



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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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 MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

RABBI JOEL REMBAUM, PH.D.

INTRODUCTION

As Judaism transitioned from the Rabbinic period to the Middle Ages, it carried forward an unsystematic conceptualization of God. While legal traditions had to an extent been organized with the development of Mishnah, Tosefta and the Talmuds, no similar process had emerged with regard to the non-legal traditions of the Midrash. It remained atomistically grounded in individual Biblical passages and organized according to the order of Scripture rather than any human-designed rational structure. Consequently, God, as perceived by pre-medieval Sages, emerged as a multi-faceted Deity with contradictory attributes. Rabbinic Judaism was unwavering in its monotheism and its absolute rejection of the notion that there were multiple divine entities in heaven. However, it did recognize the existence of angels and other spiritual entities that mediated between God and the world. And, while the God of the Rabbis was not material and not pantheistic, Rabbinic Judaism did tolerate midrashic and mystical notions that depicted God in very anthropomorphic ways.

Over the course of the first two Muslim centuries (ca. 650-850) Islamic thinkers began to absorb and integrate into their religious ideology principles of Greco-Roman philosophy and science. In so doing, they also opened the door for the introduction of Classical ideas and systems into Jewish thought. As a “daughter” monotheistic faith, Islam demonstrated that classical philosophy (long ignored by the rabbis as an expression of pagan culture and, hence, taboo) could offer new insights into metaphysical concepts and demonstrate the reasonableness of Scripture and Jewish beliefs. And so pious Jews began to read and interpret the likes of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, and systematized and rationalized notions of God and God’s relationship to the world emerged.

We will see that the work of these thinkers represents a new departure in the way that Jews thought about God. We may also find their work challenging. It is complex, elevated and technical in its tone. As we read these thinkers today we need to understand that they operated in a culture which was radically different from our own. In the Middle Ages, culture was organized around the community rather than the individual. Status, class, livelihood and belief were all externally defined. The idea of individual autonomy, which was to take hold after the Enlightenment, had not yet appeared. Philosophy, regarded as “the handmaiden of religion”, was called into service to help prove that Judaism was rational and reasonable – an honorable and noble tradition, to be respected and admired. Philosophical terminology and ideas were wedded to previously multi-faceted or contradictory Jewish theology in order to make – or to attempt to make – a coherent whole.

With this in mind, we can look at four of the leading Jewish thinkers of the period. They wrote their philosophical works in Arabic, not only because it was the idiom of expression of their day, but also because Arabic provided them with the technical language and the formulation of concepts they needed to present their thinking.

SAADIA BEN JOSEPH – KALAM

Saadia ben Joseph (Sa’id ibn Yusuf or Sa’adya al-Fayyumi, 882-942) was born in the Fayyum district of Egypt. A rabbinic Renaissance man who contributed in a wide range of cultural areas (law, polemics, Bible translation and commentary, grammar and linguistics, poetry, liturgy and philosophy), Saadia served as Gaon of the great academy of Sura in Iraq. The impact of his work was felt over the centuries, and his philosophical magnum opus, *Kitab al-‘amanat wal-i’tikadat* (*Sefer ha-emunot v’ha-deot* in Hebrew, *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*) served as a paradigm for subsequent generations of Jewish thinkers who sought to harmonize reason and revelation. Saadia’s eclectic philosophy draws upon key elements of Greek thinking as filtered through Islamic Kalam theology, especially that of the Mutazilite

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school with its emphasis on affirming the unity of God and divine justice. In this way, Saadia attempts to demonstrate the rationality of Judaism. It is commonly noted that he was the first Jewish thinker since Philo of Alexandria (1st century C.E.) to develop such a harmonization of Judaism and Classical philosophy. In the *Kiṭab* Saadia intersperses his logical inferences and reasoned conclusions with frequent references to the Bible, quoting more than 1300 passages, seeking thereby to also demonstrate the rationality of scripture.

Like the Mutazilites, Saadia argues that the fact the world was created from nothing (*ex nihilo*) proves the existence of God. God, he says, is the Creator of all things. As Creator He is one and has no associate with him. God is an eternal being and not subject to form, quality, dimension, limit, place or time. God is immune to pain, unaffected by action and not subject to accidents. God does no injustice. Why, Saadia asks, did God create the world in the first place? He had no motive, since, as opposed to people, he had no benefit by creating. Saadia responds: It was an act of free will on God's part, to reveal and make manifest His wisdom and to benefit his creatures so they could obey him and be rewarded.

Standing on the highest rung of the ladder of knowledge, the idea of the Creator is the most abstract notion, the subtlest of all things knowable and the most exalted. It is impossible fully to fathom God's character. What can be said is that God transcends the physical universe and has no body. He is one – living, omnipotent and omniscient – and nothing resembles him. Nor does he resemble any of his creations. The aforementioned three qualities – vitality, omnipotence and omniscience – are, in fact, not separate, as God cannot be said to have multiple attributes. God is absolute oneness. We are compelled to express this oneness by using multiple terms because of the inadequacy of human speech. Were God to have a multiplicity of qualities, He would be subject to change and mutation; but God is, by definition, not subject to such effects. Both reason and Scripture affirm these conclusions. And, any statement in Scripture that is contrary to sound reason is meant to be taken in a figurative sense and not literally.

Saadia observes the suffering that humans experience and addresses the age-old question: How could a just God allow this condition to exist? He suggests that God granted the human species gifts that no other species have: profound knowledge and free will. As a result of the gift of knowledge, humans can create things of beauty, establish societies and comprehend sublime truths. But this gift also gives God the right to subject people to commandments and prohibitions, rewards and punishments, which are also for their benefit because they induce them to “choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19) and “depart from evil” (Job 28:28).

Saadia recognizes that humans, because of their very physicality, are weak and suffer from a variety of ailments. He notes, however, that along with a frail body, humans have an amazing soul, which gives them the capacity to attain knowledge of things material and spiritual. But could not a just God have created them without their susceptibility to pain and suffering? On one level Saadia implies that this is the nature of existence, and people have to learn to cope. Saadia adds, however, that this is actually also to man's benefit, because by coming to an understanding of pain and its effects, a person will appreciate the meaning of God's punishments and will be motivated to follow God's commandments to avoid such punishments.

Continuing, Saadia asserts that God gave man the “power and ability to execute what He had commanded him and to refrain from what He had forbidden him,” that is – free will. Because God is innately just, He refrains from intervening in human decision-making. God's foreknowledge of human decisions does not move Him to act on that knowledge. There is no compulsion on God's part; humans remain accountable for their choices. God does not revel in punishing the rebellious; rather, He prefers that people choose to follow his commands. In keeping with rabbinic doctrine, Saadia tells us that God welcomes penitent sinners and offers them and the righteous amazing rewards in the world to come and at the time of the resurrection.

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SOLOMON IBN GABIROL – NEO-PLATONISM

As the premier exponent of Jewish Neo-platonic philosophy in the Middle Ages, the Spaniard, Solomon Ibn Gabirol (c. 1020-1058), expressed his philosophy in both technical philosophical writing and in poetry, the writing of the latter being his major means of financial support. The summary of his philosophy that follows is culled from two of his major works. One is the *Yanbu al-hayat* (“Fountain of Life”), the Arabic original of which is lost. It is called *Fons vitae* in the 12th century Latin translation and *M’kor hayyim* in a 13th century Hebrew translation of selections from the book. Since the *Fons vitae* contains no references to the Bible or the large corpus of Rabbinic works, Jewish authorship of this book was unknown until it was identified as Ibn Gabirol’s work in the mid-1840’s. It did not circulate widely in Jewish circles; in its Latin form, however, it did influence European Christian thinkers, who assumed the author was a Christian.

The second work is Ibn Gabirol’s Hebrew poetic magnum opus, *Keter malkhut* (“Royal Crown”), where we find Ibn Gabirol’s Neo-Platonism cast in Jewish terms and merged with Biblical and Rabbinic ideas. As Gershom Scholem has noted in his *Origins of the Kabbalah*, through Ibn Gabirol’s widely read *Keter malkhut*, his Neo-Platonism had an impact on Medieval Jewish thought, especially that of the 12th and 13th century Kabbalists of Southern France and Spain.

Neo-Platonism uniquely focuses on the question of how a single, infinite, indivisible spiritual God – the One or the “First Author,” as the Creator is called in the *Fons vitae* – could bring into existence the multifaceted and finite material world in which we live. It posits that the Deity emanated an intermediate entity, which in turn emanated another intermediary and so on, until, finally, as a result of the activity of the last of a chain of emanated intermediaries, our material world came into existence. In this system each succeeding intermediary is further removed from the pure spirituality of God and approaches materiality.

For Ibn Gabirol God is the First Author, the sublime, perfect and holy origin of all beings, who is not caused and who, alone, created the world from nothing. There are intermediary substances between the First Author and the final effect, without which there could be no union between the First Author and the final effect, and absent that union the final effect would not exist.

The nature of God, who is the hidden power and secret foundation of existence, is ultimately unknowable. God is the sustainer of world, the source of light, eternally living, all being having been created from the shadow of His light. The power of God is in all beings and nothing can exist without Him. He dispenses the abundance he has with him, and He is the source that maintains, envelops, and comprehends everything that is.

God exists but cannot be grasped by physical senses or by rational inquiry, and the depth of His secret cannot be discovered. God exists and has existed from before time and with no place. The power of the holy God penetrates all things, exists in all things and acts in all things beyond time. The essence of the First Author is infinite, and it is, therefore, not united with any one of the simple finite substances.

God is God of gods and Lord of lords, ruling in heaven and on earth. God’s unity is absolute, there being no distinction between His divinity and His oneness, His pre-existence and His existence – for all is one secret, the difference in the names of the attributes notwithstanding. The First Author is the true unity in whom there is no multiplicity. The First Author does not comprise anything, is not mingled with anything and is not conjoined to anything. There is no accident in the essence of the First Author. God is the unknowable One, whose oneness can be neither increased nor diminished nor counted nor changed nor imagined.

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God is wise, and His wisdom, which is the source of life, flows from Him. Compared to His wisdom, all other wisdom is folly. God is wise and more ancient than all primal things. God acquired His wisdom from no other entity, and from His wisdom God, like an artist, emanated a ready will that was prepared to draw the extant out of nothingness, drawing it from the source of light with no vessel – hewing, cutting, cleansing and refining, splitting the nothingness and fixing the extant, and hammering out the world, setting forth the heavens and the spheres. The First Author, sublime and holy, knows all things and all things exist in His knowledge.

God is the highest light, visible to the pure souls but obscured by sin from the eyes of sinners. God is light that is hidden in this world but visible in the world on high. God is light eternal, for which the intellect yearns, though it can see only its extremities and not its totality.

JUDAH HALEVI

Born in Tudela, Spain, Judah Halevi (1075-1141) was a practicing physician, a sometimes businessman, and with Ibn Gabirol, one of the most important of the medieval Hebrew poets and an exponent of rationalistic Jewish thought. He was a proto-Zionist ideologue, for whom the Land of Israel and Jerusalem had an almost mystical capacity to generate a spiritual connection between God and the Jewish people. In fact, his Zionism flows out of a melding of classical Jewish ideas with certain notions that are embedded in the Greek science he studied.

While considered by many to be a philosopher, it is hard to fit Halevi into any specific philosophical school. His influential *Kitab al-khazari* (*Sefer ha-kuzari* in Hebrew, *Book of the Khazar* or *The Kuzari*) is composed as a dialog between the King of the Khazars, who converts to Judaism, and a rabbi – a structure reminiscent of Plato's *Dialogs*. In it Halevi draws on elements of various systems to argue, among other points, that philosophy, an intellectual endeavor initiated by human beings, is not the true pathway to God, but rather revelation, initiated by God and received and responded to by prophetically inspired people, is. For Halevi God is not known – God is experienced.

This approach is in evidence at the very beginning of the *Kuzari*. As opposed to the philosopher, the Christian scholar and the Muslim scholar, whom the Khazar king first queries regarding proper religious behavior, the rabbi does not begin with a statement about the nature of God. Instead, he declares: "I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles...who sent Moses with his law and subsequently thousands of prophets...." The rabbi tells the king that 600,000 men standing at Mount Sinai witnessed God's revelation of Torah, and this is far more conclusive evidence of the truth of Judaism than are the arguments of the philosophers for the truth of philosophy. The latter disagree among themselves as to which system is correct; 600,000 witnesses do not.

True to the tradition of Jewish philosophy, however, Halevi has the rabbi explain to the king how one cannot read the Bible's anthropomorphic references to God and God's attributes literally. All names and qualities used in the Bible to refer to God, with the exception of the Tetragrammaton (YHVH), are one of three varieties of metaphors: "creative," that allude to the results of how God acts in the world (e. g. merciful, just), "relative," that speak of God with reverence (blessed, glorified) or "negative," that negate their opposites (e. g. living, first). Such terms do not imply that there is any kind of plurality in God, in no way contradict the notion of God's unity and do not touch on the divine essence. The Tetragrammaton is associated with terms that refer to God as Creator, who creates without any natural intermediaries and does so by His will alone. We may, however, refer to God's intelligence, says the rabbi, because that is not an attribute: "He is the essence of intelligence, and intelligence itself." The philosophical language in this discussion is most evident.

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God's influence on the world is universal, but it is expressed in a unique and powerful way with regard to the people whom God imbued with the spirit of prophecy, the Jewish people, especially in the Land of Israel where the People Israel can most perfectly express that spirit. Halevi calls this concentrated flow of divine influence *al-amr al-ilahi* (Hebrew: *ha-inyan ha-elohi*, the Divine Entity). The rabbi explains to the king that when one reads in the Bible of the blessings God bestows upon the Israelites in the Holy Land when they live according to the Torah, the instrumentality of that bestowal is this Entity. Similarly, when the Biblical prophets receive communication from God it is through the same means. And, says the rabbi, they can act as receivers of this spiritual transmission because they have a trace of the Divine Entity within them. Further, says the rabbi, when Israel is once again in its land, living according to Torah, with the Temple rebuilt and the sacrificial system in operation, the Divine Entity will be drawn toward it and the blessings from God set forth in Scripture will flow down upon the people once more. Herbert Davidson has demonstrated that in this presentation Halevi is actually giving a spiritual interpretation to an Aristotelian view of the operation of the Active Intellect in the earthly realm. Halevi is thus using a philosophical notion to make a distinctly non-philosophical point, a process that is typical of his methodology.

The superiority of the prophet over the philosopher is most profoundly expressed when the rabbi teaches the king that the philosophers, through reason and speculation, comprehend *Elohim* (God) as guide and manager of the world. The souls of the prophets, however, through intuition and the power of prophecy, are penetrated by God's light, and they experience *Adonai* (the Eternal). They come in contact with angelic beings and are imbued with a new spirit. "It is thus," he says, "that man becomes a servant, loving the object of his worship, and ready to perish for His sake, because he finds the sweetness of this attachment as great as the distress in absence thereof." With these words Halevi has, seemingly, crossed the line from philosophy into mysticism.

MOSES BEN MAIMON – ARISTOTELIAN

Though not the first Jew to accept Aristotle as the primary voice of ancient Greek philosophy, Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides, Rabbeinu Moshe Ben Maimon – Rambam, 1135-1204), who was born in Spain, became the great Jewish interpreter of Aristotelian thought. But he was more than a philosopher who wrote a major book of philosophy. He was a rabbi who served a major Jewish community – to all intents and purposes he was the Chief Rabbi of Egypt. The Rambam earned his living as a physician who treated the Vizier to the *Khalif* of Egypt and wrote a number of medical treatises; he was a Jewish legal scholar who compiled a major law code, wrote a commentary to the Mishnah, and prepared numerous responsa and pastoral letters on Jewish legal and spiritual matters; he was an ethicist who prepared a significant tractatus on Aristoteleian-Jewish ethics; and, in his younger years, he dabbled in logic and astronomy.

It can be said that Rambam's life's goal was to bring harmony to a world that he viewed as chaotic and beleaguered by evil forces that could rend Jewish society and prevent Jews from achieving a state of blessedness in this world and the next. Thus, in his Commentary to the Mishnah he sought to harmonize Rabbinic Judaism with principles of contemporary philosophy, thereby demonstrating that Rabbinic Judaism was, indeed, a rational tradition. In the introduction to his great law code, the *Mishneh Torah*, he tells the reader that the chaos of the time has resulted in a Jewish legal tradition that is so confused that Jews cannot find religious guidance and instruction. His carefully organized and beautifully written Hebrew code achieved its goal, even though it did not become the last word in Jewish law as its author had intended. And the *Dalalat al-ha'irin* (*Moreh nevukhim* in Hebrew, Guide of the Perplexed), his philosophical magnum opus, was written for the student of Torah and philosophy who was confused by the apparent contradictions between the two. Rambam attempted to show that, in essence, the Biblical Moses and Aristotle were expressing the same ideas – all of which had their origin in the mind of God, albeit expressed in different ways. The student of both systems, thus harmonized, would achieve the pinnacle of human existence – the bliss of profound understanding of God and of cleaving to Him.

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In the first book of the Guide Rambam addresses the language of the Bible, where we frequently find God described in very stark human and physical terms. All this anthropomorphic terminology, he says, it to be interpreted figuratively. The Biblical authors wrote this way because their audience would otherwise have difficulty with the absolute abstraction of a disembodied deity. God is a purely simple essence, not comprising any attributes and not subject to accidents. Therefore, the only statements we can make about God that can be taken literally are those that describe the results of God's actions, which Rambam terms "attributes of action." So it is that we can say that God acts wisely, but we cannot say that God is wise or that God has wisdom, because then God's unity would be compromised. And, if we cannot literally describe what God is, we can state what He is not. We cannot say that God is powerful, but we can say that God is not weak. Thus, Rambam negates his predecessors, noted above, who defined "essential attributes," qualities that were not superadded to the Divine Essence but were integral to that essence. Following the lead of Aristotle, Rambam holds that logically "essential attributes" imply a compositeness to God's nature which would compromise the principle of God's absolute unity and oneness.

In Book 2 Rambam turns to the matter of God as creator of the world. According to Aristotle, God is the unmoved mover; that is, God is unaware of, uninvolved in and unmoved by any action beyond himself. This being the case, according to Aristotle, God is not a Creator, and the universe could not have been created. Rather, it has been eternally static, the way it is now. This is a big problem for people who believe in the religion of the Bible, beginning, as it does, with God's creation of the universe. And it is a problem for Rambam; not so much because of the language of Genesis, but because of the implications the idea of God as non-creator would have for the truth of Torah. Rambam argues that, in fact, Aristotle never claimed to have proved this point. Since he did not, we can accept the words of the prophets who tell us that God did create the world. The issue for Rambam is this: If God did not create the world because it is not in His nature to change how the world runs, then God, similarly would not have intervened in the goings on to reveal Torah to Israel. If God does not create, then, for the same reason, He does not reveal. Rambam says if Aristotle had indeed proven that the universe was eternal and there was no creation, then this proof "undercuts the law at its root". Rambam, however, argues forcibly that God did create the world and, by the same token, revealed the Torah to Moses.

With regard to another aspect of God's involvement in the world, however, we see another side of Rambam's theology that views God's direct intervention as being more limited than the Bible or the Midrash would have it. The notion of divine providence, through which God intervenes in events to save or provide wonderful blessings for people, is a fundamental belief of traditional Judaism. Yet, here Rambam is more circumspect, seemingly trying to project the Aristotelian notion of a disengaged God. In Book 3 of the Guide he tells us that God emanates power from his intellect down to the human realm. But he then informs us that it is up to the human intellect to grasp that emanation and apply it for human benefit. People with more developed intellect will derive greater benefit, and those with less intelligence will derive less. In this way God is removed from the actual realization of the providence, and God cannot be directly held accountable for what transpires on earth. At the end of the Guide, however, Rambam suddenly, and surprisingly, reverses himself and presents God as an accessible model for human emulation. He declares that once the person of intelligence has gained the profound insight into God that is the culmination of metaphysical speculation, he realizes that the dominant component of God's nature is compassion, and this is the attribute the philosopher should make his own.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, these four thinkers express their ideas about God in a very technical way. Because they are philosophers their relationship with the texts of our tradition is very different from that of their predecessors; because they consider the texts to be holy and true, they are at pains to prove their truth and their continued validity for people of intelligence. As we read the work of Jewish medieval philosophers today the scope and significance of their endeavor becomes clear. Their attempt to wed Judaism to philosophy demonstrates the depth of their loyalty to their tradition and the fundamental truths it contains.

GOD IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY – TEXT 1

SAADIA

SEFER HA-EMUNOT VE-HADEOT TREATISE 2 EXORDIUM

The data with which the sciences start out are concrete, whereas the objectives that they strive for are abstract. Also there is reached in the field of scientific research a last terminal beyond which no further knowledge is possible. Every station reached by a person in the advance in knowledge consists of necessity of ideas more abstract and subtle than the preceding, the last constituting the most abstract and subtle of all...ignorance, on the other hand, has no such source from which it is derived, being merely the absence of knowledge.

I mean the idea of the Creator, exalted and magnified, must of necessity be subtler than the subtlest and more recondite than the most recondite and more abstract than the most abstract and profounder than the most profound and stronger than the strongest and more exalted than the most exalted, so that it would be impossible to fathom its character at all.

SEFER HA-EMUNOT VE-HADEOT TREATISE 2 CH.10

Were we, in our effort to give an account of God, to make use only of expressions that are literally true, it would be necessary for us to desist from speaking of God, as one that hears and sees and pities and wills, to the point where there would be nothing left for us to affirm except the fact of God's existence.

SEFER HA-EMUNOT VE-HADEOT TREATISE 2 CH. 13

Now when a person has achieved the knowledge of this lofty subject by means of rational speculation and the proof of miracles and marvels, his soul believes it is true and it is mingled with his spirit and becomes an inmate of its innermost recesses. The result is then that, whenever the soul walks in its temple, it finds it...moreover, his soul becomes filled with completely sincere love for God, a love which is beyond all doubt...that servant of God will also grow accustomed to remembering God in the daytime while doing work and at night while lying on the bed...nay, it will almost speak – I mean, his spirit – lovesick at the recollection of God, out of longing and yearning...nay, more, the mention of God will nourish the soul more than fatty foods and God's name will quench its thirst better than the juiciest fruit...the result of this is that when God affords it pleasure, the soul is grateful, and if God causes it pain, it endures it patiently.

Put it into your soul and grasp it with your mind.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Who, or what, is God, according to Sa'adia's views here?**
- **Is there any merit in talking about God in human terms? If so – what?**
- **What do you think Sa'adia means by 'the soul walks in its temple'?**
- **Why is there a distinction between putting something in your soul and grasping it with your mind?**

GOD IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY – TEXT 2

שלמה אבן גבירול – כתר מלכות א, ב, ט

נפלאים מעשיך ונפשי יודעת מאד:

לך ה' הגדולה והגבורה והנצח וההוד:

לך ה' הממלכה והמתנשא לכל לראש והעשר והכבוד:

לך בוראי מעלה ומטה ועידו כי המה יאבדו ואתה תעמד:

לך הגבורה אשר בסודה נלאו רעיונינו לעמד.

כי עצמה ממנו מאד:

לך חביון העו הסוד והיסוד:

לך השם הנעלם ממתי חכמה. והכה הסובל העולם על בלימה.

והיכולת להוציא לאור כל תעלומה:

לך החסד אשר גבר על ברואיך. והטוב הצפון ליראיך:

לך הסודות אשר לא יכילם שכל ורעיון.

והחיים אשר לא ישלט עליהם כליון...

אתה אהר. ראש כל מנין. ויסוד כל בנין:

אתה אהר. ובסוד אחדותך חכמי לב יתמהו.

כי לא ידעו מה הוא:

אתה אהר. ואחדותך לא יגרע ולא יוסיף.

לא יחסר ולא יעדיף:

אתה אהר. ולא כאחד הקנוי והמנוי.

כי לא ישיגך רבוי ושנוי. לא תאר ולא כנוי:

אתה אהר. ולשום לך חק וגבול נלאה הגיוני...

אתה חכם. והחכמה מקור חיים ממך נובעת.

והחכמה נבער כל אדם מדעת:

אתה חכם. וקדמון לכל קדמון. והחכמה היתה אצלך אמון:

אתה חכם. ולא למדת מבלעדיך. ולא קניית חכמה מזולתך:

אתה חכם ומחכמתך אצלת חפץ מזמן. בפעל ואמן:

למשוך משך היש מן האין. בהמשך האור היוצא מן העין:

ושאב ממקור האור מבלי דלי. ופעל הכל בלי כלי:

והצב וחקק. וטהר וחקק:

וקרא אל האין ונבקע. ואל היש ונתקע. ואל העולם ונרקע.

ותבן שתקים בורת. וידו אהל הנלגלים מחברת.

ובללאות היכולת זריעות הבריאות קושרת.

וכחה נונעת עד שפת הבריאה השפלה החיצונה

הזריעה הקיצונה במחברת:

SOLOMON IBN GABIROL - THE ROYAL CROWN (FROM STANZAS 1, 2 AND 9)

Mysterious are Thy works, my soul well knows:

Thine, Lord, is majesty, all pomp and power,

Kingship whose splendor yet more splendid grows

O'ertopping all in glory and wealth's dower.

To Thee celestial creatures, and the seed

Of earth-sprung kind concede

They all must perish, Thou alone remain,

The secret of Whose strength doth quite exceed

Our thought, as Thou transcendest our frail plane.

All might is thine, swathed in a mystic shawl

The fundament of all:

Hid from philosophers thy name: of Thee

That force which poised the universe on nought;

Thou canst bare secrets, in the searchlight caught,

Thy love prevails, for all thy creatures free.

Thine, too, that goodness in so rich a hoard

For them that fear Thee stored.

Wonders are thine no mind may comprehend,

And life for which decay shall ne'er decree the end...

Thy Name is One – of all the primes the Prime,

Base of all algebraic argument,

A Unity beyond account, sublime,

That leaves the schoolmen lost in wonderment:

Uniquity, that neither wanes nor grows,

No plus, no defect knows:

Oneness not gained from accident, nor told,

On which no change, no factor may impose

Nor attribute, nor surrogate; to hold

In logic's bounds that Oneness strict defined

Eludes my wearied mind....

Wise art Thou – aye, from Thee doth wisdom flow

A fount of life: that wisdom which is thine

The mind of brutish man can never know,

A wisdom, demiurge of thy design

Or e'er prime matter was, delighting Thee

Primeval equally;

Wisdom no master taught Thee, not acquired....

No tool nor vessel had that master-mind

Yet dredged it from light's source, shaped, cleaned, refined,

Called non-being to fissiparous spawn,

Bade substance fix itself, bade cosmos stand

Congealed, of heaven's tracts the measure spanned,

And laced, with powerful loops, a tent for spheres,

To charge the lowest hem, for each to each adheres.

(Translation by Raphael Loewe)

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Who, or what, is God, according to Ibn Gabirol's views here?
- Why might it be significant that God's name is 'hid from philosophers'?
- How does Ibn Gabirol perceive the process of creation?
- How might humans relate to God, in this scheme?

GOD IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY – TEXT 3

ספר הכוזרי מאמר ראשון י-כה

אחר כך קרא לחכם מהחכמי היהודים ושאל אותו על אמונתו.

אמר לו החבר: אנחנו מאמינים באלהי אברהם יצחק ויעקב המוציא את בני ישראל ממצרים באותות ובמופתים ובניסים, והמכלכלם במדבר, והמנחילם את ארץ כנען, אחר אשר העבירם את הים והירדן במופתים גדולים, ושלה משה בתורתו, ואחר כך כמה אלפי נביאים אחריו מזהירים על תורתו, מעידים בגמול הטוב לשומרה, ועונש הקשה לממרה אותה. ואנחנו מאמינים בכל מה שכתוב בתורה, והדברים ארוכים...תן לי להקדים לך הקדמות כי אני רואה דברי כבדים עליך ונקלים בעיניך...אילו היו אומרים לך כי מלך הודו איש חסד ראוי לרוממו ולתת כבוד לשמו ולספר מעשיו במה שיגיע אליך מצדק אנשי ארצו ומדותם הטובות, ושמשאם ומתנם באמונה, ההיית היב בזה?

אמר הכוזרי: ואיך הייתי חייב בו, ואני מסופק אם צדק אנשי הודו מעצמם ואין להם מלך, או צדקתם מחמת מלכם, או משני הפנים יחד?

אמר החבר: ואם היו באים אליך שלוהיו בתשורת הודיות, אינך מסתפק שאינם נמצאים אלא בארץ הודו בארמנות המלכים, בכתב מפורסם שהוא מאתו, ועמו רפואות שהן רפואות אותך מחליך, ושומרות עליך בריאותך, וסמי המות לשאונך והנלחמים בך, שאתה יוצא להם בהם וממית אותם מבלי כלי מלחמה, היית חייב להיות סר אל משמעותו ואל עבודתו?

אמר הכוזרי: כן הוא, והיה הספק הראשון סר ממני אם יש לאנשי הודו מלך אם לא, והייתי אז מאמין שמלכותו ודברו נוגעים אלי...

אמר החבר: וכן פתח משה לדבר עם פרעה כשאמר לו אלהי העברים שלחני אליך, ה"ל אלהי אברהם יצחק ויעקב מפני שהיה אברהם מפורסם אצל האומות, וכי התחבר אליהם דבר האלהים והנהיג אותם ועשה להם נפלאות, ולא אמר אלהי השמים והארץ שלחני אליך, ולא בוראי ובאורך. וכן פתח אלהים דבריו אל המון ישראל: "אנכי ה' אלהיך אשר הוציאתך מארץ מצרים" ולא אמר "אני בורא העולם ובוראכם". וכן פתחתי לך מלך הכוזרי כאשר שאלתני אל אמונתי, השיבותיך מה שאני חייב בו וחיבין בו כל קהל ישראל, אשר התברר אצלם המעמד ההוא בראות עיניהם, ואחר כן התקבלה הנמשכת שהיא כמארה העין.

JUDAH HALEVI - THE KUZARI I: 10-25 (HEBREW TRANSLATION: JUDAH IBN TIBBON)

He [the Kuzari] then invited one of the wise men of Israel [a Rabbi] and asked him what he believed. The Rabbi replied: We believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who brought the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles; who fed them in the desert and gave them the land of Canaan as an inheritance after taking them across the sea and the Jordan by way of great miracles, who [first] sent Moses with his Torah, and then thousands of prophets after him advising how to observe his Torah, testifying to its good reward for those who observe it and the dire punishment for those who pervert it. And we believe in everything written in the Torah, which is of considerable length... Allow me to set out some preliminary matters, for I can see that my words hang heavy upon you, and yet you deem them light...if you were told that the king of India was an upright man, deserving of your admiration and respect, and you heard that his people were righteous and proper and correct in their business dealings, would that bind you to respect him? The Kuzari said: How could I be bound to respect him without knowing whether the righteousness of the Indian people is their own, or due to their king, or both? The Rabbi replied: But if his messengers came to you with gifts which you know can only be obtained in India from the royal palace, and accompanied by a letter stating they are from him, along with drugs which cure your illnesses, and preserve your health, and deathly poisons for your enemies which enable you to kill them without any weapon, would this make you beholden to him? The Kuzari said: Certainly, for now I would stop doubting that the Indian people have a king, and I would believe that his kingship and his word affect me... The Rabbi said...This is the same way that Moses spoke to Pharaoh when he said, "The God of the Hebrews has sent me to you" – that is, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For Abraham was well known among the nations, who knew that the Divine Spirit was in contact with the Patriarchs, and that God led them and their families, and performed miracles for them. Moses did not say, "The God of heaven and earth sent me to you," nor did he say, "Your Creator and mine sent me." And in the same way, God spoke to the assembled masses of Israel: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" and did not say, "I am the Creator of the world and your Creator also." And I spoke to you in the same way, O King of the Khazars, when you asked me about my belief. I answered you in the way I am bound to do, which is the same way as the community of Israel is bound to do; for their belief stems from personal experience of what they saw, and after that, through an uninterrupted chain of tradition which is equivalent to that experience.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Who, or what, is God, according to Halevi's views here?
- Do you consider the first paragraph to be a summary of Judaism? Why/why not?
- Why do you think the Rabbi uses the imagery of the King of India?
- Do you think the 'uninterrupted chain of tradition' still continues today? Why/why not?

GOD IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY – TEXT 4

רמב"ם, משנה תורה, הלכות יסודי התורה א-ו
א יסוד היסודות ועמוד החכמות לידע שיש שם מצוי ראשון, והוא ממציא כל נמצא, וכל הנמצאים משמים וארץ ומה שביניהם לא נמצאו אלא מאמתת המצאו.
ב ואם יעלה על הדעת שהוא אינו מצוי אין דבר אחר יכול להמצאות.
ג ואם יעלה על הדעת שאין כל הנמצאים מלבדו מצויים הוא לבדו יהיה מצוי, ולא יבטל הוא לבטולם, שכל הנמצאים צריכין לו והוא ברוך הוא אינו צריך להם ולא לאחד מהם, לפיכך אין אמתתו כאמתת אחד מהם.
ד הוא שהנביא אומר וה' אלהים אמת, הוא לבדו האמת ואין לאחר אמת כאמתתו, והוא שהתורה אומרת אין עוד מלבדו, כלומר אין שם מצוי אמת מלבדו כמותו.
ה המצוי הזה הוא אלהי העולם אדון כל הארץ, והוא המנהיג הגלגל בכח שאין לו קץ ותכלית, בכח שאין לו הפסק, שהגלגל סובב תמיד ואי אפשר שיסוב בלא מסבב, והוא ברוך הוא המסבב אותו בלא יד ובלא גוף.
ו וידעת דבר זה מצות עשה שנאמר אנכי ה' אלהיך, וכל המעלה על דעתו שיש שם אלוה אחר חוץ מזה, עובר בלא תעשה שנאמר לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני, וכופר בעיקר שזהו העיקר הגדול שהכל תלוי בו.

RAMBAM - MISHNEH TORAH, HILKHOT YESODEI HATORAH 1-6

The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to be aware of the fact that there is a First Existent, who brought all existence into being. And everything that exists – heaven and earth and everything in between – only came into existence because of the actuality of His being.

Should one imagine that He does not exist – nothing else would be capable of existing.

Should one imagine that everything which exists ceased to exist except for Him – He would continue to exist, and the end of their existence would not mean the end of His. For everything that exists has need of Him, but He has no need of them, not a single one of them. Hence, his actuality is not like the actuality of any of them.

This is what the prophet [Jeremiah 10:10] means when he says, “Adonai, God, is truth” – He alone is truth [that is, He has actuality], and no other being has truth [actuality] like His. And this is what the Torah means when it says, “There is no other except Him” – that is, there is nothing which possesses true existence either like Him, or except Him.

That Existent is the God of all eternity, the master of the world. He imparts motion to the sphere with a power that has no end and no finitude, a power which is unceasing, for the sphere constantly revolves, and it would be impossible for it to do so if there were no power to impart motion to it; and He, Blessed be He, is that power, moving it with neither hand nor body.

And it is a positive commandment to be aware of this – as it says: “I am the Lord your God [Exodus 20:2]” - and anyone who imagines there is any other God apart from Him transgresses a negative commandment, as it says: “You shall have no other gods before Me [Exodus 20:3]” and [in addition] denies a fundamental principle, since this is the great principle on which everything else depends.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Who, or what, is God, according to Rambam's view here?
- Why do you think Rambam brings the concept of truth [actuality] into the discussion?
- Why do you think it is a positive commandment to be aware of God?
- Can one love the God Rambam portrays in this text? How?

¹ The Hebrew word Rambam uses is 'emet', which we understand today as meaning 'truth'. It had something of this sense in medieval Hebrew also, but the word 'actuality' is closer to what Rambam would have meant. The root meaning underlying the word is 'steadiness'.

GOD IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

יגדל אלהים חי וישתבח, נמצא, ואין עת אל מציאותו.
אחד ואין יחיד ביהודו, נעלם, וגם אין סוף לאחדותו.
אין לו דמות הגוף ואינו גוף, לא נערוך אליו קדשתו.
קדמון לכל דבר אשר נברא, ראשון ואין ראשית לראשיתו.
הנו אדון עולם לכל נוצר, יורה גדלתו ומלכותו.
שפע נבואתו נתנו, אל אנשי סגלתו ותפארתו.
לא קם בישראל כמשה עוד, נביא ומביט את תמונתו.
תורת אמת נתן לעמו אל, על יד נביאו נאמן ביתו.
לא יחליף האל ולא ימיר דתו, לעולמים, לזולתו.
צופה ויודע סתרינו, מביט לסוף דבר בקדמתו.
גומל לאיש חסד כמפעלו, נותן לרשע רע כרשעתו.
ישלח לקץ הימין משיחנו, לפדות מחבי קין ישועתו.
מתים יחיה אל ברב חסדו, ברוך עדי עד שם תהלתו.

YIGDAL

Exalted and praised be the living God;
He exists, and His existence is timeless.
He is One and there is no unity like his -
- He is mysterious, and His oneness infinite.
He has nothing resembling a body, and no physical substance;
His holiness is unique.
He was there before anything He created;
He is the First, though he had no beginning.
See, He is the Master of the world;
To every created thing he shows his greatness and his majesty.
He gave the flow of prophecy
to the people whom he treasured, who are his glory.
There has never arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses,
who saw his very likeness.
God gave a Torah of truth to His people
by way of the faithful prophet of his household.
God will not change, nor will he exchange his law
for any other one, forever and ever.
He sees and knows our secrets:
He sees the outcome of a thing at its outset.
He rewards the kind and loving man according to his deeds;
He brings upon the wicked man evil corresponding to his own.
At the end of days he will send the Messiah
to redeem the ones who wait faithfully for his deliverance.
God will revive the dead in his abundant lovingkindness;
Blessed is his glorious name for all eternity.

SESSION SUGGESTIONS – GOD IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

In this session the group will consider how God is presented in the work of Sa'adia, Ibn Gabirol, Yehuda Halevi and the Rambam. They may not be familiar with the first three, or even all four. They may well, however, be familiar with the final text chosen for creative study – the Yigdal – which has been included to help contextualize some of the rather lofty ideas about God which will be dealt with in the session.

INTRODUCTION

Briefly remind people of the content of the essay. It is worth eliciting some 'headline' points about how each thinker understands God:

- For Saadia, God is transcendent; human beings have freewill
- For Ibn Gabirol, God is the First Author from whom everything flows
- For Yehuda Halevi, God is perceived through the Jewish experience
- For Rambam, God is transcendent, but it is the task of humans to attempt to emulate God and cleave to him.

TEXT STUDY

Split the class into [up to] 4 chavruta groups and hand out the texts. They are quite complex and the groups might wish to refer to the essay as well while working.

Allow each group to report back on their understanding of the texts and their answers to the questions, and then draw the discussion together. The questions on the texts have been chosen to help participants identify the thinker's main line of reasoning, and then to open up the texts. One issue which might well arise is the idea that these texts are in some way 'mystical'. Help participants to understand that mysticism is more about the individual finding their way 'up' to God and ultimately blending with God, as they will see in the sessions on Kabbalah and Hassidut. These texts are all, in their way, sublime, but they are not mystical per se, and their authors would quite probably be angry at the suggestion!

CREATIVE STUDY

Text based: the Yigdal is based on Rambam's 13 principles of faith (you might wish to have a copy of these available for comparison). Allow the participants to read it and discuss it – do they understand it differently now they know a little more about the ideas which underlie it? How? Why do they think Rambam chose those principles, specifically? Would they choose those 13 principles themselves?

If you do not want to use another text, you could allow each group, or one member from each group, to represent the thought of one philosopher and see if they can conduct a 'discussion' with each other. Alternatively, this is the kind of session which might generate a larger-scale discussion about how we understand these thinkers today; given that the world in which they lived was so different from ours, do they still have relevance for us today? In what way?

CONCLUSION

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

CONTRIBUTORS

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