



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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DEAN AND VICE PRESIDENT

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

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

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

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

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

B’virkat Shalom,

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

Dean, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

Vice President, American Jewish University

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

RESOURCES

For each session you will need:

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

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

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

SUGGESTED SESSION FORMAT

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

INTRODUCTION (5 MINS)

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

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

CHAVRUTA (30 MINS)

Study of texts in chavruta

GROUP WORK (35 MINS)

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

BREAK (10 MINS)

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

GROUP STUDY (40 MINS)

- Various options are provided: see individual session suggestions

CLOSEDOWN/JOURNAL (10 MINS)

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

A FEW POINTS TO NOTE:

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

GOD IN THE TALMUD

RABBI GAIL LABOVITZ PH.D.

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

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

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

RABBINIC NAMES FOR GOD

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

“HAMAKOM”

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

“SHAMAYIM”

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

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

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

“HA-KADOSH BARUKH HU”

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

“RIBBONO SHEL OLAM”

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

“RAHMANA”

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

“SHEKHINAH”

“Shekhinah” appears at the end of this list because it actually exists in a place somewhere between a name and a concept. The word “Shekhinah” comes from the root *s, kh, n*, meaning to rest or dwell, and thus designates the manifestation of God’s spirit and presence in the world. “Shekhinah” points to God’s nearness to and intimacy with human beings at a given moment and/or in a given place. To have the Shekhinah rest directly on a particular person is to receive prophecy: Hillel the elder had eighty disciples; thirty of them were worthy like Moses our teacher to have the Shekhinah rest upon them (Sukkah 28a; see also Sotah 48b, Mo’ed Katan 25a). The places where the Shekhinah appears can be variable and multiple; it can be manifest in many places at once, just as the sun can shine on many places at once (Sanhedrin 39a; see also Bava Batra 25a). Moreover, although the Shekhinah once rested on the Temple (at least the first, if not also the second) in Jerusalem, God also causes His Shekhinah to rest in humble places like the burning thorn bush of Moses’ first prophetic experience, or on a low mountain like Sinai (Shabbat 67a and Sotah 5a, respectively⁴). The Shekhinah represents God’s closeness to human beings and the people of Israel in particular to the

² See *The Sages*, 71-2.

³ Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology: Major Concepts of the Talmud* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961; originally published 1909), 34.

⁴ These two sources are significant also in that they demonstrate the Shekhinah as an aspect of God and under God’s active control; in rabbinic literature the Shekhinah is not the quasi-independent entity and aspect of the godhead that it would come to be in some later strands of the Jewish tradition.

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

WHAT CAN WE SAY TO AND ABOUT GOD IN PRAYER?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GOD IN TALMUDIC AGGADAH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

GOD IN THE TALMUD – TEXT 1

תלמוד בבלי, יומא ס.ט.ב.

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

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, YOMA 69B

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

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

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

STUDY QUESTIONS

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

GOD IN THE TALMUD – TEXT 2

תלמוד בבלי, ברכות ג.א

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

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, BERAKHOT 3A

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

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

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

STUDY QUESTIONS

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

GOD IN THE TALMUD – TEXT 3

תלמוד בבלי, ברכות כח.ב

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

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, BERAKHOT 28B

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

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

STUDY QUESTIONS

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

GOD IN THE TALMUD – TEXT 4

משנה, סנהדרין.ה

ה אָמַר רַבִּי מֵאִיר, בְּזִמְנֵי שְׂאֵדָם מִצְטַעֵר, (שְׂכִינָה) מָה הִלְשׁוֹן אֹמְרָת (כְּבִיכּוֹל) קָלְנִי מֵרֵאשִׁי, קָלְנִי מִזְרוּעֵי. אִם כֵּן הַמָּקוֹם מִצְטַעֵר עַל דָּמָם שֶׁל רְשָׁעִים שֶׁנִּשְׁפְּדוּ, קָל וְחִמָּר עַל דָּמָם שֶׁל צְדִיקִים.

MISHNAH SANHEDRIN 6:5

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

תלמוד בבלי, מגילה כט.א

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

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, MEGILLAH 29A

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

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

STUDY QUESTIONS

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

GOD IN THE TALMUD – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

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

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

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, BERAKHOT 33B

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

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

תלמוד בבלי, ברכות ס.א

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

BABYLONIAN TALMUD BERAKHOT 60A

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

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

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

SESSION SUGGESTIONS – GOD IN THE TALMUD

In this session the group will consider the various ways God is portrayed in the Talmud. As the essay suggests, this is something of a ‘Where’s Waldo?’ exercise! You might also need to preface the session with a brief introduction to what Mishnah and Gemara are, for those participants for whom they are unfamiliar.

INTRODUCTION

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

- What names of God are mentioned in the Talmud? What do they mean?
- How do the rabbis of the Talmud understand prayer?
- What are some of the ways in which God is portrayed?

TEXT STUDY

Split the class into [up to] 4 chavruta groups and hand out the texts. The questions provided should help generate the discussion. It will be useful for some groups to be able to refer to Tanach.

Allow each group to report back on their understanding of the texts and their answers to the questions, and then draw the discussion together. You may find that the discussion runs long – the texts have a great deal in them.

CREATIVE STUDY

The text provided is a short one, but there is a lot to be gleaned from it. It has been chosen because it so beautifully expresses contradiction – and also because participants might well take issue with the Gemara’s examples. Is it really the case that what looks bad in the short term turns out to be good, and vice versa? And what does all that say about God?

Alternatively, you may have a favorite piece of Gemara of your own to bring to this session for the class to consider, or you may wish to choose one of the other examples referred to in the essay (but please, don’t use Akhnai yet, because that is turning up in the halakhah session!)

CONCLUSION

Allow participants time to journal. Hand out the essay for next time and conclude the session.

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