



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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ZIEGLER SCHOOL OF  
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**RABBI BRADLEY SHAVIT ARTSON**

DEAN AND VICE PRESIDENT

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

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

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

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

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

B’virkat Shalom,

**Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson**

Dean, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

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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.

# GOD IN MIDRASH

RABBI ILANA GRINBLAT

## INTRODUCTION

To explore the understanding of God in the Midrash, I would like to begin with a story that took place long before Midrash formally came into being. This story represents one of the first appearances in the Bible of the verb *darash*, which is the root of Midrash.<sup>1</sup> As Renee Bloch notes, the word Midrash is mentioned only twice in the Tanakh, within the book of Chronicles, yet the verb *darash* appears frequently. “It evokes the idea of a directed search” and most often is used in a religious sense, meaning “to seek the response of God in worship and personal prayer.”<sup>2</sup> This type of seeking becomes the basis of Midrash and can become a paradigm for understanding the role of God in Midrash.

This story is told in the book of Genesis that the matriarch Rebecca is in physical pain during pregnancy. The text reads: “And the children struggled together inside her, and she said, ‘If it be so, why am I thus?’ and she went to inquire [*lidrosh*] of the Lord.”<sup>3</sup>

This *darash* (inquiry) was produced by personal suffering that was both physical and spiritual. Rebecca was in pain and since she did not understand its cause, she faced a crisis of meaning. Her inquiry was urgent, and she longed for a resolution to this problem. The crisis caused her to ask an existential question: “*im ken lama zeh anochi?*” This literally means: “If so, why this me?” It can alternately be understood: “Why is this happening to me?”<sup>4</sup> or even “If so, why do I exist?”<sup>5</sup> Given what was happening to her, Rebecca sought to understand the nature of her place in the world.

With these queries in mind, she “went to inquire of the Lord.” Not God but Rebecca took the initiative in this quest. Through her efforts, God – who initially felt distant from her – was brought closer. Prior to this moment, God never spoke to Rebecca but because of her initiative, God responded.

The text continues: “And the Lord said to her, ‘Two nations are in your womb and two peoples shall be separated from your bowels, and the one shall be stronger than the other people, and the elder shall serve the younger.’”<sup>6</sup>

In responding, God did not remove Rebecca’s pain. Rather, God helped her see the bigger picture by explaining the significance of the suffering. God showed Rebecca how her present pain would lead to a brighter future and how her personal story was connected to the larger narrative of the Jewish people. God thereby revealed the purpose of Rebecca’s life, and she subsequently acted in pursuit of this vision.

These aspects of Rebecca’s story become the essential elements of Midrash and its understanding of God.

## BEGINNING WITH A CRISIS

As with Rebecca’s story, the starting place for the development of Midrash is in crisis. The body of literature known as Midrash begins early in the Tannaitic period; the earliest written compilations of Midrash – the Mekhilta, Sifra, and Sifre – are contemporaneous with the Mishnah (200 CE) although the teachings contained therein could be earlier. The rabbis at this time were facing a great historical crisis in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. They also endured continuing oppression under Roman rule that entailed persecution and even death as punishment for following Jewish practices.

The destruction of the Temple represented a crisis for the rabbis and the people on many levels. It was a physical disaster leading to the dispersal and death of many Jews. The destruction also presented a halakhic dilemma, a crisis of Jewish law. Since so much of Jewish practice involved the Temple, Jewish law had to be completely reworked in the

<sup>1</sup> This quote comes from the second passage in which the root “*darash*” is found in the Tanakh.

<sup>2</sup> Renee Bloch, “Midrash,” in Jacob Neusner, ed. **Origins of Judaism** Vol. XI part I. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990). p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 25:22. Translation by Harold Fisch, **The Holy Scriptures**. (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Per Fisch translation, “If it be so, why am I thus?” The Malbim understands this translation as: “If so, why am I in the world?”

<sup>5</sup> **Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text**. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 25: 23.



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absence of sacrifices. Furthermore, the destruction of the Temple presented a theological crisis regarding why God would allow such a tragedy to happen and whether God still loved and protected the Jewish people. The historical trauma produced an urgent crisis of meaning. Midrash sought to answer Rebecca's question: "If so, why this me?" by articulating: given these painful events, who am I, and how do I live in this kind of world?

In addition to the historical calamity of this period, the rabbis responded to crises within the Torah text itself. The starting point of Midrash is problems within the verses themselves, like grammatical incongruities, unclear words or missing details. In responding to these "crises," the rabbis simultaneously addressed the crises of their time and bridged the gap between the biblical and rabbinic periods.

As Dr. Barry Holtz wrote, "Primarily we can see the central issue behind the emergence of Midrash as the need to deal with the presence of cultural or religious tension and discontinuity. Where there are questions that demand answers and where there are new cultural and intellectual pressures that must be addressed, Midrash comes into play as a way of resolving crisis and reaffirming continuity with the traditions of the past."<sup>7</sup>

## ASKING EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS

With this backdrop, Midrash became a vehicle for the rabbis to ask existential questions about God. By couching their questions within the biblical narratives, Midrash provided a safe vehicle for asking difficult questions of God that would have been too dangerous to ask directly. Several well-known texts broach these questions. For example, in *Genesis Rabbah* (a midrashic collection edited in the 5th century) Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai gives the following interpretation of Genesis 4:10:

"Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: This is a difficult thing to say, and it is impossible to say it clearly. Once two athletes were wrestling before the king. If the king wants, they can be separated, but he did not want them separated. One overcame the other and killed him. The loser cried out as he died: 'Who will get justice for me from the king?' Thus: 'The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the land.' (Genesis 4:10)."<sup>8</sup>

By using the metaphor of the king failing to intervene in the wrestling match, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai was able to ask why God does not stop human conduct and thereby hold God responsible for such evil. The rabbi admitted that he would be unable to ask this question (or make this implicit criticism of God) without the vehicle of Midrash. Like the athletes in the parable, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai wrestled with God and the theological questions raised by the crisis of his time.

Dr. David Stern notes that obfuscation is a common feature of Midrash in general and the *mashal* (parable) in particular. "This model of the *mashal* sees the literary form as one typically used in political or religious oppressive situations to express controversial or dangerous beliefs that were better not articulated openly, or could not be, either for political or doctrinal reasons."<sup>9</sup>

In this sense, Midrash is particularly important for our own time. Like the rabbis after the destruction of the Temple, we face a cataclysmic tragedy that calls into question our core beliefs. The Holocaust raises these same theological questions: Why does God not intervene to prevent human evil? Why does God not protect good people? Does God still love us? How can we maintain our faith in an evil world? The questions asked by the rabbis, although ancient, could not be more contemporary. In this sense, Midrash can help us in our own God wrestling.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Holtz, "Midrash," in **Back to the Sources** (New York: Touchstone Publishers, 1984). p. 179.

<sup>8</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 22:9

<sup>9</sup> David Stern, "The Rabbinic Parable and the Narrative of Interpretation," in Michael Fishbane, ed., **The Midrashic Imagination** (Albany: State University of New York, 1993). p. 82.



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## HUMAN INITIATIVE

In Rebecca's story, crises and existential questions led her to seek out God. In many cases within the Bible, God takes the first step and speaks to people, but here *she* takes the initiative and reaches toward God who has been distant from her until this point. Likewise, Midrash emphasizes human initiative in the divine-human encounter. *Human* actions and creativity deepen the relationship with God.

One parable in *Eliahu Zuta*, a midrashic collection written between the seventh and tenth centuries, illustrates this point:

“A king of flesh and blood had two servants whom he loved completely. He gave each of them a measure of wheat and a bundle of flax. The intelligent one what did he do? He wove the flax into a cloth and made flour from the wheat, sifted it, ground it, kneaded it, and baked it and arranged it on the table, spread upon it the cloth and left it until the king returned. The stupid one did not do anything. After a time, the king returned to his house and said to them: ‘My sons, bring me what I gave you.’ One brought out the table set with the bread and the cloth spread upon it, and the other brought the wheat in a basket and the bundle of flax with it. Oh what an embarrassment! Oh what a disgrace! Which do you think was most beloved? The one who brought the table with the bread upon it... (Similarly) when God gave the Torah to Israel, God gave it as wheat from which to make flour and flax from which to make clothing through the rules of interpretation.”<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, the king (who represents God) begins by showing love to his servants/sons by giving them these gifts but then disappears without an explanation. During that absence, the wise son (who represents the people Israel) takes the initiative and works the raw materials of Torah into artistic creations through the process of Midrash. This handiwork is pleasing to the king/God when he returns. The human activity of interpretation becomes the vehicle for sustaining the divine-human relationship when God cannot be found. This Midrash acknowledges that God may feel distant at times in our lives, but God does not permanently disappear. God will return and be pleased with how we lovingly transformed the Torah. Midrash becomes a vehicle for expressing love in the divine-human bond, which is mutual. God showed love for the people of Israel by giving them the Torah, and the people show love for God by interpreting it.

This reciprocity is striking. The simplicity of the parable masks how radical it is. One might expect that when the king comes back, he would favor the son who preserved the gifts intact rather than the son who changed them. A lender generally expects an item to be returned by the borrower in its original condition. Likewise, many religious traditions maintain that the human role is *not* to reread or interpret scripture but accept it literally and abide by the rules. However, according to this Midrash and the spirit of Jewish writings over the centuries, the Torah was not lent to the people but given freely as a gift; human beings are not only allowed but expected to transform it as a means of expressing love for their Creator.

The reciprocity of the divine-human relationship is especially noteworthy in contrast to Christianity. Rabbi Dr. Reuven Kimmelman notes that in Christianity, God gave God's only son as a sacrifice that expressed divine love for people. This sacrifice is so extreme that there is nothing comparable that a person can give God in return. This gift cannot be reciprocated but only accepted in gratitude. By contrast, in Judaism God gave the Torah as an expression of divine love, and one can easily reciprocate by interpreting the Torah – making wheat into flour and weaving flax into cloth.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Literally, God gave the Torah to Israel, God only gave it as wheat from which to make flour and flax from which to make cloth through a general rule followed by a detail and a detail followed by a general rule, and a general rule followed by a detail and a general rule. These are the 4th, 5th and 6th of R. Ishmael's 13 rules of interpretation.

<sup>11</sup> Reuven Kimmelman, **The Hidden Poetry of the Jewish Prayerbook** (Our Learning Company, 2005). Lecture 7.





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The importance of the human role in the divine-human relationship is seen in many places in Midrash, most notably in the first of the Ten Commandments – the quintessential moment of God’s revelation. The Mekhilta begins its interpretation of the First Commandment with the following parable:

“Why were the Ten Commandments not written in the beginning of the Torah? A parable was given. To what may this be compared? To a king who entered a province said to the people, ‘May I be your king?’ The people said to him: ‘You have not done anything good for us that you should rule over us.’ What did he do? He built the (city) wall for them, he brought in the water (supply) for them, and he fought their wars. He said to them: ‘May I be your king?’ They said to him: ‘Yes, yes.’ Likewise, God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, divided the sea for them, sent down manna for them, brought up the well for them, brought quail for them, and fought for them the war with Amalek. Then God said to them: ‘Am I to be your king?’ And they replied, ‘Yes, yes.’”<sup>12</sup>

Here, in God’s most forceful display of revelation, the Midrash notes the power of the people. In order for God to rule over the people, they had to accept God’s rule. In this parable, God needs to establish credibility with the people before being accepted. God’s authority derives from the people’s affirmation. In this sense, the human-divine relationship is truly a partnership – wherein God rules and the people uphold God as their ruler.

God is clearly the senior partner in the relationship. In the Midrashic metaphor, God is the king and we are the subjects, or alternately God is the parent and we are the children. However, God’s seniority does not diminish the importance of the human role in the relationship. We are not passive but active partners in the joint task of bringing Torah to the world.

## BRINGING GOD CLOSE

Rebecca’s seeking elicits a response from God and calls God into interaction with her. Likewise, the midrashic process does not merely pass the time while the king/God is away. Rather it beckons the king/God back home. Midrash gives people a way to feel God’s presence through the text. As Stern notes, midrash does not merely “aim at discovering meaning in the text but at restoring the absent presence, the guarantor of meaning. Its real aim is the restoration of a feeling of intimacy and relationship with the estranged text, and therefore with God.”<sup>13</sup>

This point can be illustrated by a midrash in Lamentations Rabbah (a fifth century compilation):

“R Abba bar Kahana said: This situation may be likened to a king who married a lady and wrote her a long *ketubah* [wedding contract] that enumerated: ‘So many state-apartments I am preparing for you, so many jewels I am preparing for you, and so much silver and gold I give you.’ The king left her and went to a distant land for many years. Her neighbors used to vex her saying, ‘Your husband has deserted you. Come and be married to another man.’ She wept and sighed but whenever she went into her room and read her *ketubah*, she would be consoled. After many years, the king returned and said to her, ‘I am astonished that you waited for me all these years.’ She replied, ‘My lord king, if it had not been for the generous *ketubah* you wrote me, then surely my neighbors would have won me over.’ So the nations of the world taunt Israel and say, ‘Your God has no need of you; he has deserted you and removed His presence from you. Come to us, and we shall appoint commanders and leaders

<sup>12</sup> *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael. Tractate Bahodesh, Chapter 5.*

<sup>13</sup> *Stern, p. 92.*

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of every sort for you.' Israel enters the synagogues and houses of study and reads in the Torah, 'I will look with favor upon you ... and I will not spurn you.' (Leviticus 26: 9-11) and they are consoled. In the future, the Holy One, blessed be He, will say to Israel, 'I am astonished that you waited for me all these years,' and they will reply, 'If it had not been for the Torah which you gave us ... the nations of the world would have led us astray.' Therefore it is stated, 'This do I recall and therefore have hope.' (Lamentations 3:21)" <sup>14</sup>

By reading the *ketubah*, the wife in this story was able to feel her husband's love despite the neighbors' taunts, and she maintained hope that eventually he would return to her completely. Likewise, Midrash allows the people of Israel to experience God's love through the Torah and feel God's closeness, even in a brutal world. Midrash fosters hope in the coming of the messianic era where God's presence will be felt more fully and directly in the redeemed world.

As Stern notes,<sup>15</sup> this story leaves unanswered many theological questions. It does not explain why the king went away for so long or when he will be returning. The Midrash cannot answer those questions (and nor can we). The Midrash is remarkably honest about the challenge of living in this world where God can feel distant. Nevertheless, people can feel close to God and have faith. They can experience God's love and express love for God. Midrash gives them a way.

## FINDING MEANING

When speaking to Rebecca, God gave her an explanation for her situation that linked her with the larger historical narrative. God did not eliminate her pain, but she was comforted to see her suffering as part of a greater purpose in her life. Similarly, by interpreting the Torah, the rabbis uncovered God-given meaning in their lives. Their pain was not removed; they still lived under excruciatingly difficult circumstances, but they found strength in seeing their lives as part of a whole that God lovingly created and would ultimately redeem. The people thereby were connected to God and each other, to their ancestors and descendants who would share a sacred task.

For example, the Mekhilta offers the following interpretation of the last words of the second of the Ten Commandments:

"Rabbi Natan says: 'To them that love Me and keep My commandments.' These are the people of Israel who live in the land of Israel and give their lives for the sake of the commandments. 'Why are you being led out to be decapitated?' 'Because I circumcised my son.' 'Why are you being led out to be burned?' 'Because I read in the Torah.' 'Why are you being led out to be crucified?' 'Because I ate unleavened bread.' 'Why are you receiving one hundred lashes?' 'Because I shook the *lulav*,' as it is written, 'That I was wounded in the house of those who love me' [Zechariah 13: 6]. These wounds caused me to be beloved of my father in heaven."<sup>16</sup>

Here God is not the source of suffering (although God does not intervene to stop it). God does not want the people to suffer, yet the people's fidelity to God and their tradition despite suffering makes them beloved in God's eyes. The children of Israel can experience God's love even amid pain because they know that they are fulfilling their purpose of "loving God and keeping the commandments."

While pain is not removed, it is made bearable in the context of greater meaning. The eighteenth century Hassidic Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, whose town faced a deadly plague, prayed these words: "Master of the universe, I do not know what questions to ask. I do not expect You to reveal Your secrets to me. All I ask is that You show me one thing: what this moment means to me and what You demand of me. I do not ask why I suffer. I ask only do I suffer for Your sake."

<sup>14</sup> *Eicha Rabba* 3:101 (Buber edition), cited in Stern, *ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*. p. 88.

<sup>16</sup> *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Bachodesh, Chapter 6*.

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Midrash answers Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's prayer. Through the process of Midrash, the rabbis show precisely "what this moment means" and "what God demands" of them. Although the Midrash cannot adequately answer the question "Why do I suffer?" it reassures the people in pain that God is with them.

Renee Bloch explains:

*"Midrash always involves a living Word addressed personally to the people of God and each of its members, a Word which makes clear the divine wishes and demands and calls for a response, never theoretical, and a commitment: the fidelity of a people and each of its members to the demands which the Word makes manifest. Revealed at a specific point in history, this Word is nevertheless addressed to people of all times. Thus it ought to remain open indefinitely to all new understanding of the message, all legitimate adaptations to all situations ... So long as there is a people of God who regard the Bible as the living Word of God, there will be midrash."*<sup>17</sup>

## CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS

Today, daily life is far more comfortable and secure than it was in biblical and rabbinic times, yet like our ancestors we have witnessed catastrophes of cataclysmic proportions. We, too, face historical struggles as well as personal crises. These moments prompt us to wrestle with existential and theological questions. Like our predecessors, we long for closeness with God yet often feel distant. We seek the deeper purpose of our lives – both in pain and joy.

For us as for the rabbis, Midrash can be a vehicle that brings us closer to ultimate meaning. Through creative interpretation, we can uncover God's presence in our lives. We can feel God's love through the gift of Torah and express our love in return. We can find comfort in our struggles by discovering a higher purpose. Like Rebecca, through seeking we can "walk with God."

<sup>17</sup> Bloch, p. 33.

# GOD IN MIDRASH – TEXT 1

שמות רבה פרשה ג:ו

ויאמר אלהים אל משה, אמר רבי אבא בר ממל אמר ליה הקב"ה למשה שמי אתה מבקש לידע, לפי מעשי אני נקרא פעמים שאני נקרא באל שדי, בעבאות, באלהים, בה', כשאני דן את הבריות אני נקרא אלהים, וכשאני עושה מלחמה ברשעים אני נקרא עבאות, וכשאני תולה על הטאיו של אדם אני נקרא אל שדי, וכשאני מרחם על עולמי אני נקרא ה', שאין ה' אלא מדת רחמים שנאמר (שמות לד) ה' ה' אל רחום וחנון, הוי אהיה אשר אהיה אני נקרא לפי מעשי.

ר' יצחק אומר א"ל הקב"ה למשה אמור להם אני שהייתי ואני הוא עכשיו ואני הוא לעתיד לבא, לכך כתיב אהיה שלשה פעמים...

## SHEMOT RABBAH PARASHAH III:6 [BASED ON EXODUS 3:6]

AND GOD SAID [TO MOSES] I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS [THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, THE GOD OF ISAAC, THE GOD OF JACOB]. R Abba b. Mammal said: God said to Moses, "You wish to know my name? Well, I am called according to my work. Sometimes I am called 'Almighty God', 'Lord of Hosts', 'God', 'Lord'. When I am judging created beings I am called 'God' and when I am waging war against the wicked I am called 'Lord of Hosts'. When I suspend judgment for man's sins I am called 'Almighty God [*el shaddai*]' and when I am merciful to my world I am called 'Adonai', for Adonai is the attribute of mercy, as it is said: 'The Lord, the Lord, God, merciful and gracious [Exodus 34:6]'. Hence I AM THAT I AM in virtue of my deeds."

R Isaac said: God said to Moses, "Tell them that I am now what I always was and always will be"; this is why the word *ehyeh* is written three times...

### COMPARE:

פסיקתא דרב כהנא יב:כה

ד"א אנכי י"י אלהיך (שמות כ'). א"ר חננא בר פפא נראה להם הקב"ה פנים זעופות, פנים בינוניות, פנים מסבירות, פנים שוחקות. פנים זועמות למקרא, כשאדם מלמד את בנו תורה צריך ללמדו באימה. פנים בינונית למשנה. פנים מסבירות לתלמוד. פנים שוחקות לאגדה. אמ' להם הקב"ה אע"פ שאתם רואין כל הדמויות הללו, אלא אנכי י"י אלהיך (שמות כ').

## PESIKTA D'RAV KAHANA 12:25 [BASED ON EXODUS 20:2]

I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD. Hanania bar Papa said: The Holy Blessed One appeared to them with an angry face, and with a neutral face, and with a friendly face, and with a smiling face. The angry face was for Torah: when a person teaches their son Torah, they should do so with awe. The neutral face was for Mishnah. The friendly face was for Talmud. The smiling face was for *aggadah* [Midrash]. The Holy Blessed One said to them, even though you see all of these different faces I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- Look up the quotations in their context. What does the context add?
- What do God's names say about God in the first Midrash?
- What names would you give to the faces in the second Midrash?
- Do you think there might be other names for God? If so – what might they be?

## GOD IN MIDRASH – TEXT 2

### מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בחדשה

אנכי ה' אלהיך. למה נאמר, לפי שנגלה על הים כנבור עושה מלחמות, שנאמר (שמות טו) ה' איש מלחמה. נגלה על הר סיני בזקן מלא רחמים, שנאמר (שמות כד י) ויראו את אלהי ישראל, וכשנגאלו מה הוא אומר, וכעצם השמים לטוהר; ואו' (דניאל ז ט י) חזה הוית עד די כרסון רמיו, ואומר נהר דינור נגד ונפק מן קדמוהי וגו'. שלא ליתן פתחון פה לאומות העולם לומר, שתי רשויות הן. אלא אנכי ה' אלהיך, אני במצרים, אני על הים, אני בסיני אני לשעבר, אני לעתיד לבא, אני לעולם הזה, אני לעולם הבא. שנאמר (דברים לב ט) ראו עתה כי אני אני הוא, ואומר (ישעי' מו ד) ועד זקנה אני הוא, ואומר (ישעי' מד ו) כה אמר ה' מלך ישראל וגואלו ה' צבאות אני ראשון ואני אחרון.

### MEKHILTA D'RABBI ISHMAEL BAHODESH 5 [BASED ON EXODUS 20:2]

I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD. Why is this said? Because at the sea he appeared to them as a mighty hero doing battle, as it is said: “The Lord is a man of war [Exodus 15:3].” At Sinai he appeared to them as an old man full of mercy. It is said: “And they saw the God of Israel etc. [Exodus 24:10].” And of the time after they had been redeemed, what does it say? “And the like of the very heaven for clarity [Exodus 24:10].” Again it says: “I looked until thrones were placed [Daniel 7:9].” And it also says: “A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him etc. [Daniel 7:10].”

So as to ensure the nations of the world do not claim that there are two authorities, the Torah states: “I am the Lord your God. I am the One who was in Egypt, and I am the One who was at the sea. I am the One who was at Sinai. I am the One who was in the past and I am the One who will be in the future. I am the One who is in this world and I am the One who will be in the world to come, as it is said, ‘See now that I, even I, am he’ etc [Deuteronomy 32:9].” And it says: “Even to old age I am the same [Isaiah 46:4].” And it says: “Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his redeemer the Lord of Hosts: I am the first and I am the last [Isaiah 44:6].”

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- Look up the quotations in their context. What does the context add?
- How else has God appeared in Jewish history?
- How can God be one and yet multiple? What does it mean that we understand God in this way?
- Do you think there might be other names for God? If so – what might they be?

## GOD IN MIDRASH – TEXT 3

### מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בחדש ו

לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני. למה נאמר, לפי שנאמר אנכי ה' אלהיך. משל למלך בשר ודם שנכנס למדינה, אמרו לו עבדיו, גזור עליהם גזרות. אמר להם לאו, כשיקבלו את מלכותי, אנזור עליהם גזרות, שאם מלכותי לא יקבלו, גזרותי לא יקבלו. כך אמר המקום לישראל, אנכי ה' אלהיך – לא יהיה אלהים אחרים. אמר להם, אני הוא, שקבלתם מלכותי עליכם במצרים, אמרו לו, כן. וכשם שקבלתם מלכותי עליכם, קבלו גזרותי: לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני. רבי שמעון בן יוחאי אומר, הוא שנאמר להלן (ויקרא יח ב) אני ה' אלהיכם, אני הוא שקבלתם מלכותי עליכם בסיני; אמרו לו, הן והן; קבלתם מלכותי, קבלו גזרותי: לא יהיה לכם אלהים אחרים על פני.

### MEKHILTA D'RABBI ISHMAEL BAHODESH 6 [BASED ON EXODUS 20:2-3]

YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME. Why is this written, since it is written, “I am the Lord your God?” This can be compared to a human king who entered a country. His servants said to him: “Decree upon them decrees.” He said to them, “No, when they will accept my rule, then I will decree upon them decrees, because if they do not accept my rule, they will not accept my decrees.” Similarly, God said to Israel, “I am the Lord your God” and “Do not have any other gods before me.” God said to them, “I am the One whose rule you accepted in Egypt, is that right?” They said to him: “Yes.” [God continued] “So just as you accepted my rule upon you, accept my decrees: You shall have no other gods before me.”

#### COMPARE:

### תלמוד בבלי, שבת פה.א

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר, אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כנגינת, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה – מוטב, ואם לאו – שם תהא קבורתכם.

### BABYLONIAN TALMUD, SHABBAT 88A

AND THEY STOOD UNDER THE MOUNTAIN. R Abdimi b Hama b Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy Blessed One turned the mountain upside down over them like a barrel, and said to them, “If you accept the Torah, that is good: and if not, here is where you will be buried!”

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

- Look up the quotations in their context. What does the context add?
- How does the passage from the Midrash differ from the passage in the Talmud?
- What does that difference say about how we can understand God?
- Do you think there might be other ways to envisage God? If so – what might they be?



## GOD IN MIDRASH – TEXT 4

### פסיקתא דרב כהנא יב:כה

א"ר לוי נראה להם הקב"ה כאיקונין הווי שיש לה פנים מכל מקום, אלף בני אדם מביטין בה והיא מבטת בכולם. כך הקב"ה כשהיה מדבר כל אחד ואחד מישר' היה אומ' עמי הדבר מדבר, אנכי י"י אלהיכם אין כת' כאן, אלא אנכי י"י אלהיך (שמות כ') א"ר יוסי בר' חנינא ולפי כוחן של כל אחד ואחד היה הדיבר מדבר עמו. ואל תתמה על הדבר הזה, שהיה המן יורד לישראל כל אחד ואחד היה טועמו לפי כוחו, התינוקות לפי כוחן, והבחורים לפי כוחן, הזקנים לפי כוחן. התינוקות לפי כוחן, כשם שהתינוק הזה היונק בשדי אמו כך היה טועמו, שנא' והיה טעמו כטעם לשד השמן (במדבר יא: ח). והבחורים לפי כוחן, שנ' ולחמי אשר נתתי לך לחם ושמן ודבש האכלתיך (יחזקאל טז: יט). והזקנים לפי כוחן, שנ' וטעמו כצפיחית בדבש (שמות טז: לא). ומה אם המן כל אחד ואחד לפי כוחן היה טועם לפיו, בדיבר כל אחד ואחד שומע לפי כוחן.

### PESIKTA D'RAV KAHANA 12:25 [BASED ON EXODUS 20:2]

I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD... Rabbi Levi said that the Holy Blessed One appeared like one of those icons which has faces everywhere; a thousand people can look at it, and it looks back at each one. In the same way, when God spoke, each individual could say, "the speaker is speaking to me!" It does not say "I am the Lord your God" with "you" in the plural; it says "you" in the singular.

Rabbi Yosi bar Hanina said: God's speech came to each individual according to their capacity. Do not be surprised at this: when the manna descended for Israel, each person tasted it according to their own capacity. Infants tasted it according to their capacity, the young according to theirs, elders according to theirs. To infants according to their capacity it tasted like their mothers' milk, as it says: "It tasted like rich cream [Num. 11:8]." To the young it tasted according to their capacity, as it says: "My bread, which I gave you: bread, and oil, and honey [Ezekiel 16:19]." To elders it tasted according to their capacity, as it says: "The taste of it was like wafers made with honey [Ex. 16:31]." In the same way as the manna tasted in each person's mouth according to their capacity, so each individual heard God's speech according to their capacity.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- Look up the quotations in their context. What does the context add?
- How else might God have appeared at Sinai?
- How can God be one and yet multiple? What does it say that we understand God in this way?
- Do you think there might be other ways to 'taste' God? If so – what might they be?

# GOD IN MIDRASH – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

## EVERY MAN HAS A NAME

ZELDA

every man has a name  
given to him by God  
& given to him by his father and his mother  
every man has a name  
given to him by his height & the way that he smiles  
& given to him by his clothing  
every man has a name  
given to him by the mountains  
& given to him by his walls  
every man has a name  
given to him by the constellations  
& given to him by his neighbors  
every man has a name  
given to him by his sins  
& given to him by his longing  
every man has a name  
given to him by his enemies  
& given to him by his love  
every man has a name  
given to him by his celebrations  
& given to him by his work  
every man has a name  
given to him by the seasons of the year  
& given to him by his blindness  
every man has a name  
given to him by the sea  
& given to him  
by his death.





# SESSION SUGGESTIONS – GOD IN MIDRASH

**In this session the group will consider Midrash. Various midrashim illustrating how God has been perceived by the Rabbis will be circulated and discussed. There are different options for the group part of the session.**

## INTRODUCTION

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

- What is Midrash?
- What function does it serve?
- What are the circumstances in which it might be created?

## TEXT STUDY

Split the class into [up to] 4 chavruta groups and hand out the texts. The questions provided should help generate the discussion. You may wish to let groups begin working on their own, and then put them together, two and two, so that they can compare and contrast the texts they have been working on.

Various images of God arise from the texts which have been chosen – a king, a warlord, an old man, a leader – and God is also perceived in different ways (sight, sound, taste).

Allow each group to report back on their understanding of the texts and their answers to the questions, and then draw the discussion together. All four groups have been given a ‘leading question’ stimulating them to consider that God can be differently perceived by every individual, which is the link to the second part of the session.

## GROUP STUDY

Text based: Let participants brainstorm how God might be differently perceived by different people – a flower? a light? a baby’s cry? Then hand out the translation of the Zelda poem and let participants study it. If that poem were to be about God – how would it differ?

If you want to be more creative, see if the class can use the images it generated to write its own poem about God. And/or see if participants can write a Midrash. The difference between this and the poem exercise above is that they need to use a piece of text from Tanach to ‘jump off’. The choice will depend on your class, but you could use any of the verses in any of the Midrashim above, as well as Exodus 6:2-3 (‘And Elohim spoke to Moses and told him: I am Adonai’ etc.)

## CONCLUSION

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

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