to relate to God.

First, although we consider it of highest value to try and persuade the non-Jewish partner to convert, we need to consider what it means to respect the beliefs and choices of the non-Jewish partner. Hence we should be clear about what roles in our lives are limited to Jews, as well as speaking respectfully about the faith that the partner does have. If we are honest, we must also acknowledge that in respecting a partner who does not choose to convert, one's life as a Jew is probably also limited by that choice, as is often the richness of the Jewish identities of the children of such a couple.

Secondly, we might do well to listen to the non-Jewish partner to hear what they can teach us, as Jews, about being Jewish. One thing that many Christians do much better than Jews is spontaneous prayer. Jews often are very uncomfortable with the idea of just making up a prayer and speaking with God. When we view the relationships of others with God through their own lens, we can learn much about what our own lacks are, and how to enrich our own Judaism. While endogamy is still of exceptionally high value to Jews and is something to be encouraged and sought, intermarriage presents an opportunity for us to learn about ourselves and to grow closer to God, and sometimes, even for a Jew with little connection to tradition may be challenged into taking another look at Judaism.

Authority and autonomy: samkhut

This is likely to be the hottest of all the hot topics of the near future. Many of the most vibrant, lively places to pray and to gather in community are independent minyans, places which lack an official authority.

Americans do not much like authority. We really dislike the idea of someone telling us what to do. Yet Judaism is steeped in traditions of authority:

> "Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you." [11]

In the Mishnah, in the first chapter of Pirkei Avot, we find that we are advised to "get for yourself a teacher" no fewer than three times.[12] And in the Talmud we find other texts which suggest that the worst possible curse is for a community to be without learned advisors and leaders[13]. In the light of these texts we may ask: if respect for authority is so deeply embedded in our tradition, is there a valid place for these minyans, the communities without official leaders?

In order to answer this question, we need to analyze why it is that these minyans are successful. The reason they are so vibrant is because they take upon themselves the obligation we have as Jews to learn. They epitomize relationship

[9] *Pirke Avot 4:1*
[10] *B. Berakhot 19b; B. Shabbat 81b, 94b; B. Eruvin 41b; B. Megillah 3b; B. Bava Kama 79b; B. Menahot 37b-38a.*
[11] *Dvarim 32:7*
[12] *Pirke Avot 1:1, 1:6 and 1:16, respectively.*
[13] *Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 14a*

to God through study, which is one of Judaism's deepest held and most beloved traditions.[14] When the entire community is responsible for leading services and reading Torah, then the opportunities arise to expand and grow, to study in depth, learning becomes a necessity for everyone. More importantly, many of these communities have created successful experiments of various kinds: pluralist communities, where people of deeply divergent understandings of halakhah can pray together. They may come together around social justice work, or study – or both. They rely on one another to learn – and many of them have rabbis as community members, as well as knowledgeable Jewish professionals, scholars and teachers. It is long past the time for us to acknowledge that many of our Jewish experts and teachers are not ordained, and to consult and respect them.

What, then, will be the role of the rabbi for these communities? Rabbis will have the gift of being able to return to what is, in many ways, a more traditional role. They will be the community's organizers, helping to teach the children as well as the adults. They will set up times, places and teachers for study, and will learn together with members of the community. These rabbis also will, hopefully, be the person to whom the community comes when there are questions about practice. Ultimately, although we Americans don't care for authority, we do need someone who can be a decisor, and we need to develop some humility about having such a person in the community and making use of them.

The question of who should be in charge, though, has wider implications. Although we prefer our models of God to represent God as partner, that is not God's only relationship to us. Judaism has two modes of relating to God: *Yirah* – fear/awe, and *ahavah* - love/intimacy. Both of these are necessary. In Psalms, it says, "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom".[15] In just a very quick glance at the Torah, we find the repetition of the commandment to fear, and separately (and sometimes together) the command to love, God literally dozens of times[16].

Yirah – fearing God – implies an element of submission. That's a very difficult concept for us, but it is one that we need. In fact, it's not so foreign to us as we might like to think. Much of our lives involve us submitting to authority in a way that is invisible to us. Consider what happens when a police siren sounds behind you on the highway: most of us pull over. Most of us grumble about having to acquire a driver's license and the hassle of car registration, yet we make time in our schedules to update these mechanical details of our social order. Submission to God, in its full Jewish context, leads us not to acquiesce to society, but to rebel against its coarse or wrong aspects. This brings me to my conclusion.

CONCLUSION

The various points I have outlined, from the rejoining of Jewish law to its ethical precepts, to the new pluralistic minyanim, to the relationship between Jews and non-Jews, to the expanding role of women are not separate frontiers. They overlap, and flow together. "God on the Frontier of Jewish Thought" has to do both with our individual relationships with God, and how we think God wants us to relate to one another. Ultimately, in terms of our relationship with God, the "new frontier" is returning to the idea of an immanent God but to also bring yirah, awe, into that relationship. God as totally transcendent and not immanent, God as all love and no discipline, is now passé. Our frontiers are returning to what is really a more traditional view of God.

God gave us the Torah as part of an ongoing project to make us holy. Since God, being omniscient, knew that a nation just liberated from slavery would not be able to comprehend a non-hierarchical society, God deliberately gave us the Torah written ambiguously enough that we would need to interpret it. God wishes of us to move as a nation toward partnership, toward a more holy understanding of ourselves and the world, and so God created the language of the Torah in such a way that we would have to re-examine ourselves over and over again, growing, changing, and becoming closer to one another and to God as we develop.

[14] see, for example, Pirke Avot 2:6, which reminds us, 'an ignorant person cannot be pious'.
[15] Psalms 111:10
[16] A small sample: Love: Deuteronomy 6:5, 10:12, 11:1, 11:13, 11:23, 13:4, 19:9, 30:6, 30:20; fear: Leviticus 19:14, 19:32, Deuteronomy 6:2, 6:13, 6:24, 8:6, 10:12, 10:20, 13:5, 31:12, 31:13. Not nearly exhaustive.

We can see from the texts here that God has always wanted us to be loving and inclusive in our relationships with each other, but society has not been ready to take those giant leaps; earlier generations were not able to hear that message the same way we are hearing it now. We are finally ready to begin hearing God, but in order to do so, we have to open our books and study, to hear all the voices that have come down to us in holiness. The trend of both secular society and Jewish tradition is towards greater equality and more care for kavod habriot, and consequently the gap between the Reform movement's commitment to social justice and the Orthodox movement's commitment to halakhah, is narrowing. It is about time. The distinction made between moral and ritual law is as false as our commentators have always implied. To the contrary, neither is possible without the other. Jewish law is not a discrete system, but a holistic one. It is a matter of common sense to recognize, given both economic and social realities, that inclusion, strengthened yet transparent borders, and humility in our dialogue with God, while simultaneously recognizing a God who dwells among us, who longs for a relationship with us, is a necessity of Jewish development and holiness.

We look outward towards our frontiers, and ask, "If we cross, what will we find on the other side?" But in reality, we are already crossing these borders, we are walking: walking towards, and walking away. The question is now towards Whom do we walk, and what are we leaving behind? In the end, the frontier is not feminism, or intermarriage, or independent minyans: in the end, the frontier is God.

הושע ב:טז–כב

טז לָכֵן הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי מְפַתֶּיהָ וְהֹלַכְתִּיהָ הַמִּדְבָּר וְדִבַּרְתִּי עַל־לִבָּהּ: יז וְנָתַתִּי לָהּ אֶת־כְּרָמֶיהָ מִשָּׁם וְאֶת־עֵמֶק עָכוֹר לְפֶתַח תִּקְוָה
וְעָנְתָה שָּׁמָּה כִּימֵי נְעוּרֶיהָ וּכְיוֹם עֲלוֹתָהּ מֵאֶרֶץ־מִצְרָיִם: יח וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם־הַהוּא נְאֻם־יי תִּקְרְאִי אִישִׁי וְלֹא־תִקְרְאִי־לִי עוֹד בַּעְלִי:
יט וַהֲסִרֹתִי אֶת־שְׁמוֹת הַבְּעָלִים מִפִּיהָ וְלֹא־יִזָּכְרוּ עוֹד בִּשְׁמָם: כ וְכָרַתִּי לָהֶם בְּרִית בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עִם־חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה וְעִם־עוֹף
הַשָּׁמַיִם וְרֶמֶשׂ הָאֲדָמָה וְקֶשֶׁת וְחֶרֶב וּמִלְחָמָה אֶשְׁבּוֹר מִן־הָאָרֶץ וְהִשְׁכַּבְתִּים לָבֶטַח: כא וְאֵרַשְׂתִּיךְ לִי לְעוֹלָם וְאֵרַשְׂתִּיךְ לִי
בְּצֶדֶק וּבְמִשְׁפָּט וּבְחֶסֶד וּבְרַחֲמִים: כב וְאֵרַשְׂתִּיךְ לִי בֶּאֱמוּנָה וְיָדַעַתְּ אֶת־יי: כג וְהָיָה | בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶעֱנֶה נְאֻם־יי אֶעֱנֶה
אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהֵם יַעֲנוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ: כד וְהָאָרֶץ תַּעֲנֶה אֶת־הַדָּגָן וְאֶת־הַתִּירוֹשׁ וְאֶת־הַיִּצְהָר וְהֵם יַעֲנוּ אֶת־יִזְרְעֶאל: כה וּזְרַעְתִּיהָ
לִּי בָּאָרֶץ וְרִחַמְתִּי אֶת־לֹא רֻחָמָה וְאָמַרְתִּי לְלֹא־עַמִּי עַמִּי־אַתָּה וְהוּא יֹאמַר אֱלֹהָי:

EQUALITY

Hosea 2:16-25

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And I will give her vineyards from there, and the valley of Achor for a gate of hope; and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came out of the land of Egypt.

And it shall be at that day, says the Lord, that you shall call me My husband ("Ishi"); and shall no more call me My master ("Baali").

For I will take away the names of Baalim from her mouth, and they shall no more be mentioned by their name. And in that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, and with the birds of heaven, and with the creeping things of the ground; and I will break the bow and the sword and the battle out of the earth, and will make them lie down safely.

And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in grace, and in compassion. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord.

And it shall come to pass in that day, I will answer, says the Lord, I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth; and the earth shall answer the grain, and the wine, and the oil; and they shall answer Jezreel.

And I will sow her to me in the earth; and I will have compassion upon her who had not obtained compassion; and I will say to them who were not my people, You are my people; and they shall say, You are my God.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What do you think is the difference between "ishi" and "ba'ali"? Why do you think the distinction is made?**
- **What kinds of imagery are being used here?**
- **Who are "them who were not my people" in the final verse?**
- **Do you consider this text represents the relationship between God and the Jewish people today? Why/why not?**

תלמוד בבלי, מגילה ג.ב
אמר רבא: פשיטא לי: עבודה ומקרא מגילה – מקרא מגילה עדיף, מדרבי יוסי בר חנינא. תלמוד תורה ומקרא מגילה – מקרא מגילה עדיף, מדסמכו של בית רבי. תלמוד תורה ומת מצוה – מת מצוה עדיף, מדתניא: מבטלין תלמוד תורה להוצאת מת ולהכנסת כלה. עבודה ומת מצוה – מת מצוה עדיף, (במדבר ו') מולאחתו דתניא: ולאחותו מה תלמוד לומר? הרי שהיה הולך לשחוט את פסחו ולמול את בנו, ושמע שמת לו מת, יכול יטמא – אמרת: לא יטמא. יכול כשם שאינו מיטמא לאחותו כך אינו מיטמא למת מצוה – תלמוד לומר ולאחתו: לאחותו הוא דאינו מיטמא, אבל מיטמא למת מצוה. בעי רבא: מקרא מגילה ומת מצוה הי מינייהו עדיף? מקרא מגילה עדיף משום פרסומי ניסא, או דלמא מת מצוה עדיף – משום כבוד הבריות? בתר דבעיא הדר פשטה: מת מצוה עדיף. דאמר מר: גדול כבוד הבריות שדוחה את לא תעשה שבתורה.

KAVOD HABRIOT

Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 3b

Rava said: it is entirely clear to me that reading the Megillah takes priority over the Temple sacrificial service, as can be proved by the statement of Rabbi Yosi bar Chanina on the subject. Similarly, reading the Megillah takes priority over Torah study, as shown by the fact that students from the school of Rabbi relied on R Yosi's ruling [and interrupted their Torah study to go and hear the Megillah]. Burying a met mitzvah takes priority over Torah study, since we know [from a Baraita] that one may take time away from studying Torah in order to bury the dead or to accompany a bride to the canopy. Burying a met mitzvah takes priority over the Temple sacrificial service…but as between reading the Megillah and burying a met mitzvah, which takes priority over which? Is it that reading the Megillah takes priority because of the obligation to publicize the miracle? Or is it that burying a met mitzvah takes priority because of human dignity [kavod habriot]?

After putting the question, Rava answered it himself. [He said:] burying a met mitzvah takes priority, since it was said by a Master , "Human dignity is so great that it takes priority over even a negative commandment in the Torah [which means it will definitely take priority over a positive commandment such as reading the Megillah]".

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Why do you think Rava ruled as he did? Do you agree with his ruling?**
- **Why do you think the example for human dignity is a dead body?**
- **Do you consider that there are circumstances in which human dignity can be overriden? If so, which circumstances?**
- **Do you consider that Rava's ruling could be understood as permitting people not to observe mitzvot in general?**

ספר עזרא פרק ט–י

א וּכְכַלּוֹת אֵלֶּה נִגְּשׁוּ אֵלַי הַשָּׂרִים לֵאמֹר לֹא־נִבְדְּלוּ הָעָם יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהַכֹּהֲנִים וְהַלְוִיִּם מֵעַמֵּי הָאֲרָצוֹת כְּתוֹעֲבֹתֵיהֶם לַכְּנַעֲנִי הַחִתִּי
הַפְּרִזִּי הַיְבוּסִי הָעַמֹּנִי הַמּוֹאָבִי הַמִּצְרִי וְהָאֱמֹרִי: ב כִּי־נָשְׂאוּ מִבְּנֹתֵיהֶם לָהֶם וְלִבְנֵיהֶם וְהִתְעָרְבוּ זֶרַע הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּעַמֵּי הָאֲרָצוֹת וְיַד
הַשָּׂרִים וְהַסְּגָנִים הָיְתָה בַּמַּעַל הַזֶּה רִאשׁוֹנָה: ג וּכְשָׁמְעִי אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה קָרַעְתִּי אֶת־בִּגְדִי וּמְעִילִי וָאֶמְרְטָה מִשְׂעַר רֹאשִׁי וּזְקָנִי
וָאֵשְׁבָה מְשׁוֹמֵם: ד וְאֵלַי יֵאָסְפוּ כֹּל חָרֵד בְּדִבְרֵי אֱלֹהֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל מַעַל הַגּוֹלָה וַאֲנִי יֹשֵׁב מְשׁוֹמֵם עַד לְמִנְחַת
הָעֶרֶב:...א וּכְהִתְפַּלֵּל עֶזְרָא וּכְהִתְוַדֹּתוֹ בֹּכֶה וּמִתְנַפֵּל לִפְנֵי בֵּית הָאֱלֹהִים נִקְבְּצוּ אֵלָיו מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל קָהָל רַב־מְאֹד אֲנָשִׁים וְנָשִׁים
וְיִלָּדִים כִּי־בָכוּ הָעָם הַרְבֵּה־בֶכֶה: ב וַיַּעַן שְׁכַנְיָה בֶן־יְחִיאֵל מִבְּנֵי עֵילָם [עוֹלָם] וַיֹּאמֶר לְעֶזְרָא אֲנַחְנוּ מָעַלְנוּ בֵאלֹהֵינוּ וַנֹּשֶׁב
נָשִׁים נָכְרִיּוֹת מֵעַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ וְעַתָּה יֵשׁ־מִקְוֶה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַל־זֹאת: ג וְעַתָּה נִכְרֹת־בְּרִית לֵאלֹהֵינוּ לְהוֹצִיא כָל־נָשִׁים וְהַנּוֹלָד מֵהֶם
בַּעֲצַת אֲדֹנָי וְהַחֲרֵדִים בְּמִצְוַת אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְכַתּוֹרָה יֵעָשֶׂה: ד קוּם כִּי־עָלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר וַאֲנַחְנוּ עִמָּךְ חֲזַק וַעֲשֵׂה: ה וַיָּקָם עֶזְרָא וַיַּשְׁבַּע
אֶת־שָׂרֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּם וְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲשׂוֹת כַּדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּשָּׁבֵעוּ: ו וַיָּקָם עֶזְרָא מִלִּפְנֵי בֵּית הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־לִשְׁכַּת יְהוֹחָנָן
בֶּן־אֶלְיָשִׁיב וַיֵּלֶךְ שָׁם לֶחֶם לֹא־אָכַל וּמַיִם לֹא־שָׁתָה כִּי מִתְאַבֵּל עַל־מַעַל הַגּוֹלָה: ז וַיַּעַבִירוּ קוֹל בִּיהוּדָה וִירוּשָׁלַם לְכֹל בְּנֵי
הַגּוֹלָה לְהִקָּבֵץ יְרוּשָׁלָם: ח וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָבוֹא לִשְׁלֹשֶׁת הַיָּמִים כַּעֲצַת הַשָּׂרִים וְהַזְּקֵנִים יֶחֱרַם כָּל־רְכוּשׁוֹ וְהוּא יִבָּדֵל מִקְּהַל
הַגּוֹלָה: ט וַיִּקָּבְצוּ כָל־אַנְשֵׁי־יְהוּדָה וּבִנְיָמִן | יְרוּשָׁלַם לִשְׁלֹשֶׁת הַיָּמִים הוּא תֹּדֶשׁ הַתְּשִׁעִי בְּעֶשְׂרִים בַּחֹדֶשׁ וַיֵּשְׁבוּ כָל־הָעָם
בִּרְחוֹב בֵּית הָאֱלֹהִים מְרַעִידִים עַל־הַדָּבָר וּמֵהַגְּשָׁמִים: י וַיָּקָם עֶזְרָא הַכֹּהֵן וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אַתֶּם מְעַלְתֶּם וַתּוֹשִׁיבוּ נָשִׁים נָכְרִיּוֹת
לְהוֹסִיף עַל־אַשְׁמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל: יא וְעַתָּה תְּנוּ תוֹדָה לַיי אֱלֹהֵי־אֲבֹתֵיכֶם וַעֲשׂוּ רְצוֹנוֹ וְהִבָּדְלוּ מֵעַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ וּמִן־הַנָּשִׁים הַנָּכְרִיּוֹת:
יב וַיַּעֲנוּ כָל־הַקָּהָל וַיֹּאמְרוּ קוֹל גָּדוֹל כֵּן כִּדְבָרֶיךָ עָלֵינוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת:

INTERMARRIAGE

From Ezra chapters 9 and 10

And when these things were done, the princes came to me [Ezra], saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not set themselves apart from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons; so that the holy seed have mixed themselves with the people of those lands; and the hand of the princes and rulers has been foremost in this trespass. And when I heard this matter, I tore my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down appalled. Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those who had been carried to exile, gathered around me, while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice….And while Ezra prayed, and confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men and women and children gathered to him out of Israel; for the people wept bitterly. And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said to Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken alien wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this matter. And now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all such women, and those born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the Torah. Arise; for it is your task, and we are with you. Be of good courage and do it! Then Ezra arose, and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, swear that they should do according to this word. And they swore. Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib; and when he came there, he did not eat bread, nor drink water; for he mourned because of the transgression of the exiles. And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles, that they should gather themselves together at Jerusalem; And that whoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his goods should be forfeited, and he himself set apart from the congregation of the exiles. Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together at Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month; and all the people sat in the street of the house of God, trembling because of this matter, and because of the heavy rain. And Ezra the priest stood up, and said to them, You have transgressed, and have taken foreign wives, to increase the guilt of Israel. And now make confession to the Lord God of your fathers, and do his will; and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the foreign wives. Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As you have said, so must we do.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What motives might Ezra have had for behaving as he did?**
- **Why do you think the people agreed to do as he said?**
- **Why do you think there was (apparently) unanimous agreement?**
- **Do you consider this text has any place in the way we think today? Why/why not?**

תלמוד בבלי, סנהדרין יז.ב
ותניא: כל עיר שאין בה עשרה דברים הללו אין תלמיד חכם רשאי לדור בתוכה: בית דין מכין ועונשין, וקופה של צדקה נגבית בשנים ומתחלקת בשלשה, ובית הכנסת, ובית המרחץ, ובית הכסא, רופא, ואומן, ולבלר, [וטבח] ומלמד תינוקות. משום רבי עקיבא אמרו: אף מיני פירא, מפני שמיני פירא מאירין את העינים.

AUTHORITY

Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 17b

It was taught [in a Baraita]: A scholar may not live in any town which does not have these ten things:

1. A court that administers lashes and other punishments.
2. A charity fund collected by two people.
3. And [the charity fund must be] distributed by three.
4. A synagogue
5. A bathhouse
6. An outhouse
7. A doctor
8. A blood-letter
9. A scribe
10. A teacher of children

In the name of Rabbi Akiva they said: varieties of fruit are also required because varieties of fruit brighten the [sight of one's] eyes.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What do you think might be missing from this list?**
- **Why do you think the text specifies that these things are important for a scholar?**
- **Are teachers more important than leaders? Why?**
- **Is it possible for a community to exist without a leader and/or a scholar?**

GOD ON THE FRONTIER OF JEWISH THOUGHT – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

There are no such things as 'women's issues…' Women's voices have to be heard as lawmakers, but it is not enough for women to be heard as advocates in court, or as mikvah ladies. When power is limited, it is limited, and in the Jewish community power is wielded through the judiciary – ie. the rabbinate. There is no halakhic reason why women cannot be poskot [those who make authoritative rulings in Jewish law] even in the most traditional of Jewish communities. Women need to be part of the conversation – all of it. There is no Jewish topic that does not affect both men and women. Furthermore, women's decisions need to affect men as well.

An interesting model for this is that of the tallit…the wearing of a tallit by women began to be popular around the time of the beginning to the DIY ("Do It Yourself") havurah movements in the 1970s. When this began, tallitot were mostly polyester, white and blue or white and black; in some very traditional congregations they were wool, but again white and blue or white and black, or in a few cases, white and white. When women began wearing tallitot, part of the ambivalence about how women should wear them was expressed through women trying different kinds of tallitot. Since there are no legal requirements of a tallit other than it have four corners to which the requisite fringes are attached, women started tie-dyeing them, wearing them in different shapes, different colors and even different fabrics, such as painted silk or soft rayon.

After some time, many men realized that they were wearing boring tallitot, that there was no halakhic reason for them to wear boring tallitot and that they did not have to wear polyester, black and white tallitot. Shortly, men, too, began wearing tallitot that were more expressive of their own aesthetics…today, there is hardly a synagogue around the country, including Orthodox ones, where a colored tallit cannot be found. There is an entire industry devoted to producing beautiful tallitot- and we now have a widespread new custom of hiddur mitzvah [fulfilling a commandment in an aesthetically beautiful way] via the adoption of a mitzvah by women. It seems to me that this is a wonderful metaphor for how halakhic reinterpretation ought to happen regarding women. It is not enough to "add women and stir". When women participate, it means that the roles of both men and women have changed: otherwise attempts to include women have not really changed anything.

Rabbi Alana Suskin, A Feminist Theory of Halakhah, taken from The Unfolding Tradition: Jewish Law After Sinai, Elliot N Dorff, Aviv Press 2005.

The Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

Conclusions - My God

CONCLUSIONS – MY GOD

MY GOD
Leah Goldberg

I saw my God in a café -
he revealed himself to me in clouds of cigarette smoke
dejected, apologetic and feeble
he signalled to me: “Life goes on”.

He did not look like my lover
he was closer than him – and pitiful
like a transparent shadow made of starlight
he hardly occupied any space

in the light of a pale, reddish sunrise
as if confessing a sin before dying
he went downstairs, to kiss the feet of humans
and beg their forgiveness.

WITH MY GOD, THE BLACKSMITH
Uri Zvi Greenberg

My days are aflame like chapters of prophecy in all their revelations,
My body between them like a lump of smelter’s iron.
And over me stands my God, the blacksmith, mightily pounding.
Each wound hatched into me by time splits open for him
releasing the captive fire in sparks of moments.

This is my fate, my judgment, until evening falls by the wayside.
And when I return to throw my stricken lump upon my bed
my mouth is an open wound.

All naked I speak to my God: you have labored ruthlessly
And now it is night. Please. Let us both rest.

FROM ‘GODS COME AND GO, PRAYERS STAY FOREVER’
Yehuda Amichai

Bird tracks in the sand on the beach,
like the scribbles of someone who took notes
so as to remember things, names, numbers and places.
Bird tracks made in the sand at night
are there the day after, as well, though I did not see
the bird which made them. And thus, also: God.

to justify the material at this point – your purpose here is not to provide answers. If participants are left with questions about God, that's a desirable outcome. (It is likely, in any case, that there will be somebody else in the group who will want to answer any particular participant's issues.)

The final question may be of particular interest, since it has practical impact. How do participants' theological considerations translate into their day to day practice? Should they? Why/why not?

TEXTS [OPTIONAL]

The three texts provided all present different views of God through the lens of modern Hebrew poetry. Hand out all three texts to all participants – do they present a view of God they espouse? Disagree with? Why?

JOURNALS

As a final exercise, ask participants to look back at the beginning of their journals. What did they write about God initially? Do they still hold those views? If so, why – if not, why not?

Allow participants to journal their current views. Do they propose to incorporate them into their lives? If so, how? They can do this exercise in any form they wish – statement, poetry, a list of questions – but one way which might work well, if appropriate, is to write a letter to God. If they do that, they could also place a copy in their siddur, or perhaps their High Holyday machzor.

CONCLUSION

Thank participants, and conclude the session.

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