



The Ziegler School  
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

# Walking with God

Edited By  
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and Deborah Silver

דרכיה דרכי נעם

In Memory of Louise Held

The Held Foundation

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ZIEGLER SCHOOL OF  
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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: 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

# GOD: AN INTRODUCTION

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

# GOD: AN INTRODUCTION

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 (*Hilkhhot 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



# GOD: AN INTRODUCTION

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*.<sup>1</sup> 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?**

<sup>1</sup> *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?

# SESSION SUGGESTIONS – INTRODUCTION

**This session is atypical in that the participants will not have received the essay beforehand – instead, they will be given it to read after the session. You need to take time to introduce the course to the group, and perhaps also the group to each other.**

## INTRODUCTION

You might wish to include the following:

- an icebreaker of some kind (eg ask each participant for their name and an adjective they would use to describe God)
- a sharing of expectations – why have people come? what do they want to get from the course?
- an introduction to the course – a brief overview of each unit
- giving out/recommending the keeping of a journal (see How To Use This Book)

## JOURNALS

This is a good point to ask people to begin their journals. Ask them to record their own starting point – that is, to write about how they currently perceive God. What do they believe? Why? What do they find challenging about God? How do they think God and the Jewish tradition relate to each other? Whether they write statements or a list of questions (or poetry, or a letter to God) the aim here is to provide a starting point to which they can refer at the end of the course, to see how their ideas may have changed.

## CHAVRUTA STUDY

Hand out the chavruta texts. We suggest splitting the group so that each sub-group is dealing with a separate text. After giving them time to discuss the texts, draw them back together. Allow them to teach each other what they learned. Has this exercise changed anyone's view about God? How, if so? Has it raised any new questions? Which?

## CONCLUSION/CLOSEDOWN

Allow participants time to journal. Hand out both the Introduction essay and the essay for next session, and then conclude the session.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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