



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

Walking with God

Edited By
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דרכיה דרכי נעם

In Memory of Louise Held

The Held Foundation

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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,

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

Dean, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

Vice President, American Jewish University

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

INTRODUCTION

This book is the first in the Ziegler Adult Learning series. Our aim is to provide high quality, stimulating and challenging materials to enable adults to expand their understanding of the basic concepts and tenets of Conservative Judaism – and to expose them to the thinkers, texts and ideas which underpin our tradition. The audience we have in mind is the questioning adult congregant who might not be entirely familiar with Jewish sources.

The book will enable you to teach a series of twelve adult education classes on the subject of God. It contains twelve self-contained units, which are arranged chronologically. Eleven of these comprise:

- an essay
- a set of four texts, with questions
- a fifth text for further/creative study
- session suggestions

The final unit has no essay: instead, it provides an opportunity for participants to reflect upon and consolidate their learning.

RESOURCES

For each session you will need:

- the essays (for session 1, essays 1 and 2; for the rest, the essay for the subsequent session to hand out at the end)
- copies of the texts

It will also be useful to have copies of the Tanakh, in Hebrew and in English.

For the first session, you might also wish to provide every participant with a notebook. This will serve as a journal, in which the participant's own thoughts and insights can be recorded. If your budget will not accommodate this, it is nevertheless strongly recommended that participants be encouraged to bring their own resources so that they can journal, and/or for you to bring spare paper to every session. Busy congregants are unlikely to be able to keep these materials in their minds from session to session, and a journal will provide them with tangible evidence of their learning, as well as something to refer to after the course is over. You might also wish to provide a ring binder, or a folder of some kind, in which participants can keep the essays and texts.

SUGGESTED SESSION FORMAT

Below is a basic format, with timings, for a two-hour session. Please feel free to amend it as it suits you – you might wish to allow more time for chavruta and less for group work, for example.

INTRODUCTION (5 MINS)

Orientation – recap and consolidate what happened in the last session. Elicit the main points of the essay for today/issues/questions/problems the essay raises (we strongly recommend eliciting rather than 'teaching' – easier on you, and it involves the participants more. It will also be quicker and allow more time for chavruta.)

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

CHAVRUTA (30 MINS)

Study of texts in chavruta

GROUP WORK (35 MINS)

- Presentation from the chavruta groups
- Consolidation of what has been learned from the texts

BREAK (10 MINS)

- (If you use a text for part 2 of the session, you can hand it out here)

GROUP STUDY (40 MINS)

- Various options are provided: see individual session suggestions

CLOSEDOWN/JOURNAL (10 MINS)

- What did we learn?
- How does what we learned today sit in the context of previous sessions?
- Journal entries
- Hand out the essay for next time.

A FEW POINTS TO NOTE:

- We recognize you are busy! The session notes have been designed to enable you to prepare your teaching quickly and easily, so you might want to read them even before you begin to prepare the essay and texts. Basically, if you read the essay & have some answers to the questions on the chavruta texts you will be ready to run the session.
- Four chavruta texts are provided per session, with questions to help guide the study. The idea is that you split your participants into four chavruta groups. Initially, give each group one of the texts. When the time comes to report back, give every group all of the texts so that they can study them as their colleagues report on them, and take them home. This technique enables a lot of learning to be covered in a comparatively short time, and has the added benefit of empowering participants to teach each other. Then again, the sessions are packed and the material is rich, so you might want to be selective.
- You may wish to use only two, or only one, of the texts for chavruta. The session has been designed to work whatever you decide. We only have one plea – please let the participants interact with the actual texts. Even when they are complex – and some of them are – there is a magic in people studying together which invariably means that precious insights arise and are shared. If you wish to change the questions at the bottom of every text to help focus the discussion, please feel free – they are only suggestions.
- It is entirely up to you what you do with the second part of the session. You can use the fifth text, or come up with something of your own – we give some ideas in the session outlines. We have sometimes made the fifth text one with which the participants might already be familiar so they can look at it with new eyes.
- Finally, please do not feel limited by the texts we have provided. There is a huge amount of material outside this book which could be used, and which, for reasons which include copyright and space limitations, we have not been able to include. Popular song lyrics, for example, are a rich resource.

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!)

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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

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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.

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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.

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EMANUEL LEVINAS (1906-1995): GOD AS THE SOURCE OF MORAL DUTY

A view of God very close to Buber's is that of Emmanuel 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 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 alone 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.

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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 realized 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.

SESSION SUGGESTIONS – GOD IN MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT

In this session the group will consider various modern Jewish theologians' views of God.

INTRODUCTION

Briefly remind people of the content of the essay. Some questions to generate a brief recap might be:

- Which philosophers were dealt with in the essay?
- What are the main views of God which emerge?
- Are the views consistent? (obvious question, but we need the response)

TEXT STUDY

Split the class into [up to] 4 chavruta groups and hand out the texts. The questions provided should help generate the discussion. If you want to put groups together, the logical 'matches' are Falk/Buber and Kaplan/Heschel. You might also wish to have some of Falk's blessings available for participants to read & comment on – see her website www.marciafalk.com

Allow each group to report back on their understanding of the texts and their answers to the questions, and then draw the discussion together. Very different ideas of God emerge from these texts. The groups were each given the same questions this time, so that the discussion will highlight where the differences between the thinkers arise. Aim for an objective evaluation that isn't just about 'X talks to me, Y doesn't'.

GROUP STUDY

Text based: The Dorff text provided is from his book 'Knowing God', which is also a good resource for this session. Let participants read the short extract provided, and then consider the various ways in which we, in the modern world, encounter God. What differentiates our encounters from, say, the way that Rambam or Saadia thought about God? What are the implications of Dorff's view that the interaction between revelation and its ongoing interpretation is a source of knowing God? Does any participant want to revise their ideas about halakhah in the light of this?

Free-form: a logical way to run the end of this session would be in the form of a debate – let participants represent the view of God with which they feel the most resonance, and see if they can conduct a measured (or not!) discussion with someone who holds a conflicting view.

Try to steer away, if possible, from arguments which relate to proving the *existence* of God – great material for another session, but to get into this would be to bypass what is being said by the theologians whose views we are exploring.

CONCLUSION

Hand out the essay for next time and conclude the session.

CONTRIBUTORS

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