



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 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 Berdichev*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 away 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 Berdichev* by Samuel H. Dresner p. 106-7 (Shapolsky Publishers, New York 1986)

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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.

GOD AND US

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

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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 ויהי אחר הדברים האלה והאלהים נסה את-אברהם ויאמר אליו אברהם ויאמר הנני: ב ויאמר קח-נא את-בנך את-יחידך אשר-אהבת את-יצחק ולך-לך אל-ארץ המזבח והעלהו שם לעלה על אחד ההרים אשר אמר אליך: ג וישבם אברהם בבקר ויחבש את-חמרו ויקח את-שני נעריו אתו ואת יצחק בנו ויבצע עצי עלה ויקם ולך אל-המקום אשר-אמר-לו האלהים: ד ביום השלישי וישא אברהם את-עיניו וירא את-המקום מרחק: ה ויאמר אברהם אל-נעריו שבו-לכם פה עם-החמור ואני והנער נלכה עד-כה ונשתחנה ונשובה אליכם: ו ויקח אברהם את-עצי העלה וישם על-יצחק בנו ויקח בידו את-האש ואת-המאכלת וילכו שניהם יחדו: ז ויאמר יצחק אל-אברהם אביו ויאמר אבי ויאמר הנני בנו ויאמר הנה האש והעצים ואיה השנה לעלה: ח ויאמר אברהם אלהים יראה-לו השנה לעלה בנו וילכו שניהם יחדו: ט ויבאו אל-המקום אשר אמר-לו האלהים ויבן שם אברהם את-המזבח ויערף את-העצים ויעקד את-יצחק בנו וישם אתו על-המזבח ממעל לעצים: י וישלח אברהם את-ידו ויקח את-המאכלת לשחט את-בנו: יא ויקרא אליו מלאך יי מן-השמים ויאמר אברהם ויאמר הנני: יב ויאמר אל-תשלח ירך אל-הנער ואל-תעש לו מאומה כי א עתה ידעתי כי-ירא אלהים אתה ולא השקפת את-בנך את-יחידך ממני:

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 withheld 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 ומִשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֵה רֵעָה אֶת־צֹאן יִתְרוֹ הַתְּנִי כִּתְּנֵי מִדְיָן וַיִּנְהַג אֶת־הַצֹּאן אַחַר הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֹא אֶל־הַר הָאֱלֹהִים הַרְבֵּה: ב וַיֵּרָא מִלְּאֻךְ יי אֱלֹו בְּלַבַּת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה הַסֵּנֶה בֹּעֵר בְּאֵשׁ וְהַסֵּנֶה אֵינְנוֹ אֹכֵל: ג וַיֹּאמֶר מִשֶׁה אֶסְרֶה־נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת־הַמַּרְאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא־יִבְעַר הַסֵּנֶה: ד וַיֵּרָא יי כִּי סָר לְרְאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מִשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִי: ה וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־תִּקְרַב הָלֵם שְׁלֹ־נַעֲלֶיךָ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמֶּת־קֹדֶשׁ הוּא: ו וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי אֲבִיךָ אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב וַיִּסְתַּר מִשֶׁה פָּנָיו כִּי יָרָא מֵהִבִּיט אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים: ז וַיֹּאמֶר יי רֵאֵה רְאִיתִי אֶת־עַנְי עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־צַעֲקוֹתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נְגִשָׁיו כִּי יָדַעְתִּי אֶת־מַכְאֹבָיו: ח וַאֲרֹד לְהַצִּילוֹ | מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וְלַהֲעֵלְתוֹ מִן־הָאֲרֶץ הַהוּא אֶל־אֲרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרַחֲבָה אֶל־אֲרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ אֶל־מָקוֹם הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי: ט וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צַעֲקַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאָזְנוֹ אֱלֹהִים וְגַם־רְאִיתִי אֶת־חֲלָחִץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לְחַצְוֵם אַתֶּם: י וְעַתָּה לֵבֹה וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל־פְּרַעֲה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: יא וַיֹּאמֶר מִשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנֹכִי כִּי אֵלֶךְ אֶל־פְּרַעֲה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: יב וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ וְוַהֲלַךְ הָאֹת כִּי אֲנֹכִי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאֶךָ אֶת־הָעַם מִמִּצְרַיִם תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הַר 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:גא-טז

א והנער שמואל משרת את יי לפני עלי ודבר יי היה יקר בימים ההם אין תזון נפרץ: ב ויהי ביום ההוא ועלי שכב במקומו ועינו וועיניו החלו כהות לא יוכל לראות: ג ונגר אלהים טרם יכפה ושמואל שכב בהיכל יי אשר שם ארון אלהים: ד ויקרא יי אל שמואל ויאמר הנני: ה וירץ אל עלי ויאמר הנני כי קראת לי ויאמר לא קראתי לך וישכב: ו ויסף יי קרא עוד שמואל ויקם שמואל וילך אל עלי ויאמר הנני כי קראת לי וישכב: ז ושמואל טרם ידע את יי וטרם יגלה אליו דבר יי: ח ויסף יי קרא שמואל בשלשית ויקם וילך אל עלי ויאמר הנני כי קראת לי ויבן עלי כי יי קרא לנער: ט ויאמר עלי לשמואל לך שכב והיה אם יקרא אליך ואמרתי דבר יי כי שמע עבדך וילך שמואל וישכב במקומו: י ויבא יי ויתיצב ויקרא בפעם בפעם שמואל | שמואל ויאמר שמואל דבר כי שמע עבדך: יא ויאמר יי אל שמואל הנה אנכי עשה דבר בישראל אשר כל שמעו תצלילה שתי אזניו: יב ביום ההוא אקים אל עלי את כל אשר דברתי אל ביתו החל וכלה: יג והגדתי לו כי שפט אני את ביתו עד עולם בעון אשר ידע כי מקללים להם בנזיו ולא כהה בם: יד ולכן נשבעתי לבית עלי אם יתכפר עון בית עלי בזבח ובמנחה עד עולם: טו וישכב שמואל עד הבקר ויפתח את דלתות בית יי ושמואל ירא מהניד את המראה אל עלי: טז ויקרא עלי את שמואל ויאמר שמואל בני ויאמר הנני:

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':ט-כא

ט וַיְבֹא־שָׁם אֶל־הַמַּעְרָה וַיִּלֶן שָׁם וַהֲגִה דְבַר־יְיָ אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ מִה־לָּךְ פֹּה אֵלֶיךָ: י וַיֹּאמֶר קָנָא קָנָאתִי לַיְיָ אֱלֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת כִּי־עָזְבוּ בְרִיתְךָ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מִזְבְּחֵיךָ הָרְסוּ וְאֶת־נְבִיאֶיךָ הָרְגוּ בַחֶרֶב וְאֹתָר אֲנִי לְבַדִּי וַיִּבְקְשׂוּ אֶת־נַפְשִׁי לְקַחְתָּהּ: יא וַיֹּאמֶר צֵא וְעַמְדָתָ בְּהָר לִפְנֵי יְיָ וַהֲגִה יְיָ עִבְר וְרוּחַ גְּדוּלָה וְהִזְק מִפְּרֹק הָרִים וּמִשֹּׁבַר סַלְעִים לִפְנֵי יְיָ לֹא בְרוּחַ יְיָ וְאַחַר הָרוּחַ רָעַשׁ לֹא בְרַעַשׁ יְיָ: יב וְאַחַר הָרַעַשׁ אִישׁ לֹא בָאֵשׁ יְיָ וְאַחַר הָאֵשׁ קוֹל דְּמָמָה דָּקָה: יג וַיְהִי אֲבִי־שָׁמַע אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּלֶט פָּנָיו בְּאֲדָרְתוֹ וַיִּזְאָ וַיַּעֲמֵד פֶּתַח הַמַּעְרָה וַהֲגִה אֵלָיו קוֹל וַיֹּאמֶר מִה־לָּךְ פֹּה אֵלֶיךָ: יד וַיֹּאמֶר קָנָא קָנָאתִי לַיְיָ אֱלֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת כִּי־עָזְבוּ בְרִיתְךָ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מִזְבְּחֵיךָ הָרְסוּ וְאֶת־נְבִיאֶיךָ הָרְגוּ בַחֶרֶב וְאֹתָר אֲנִי לְבַדִּי וַיִּבְקְשׂוּ אֶת־נַפְשִׁי לְקַחְתָּהּ: טו וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֵלָיו לָךְ שׁוּב לְדָרְכְךָ מִדְּבַרָה דַּמְשֶׁק וּבָאתָ וּמִשְׁחַתָּ אֶת־חֻזְאֵל לְמַלְךְ עַל־אַרְבָּם: טז וְהָיָה בְּיָדְךָ תְּמֻשָׁה לְמַלְךְ עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־אֱלֹהֵי־שָׁמַע בְּיָדְךָ שֹׁפֵט מֵאֲבֵל מְחֹלָה תְּמֻשָׁה לְנַבִּיאַת תַּחֲתִיד: יז וְהָיָה הַנְּמַלֵּט מִחֶרֶב חֻזְאֵל יָמִית יְהוָה וְהַנְּמַלֵּט מִחֶרֶב יְהוָה יָמִית אֱלֹהֵי־שָׁמַע: יח וְהַשְׂאֲרָתִי בְיִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁבַע־עָת אֲלָפִים כָּל־הַבְּרַפִּים אֲשֶׁר לֹא־כָרְעוּ לְבַעַל וְכָל־הַפֶּה אֲשֶׁר לֹא־נִשְׁקָ לוֹ: יט וַיִּלְךְ מְשָׁם וַיִּמְצָא אֶת־אֱלֹהֵי־שָׁמַע בְּיָדְךָ שֹׁפֵט וְהוּא הָרִשׁ שְׁנַיִם־עָשָׂר צְמֻדִים לִפְנֵי וְהוּא בְּשָׁנִים הָעֶשְׂרִים וַיַּעֲבֹר אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אֲדָרְתוֹ אֵלָיו: כ וַיַּעֲזֹב אֶת־הַבְּקָר וַיִּרְץ אַחֲרָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לְךָ שׁוּב כִּי מִה־עֲשִׂיתִי לָךְ: כא וַיִּשָׁב מֵאַחֲרָיו וַיִּקַּח אֶת־צֶמֶד הַבְּקָר וַיִּזְבְּחֵהוּ וַיִּבְכְּלֵי הַבְּקָר בְּשֶׁלֶם הַבָּשָׂר וַיִּתֵּן לָעָם וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּקְּם וַיִּלְךְ אַחֲרָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשְׁרָתְהוּ:

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 sound⁵ 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'

SESSION SUGGESTIONS – GOD AND US

In this penultimate session participants will consider a contemporary essay about faith, how it can be sustained and how they feel God ‘speaks’ to them. The texts chosen are from Tanakh – they represent four very different, and challenging, types of God-human interaction. There is no fifth text in this session, in order to allow participants fully to explore the issues raised by the essay and to focus on them fully. It is in many ways a complement to the Introduction and you might wish to refer participants back to that.

INTRODUCTION

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

- How does the author describe moments of awareness of God?
- What are the author’s views about faith?
- What does the word *hineini* mean?

You might well find that this discussion runs longer than others of its kind, as participants share what engaged them about this essay.

TEXT STUDY

This is a session in which you might begin by introducing all four texts (briefly) to the group as a whole, and then ask participants which of the four they would like to explore more deeply. Then allow them to report back on the texts they have studied and teach the other participants about them.

There will be further opportunity in the next session for personal reflections about how participants themselves perceive God, so you may wish to focus more on the issues raised by faith. What faith issues do these passages raise? What issues today might parallel these four experiences? Are they paradigms of any kind?

You might also allow additional journal time in this session for participants to record their understanding of *hineni* – has there been a moment in which they have sensed God, a moment which is in some way central to their faith, or lack of it? What was that situation, what feelings did it inspire? (If you do this exercise, it will provide an excellent basis for the ‘My God’ session to follow.)

CONCLUSION

There is no essay for the final session, ‘My God’. Instead, hand out the ‘Questions to Consider’ sheet. Ask participants to come to the next session with answers to those questions and ready to discuss and share those answers with others. Then close the session down.

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