



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

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ZIEGLER SCHOOL OF
RABBINIC STUDIES
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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

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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.

CONCLUSIONS – MY GOD

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Look back over the course materials and your journal. Consider:

1. Do you believe in God? Did you do so when the course began?
2. If you were now to describe God in three adjectives, what would they be?
3. Are those the same three adjectives as you would have used at the beginning of the course?
4. Looking back at the essays and texts you studied during the course:
 - Is there a view of God with which you particularly identify? Why is that?
 - Is there a view of God you find particularly difficult to agree with? Why is that?
 - Is there material which changed how you previously thought about God? What?
5. What do you think is the relationship between God and Judaism? Has your view changed since the beginning of the course?
6. Is there any aspect of your Jewish practice which you might be re-assessing in the light of what you have learned about God?

CONCLUSIONS – MY GOD

MY GOD

LEAH GOLDBERG

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

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

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

WITH MY GOD, THE BLACKSMITH

URI ZVI GREENBERG

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

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

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

FROM 'GODS COME AND GO, PRAYERS STAY FOREVER'

YEHUDA AMICHAI

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

SESSION SUGGESTIONS – MY GOD

There is no essay for this session. Instead, its function is to enable participants to reflect upon what they have learned during the course and what they would like to do with those insights in the future.

You might wish, in addition to the texts for the session, to have copies of all of the course materials available so that participants can refer to them. Feel free to bring in other resources – books? pictures? if you wish. A board, or a large sheet of paper and a Sharpie, will be useful for the brainstorm.

The texts in this session are optional, and whether you use them will depend on how animated the discussion becomes. They are, though, an opportunity for participants to encounter some Hebrew poetry on the subject of God.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this session is to enable participants to reflect on their learning over the course. Has their consideration of the material changed their view of God, and if so, how?

Participants were asked at the end of the last session to answer some questions and should (hopefully) arrive at the session having considered them, and ready to discuss their answers.

You might wish to introduce the session by reminding participants of a section of Rabbi Artson's introductory essay:

“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.”

So this session is an opportunity for participants to explore/articulate their theology.

BRAINSTORM – ADJECTIVES FOR GOD

Working with the group as a whole, elicit the group's view of God. Ask participants for the three adjectives they now use to describe God. Write everything down – the point of a brainstorm is that nothing gets judged.

Then see if participants can arrange those adjectives under headings. These will vary depending on the particular group you are working with, but might well include 'Personal God'; 'Power'; 'Commandment' and other such.

Have those adjectives changed since the beginning of the course? Would any participants care to discuss whether that is the case, and why they think that might be?

This might be a time to remind participants that they have been considering God through the lens of Jewish learning and Jewish tradition. Which headings relate specifically to Judaism? Which do not? What does that say about how we understand God today? How does that sit with the views of God they encountered through the essays and texts they read?

QUESTIONS

Now break the group into small groups, or into pairs. Ask people to share their answers to the other questions they considered. If you circulate around the room during this exercise you will glean useful material to use in the plenary session which follows. The aim of this exercise is partly to get people to articulate their views of God, and partly to see if there are gaps – that is, was there an essay or section which people found it hard to glean learning from? If so, you might wish briefly to discuss that section.

Draw the group together and share answers. Where did participants learn, where did they disagree? Don't feel tempted

SESSION SUGGESTIONS – MY GOD

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

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

TEXTS [OPTIONAL]

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

JOURNALS

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

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

CONCLUSION

Thank participants, and conclude the session.

CONTRIBUTORS

RABBI BRADLEY SHAVIT ARTSON (<http://www.bradartson.com>) is the Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University, where he is Vice President. He is the author of 6 books, most recently *Gift of Soul, Gift of Wisdom: Spiritual Resources for Leadership and Mentoring*, and is a Doctoral candidate in Contemporary Theology at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion.

RABBI DAVID LIEBER, DHL is president emeritus of the American Jewish University and the Flora and Arnold Skovron Distinguished Service Professor of Literature and Thought. He was educated at the College of the City of New York and ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1948. He has been a leading figure in American Jewish life and learning for many years, being, *inter alia*, the senior editor of the *Etz Chayyim* commentary on the Torah, sponsored jointly by the Rabbinical Assembly and the Jewish Publication Society, past president of the Rabbinical Assembly, a former spiritual leader of Sinai Temple, Los Angeles and dean of students at the American Jewish University until he assumed the presidency in 1963. Dr Lieber has written extensively, with articles published in *Commentary*, *The Christian Century*, *The Reconstructionist*, *The Torch*, and *Jewish Education*. In recognition of his work, Dr. Lieber was awarded the “Doctor of Humane Letters” degree, *honoris causa*, by the Hebrew Union College in 1982 and the “Torch of Learning” Award by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1984.

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RABBI ALANA SUSKIN was ordained in 2003 at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University. Her essays, poetry and other writing have appeared in a wide variety of journals, books and anthologies. Her most recent project, "Ethical Smachot" (with Rabbi Joshua Ginsberg and Jews United for Justice), can be found online at http://www.myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/About_Jewish_Lifecycle/Overview_Themes/ethicalsmahot.htm.

DEBORAH SILVER is entering her third year at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University. She holds a Master's Degree in Hebrew Studies from Cambridge University, England, as well as an MA in the theory and practice of literary translation. She is past holder of the George Webber Prize for Hebrew Translation, and she is the Senior English Editor of the Oxford English-Hebrew Dictionary of Current Usage (Oxford, 1996). Prior to coming to Los Angeles, she practiced as an attorney before becoming an Associate Professor at BPP Law School, London.

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GOD ON THE FRONTIER

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