

## *The Questions That Won't Go Away --- "Are You There, God?"*

### **The God of the Bible**

Perhaps it is most natural for us to explain the differences between our view of things and those of earlier civilizations by saying that in premodern times people simply did not know this or that fact, that they were under this or that misapprehension, from which we have happily freed ourselves. No doubt there is some truth in this proposition. But it seems to me we ought at least to be prepared to entertain the opposite hypothesis as well, that however much progress the intervening centuries may have brought in some domains, they have also led us to lose a way of seeing that existed in former times. By "way of seeing" I mean to suggest something more than simply another point of view; perhaps people were actually enabled by this way of seeing to observe things that we no longer observe nowadays. It is difficult for one who reads the Bible carefully, and takes its words seriously, not to arrive at such a conclusion: Something, a certain way of perceiving, has gradually closed inside of us, so that nowadays most people simply do not register, or do not have access to, what had been visible in an earlier age. What we have – all we have – are those texts of the Bible that bear witness to that other way of seeing and perhaps invite us, with the use of some spiritual imagination, to try to enter into it, open our eyes and look. James Kugel, *The Great Poems of the Bible*

### **Genesis 12**

The LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your land, your home, your father's house to the land that I will show you.

<sup>2</sup>I will make of you a great nation,  
And I will bless you;

I will make your name great,  
And you -- Be a blessing!

<sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you  
And curse him that curses you;  
And all the families of the earth  
Shall bless themselves by you."

<sup>4</sup>Abram went forth as the LORD had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.

### **Exodus 34**

<sup>12</sup>Moses said to the Lord, "See, You say to me, 'Lead this people forward,' but You have not made known to me whom You will send with me. ...<sup>13</sup>Now, if I have truly gained Your favor, pray let me know Your ways, that I may know You and continue in Your favor. ...

<sup>17</sup>And the Lord said to Moses, "I will also do this thing that you have asked; for you have truly gained My favor and I have singled you out by name."

<sup>18</sup>He said, "Oh, let me behold Your Presence!"

<sup>19</sup>And He answered, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Lord, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. <sup>20</sup>But," He said, "you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live."

<sup>21</sup>And the Lord said, "See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock <sup>22</sup>and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. <sup>23</sup>Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen."

<sup>5</sup>The Lord came down in a cloud; He stood with him there, and proclaimed the name Lord. <sup>6</sup>The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: "The Lord! the Lord! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup>extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations."

## **God in the Rabbinic Tradition**

### **Midrash Breshit Rabbah**

The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your land" . . .

R. Isaac said: To what may this be compared? To a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a palace full of light {*doleket*} [alt: a palace on fire]. He wondered, "Is it possible that this palace has no one who cares for it?" The owner of the building looked out at him and said, "I am the owner of the palace." Similarly, because Abraham our father wondered, "Is it possible that this world has no one who cares for it?" Then God looked at him and said, "I am the Master of the world."

### **Traditional Prayerbook**

Praised are You, Lord our God, whose Presence fills the universe, whose word brings on the evening dusk. You open the gates of dawn with wisdom, change the day's divisions with understanding, set the succession of seasons and arrange the stars in the sky according to Your will. You create day and night, rolling light away from darkness and darkness away from light. Eternal God, Your rule shall embrace us forever. Praised are You, Lord, for bringing the evening dusk.

With eternal love have You loved Your people Israel, teaching us Torah and mitzvot, the path of life. Therefore, Lord our God, when we lie down to sleep and when we rise, we shall meditate on Your ways and celebrate each word of Your teaching for as long as we live. For they are our life and the length of our days. Day and night, they guide us. Never take Your love from us. Praised are You, Lord, who loves the people Israel.

### **Talmud Brachot 10a**

As God fills the entire world, the self (or soul) fills the entire body.

As God sees but is not seen, so the self sees but is not seen.

As God sustains the entire world, all of it, so the self sustains the body.

As God is pure, so the self is pure.

As God lives in the innermost chamber, so the self dwells in the innermost chamber.

## **The God of the Philosophers**

### **Maimonides, Mishna Torah, Foundations of Faith, chapter 1**

1. The basic principle of all principles and the foundation of all wisdom is to know that there is a Primary Being who brought into being all existence. All the beings of the heavens, the earth, and what is between them came into existence only from the truth of His being.

2. If one would imagine that He does not exist, no other being could possibly exist.

3. If one would imagine that none of the other entities aside from Him exist, He alone would continue to exist, and the nullification of their [existence] would not nullify His existence, because all the [other] entities require Him and He, blessed be He, does not require them nor any one of them. Therefore, the fact of His being does not resemble the fact of any of their being.

4. This is what the prophet meant in saying: [Jeremiah 10:10]: "And God, your Lord, is true" - that is, He alone is true and no other entity possesses truth that compares to His truth. This is what is meant by the Torah's statement [Deuteronomy 4:35]: "There is nothing else aside from Him" - that is, aside from Him, there is no true existence like His.

5. This entity is the God of the world and the Lord of the entire earth. He controls the sphere (universe) with infinite and unbounded power. This power continues without interruption, because the sphere is constantly revolving, and it is impossible for it to revolve without someone causing it to revolve. That one is He, blessed be He, who causes it to revolve without a hand or any other corporeal dimension.

6. To acknowledge this concept is a positive commandment, as it is said [Exodus 20:2]: "I am God, your Lord...." Anyone who thinks that there is another god besides this God, transgresses a negative commandment, as [Exodus 20:3] states: "You shall have no other gods before Me" and denies a fundamental principle of faith, because this is the great principle of faith upon which all depends.

## The God of the Mystical Tradition

**Moshe Cordovero (1522-1570, Safed)** The essence of divinity is found in every single thing – nothing but it exists. Since it causes everything to be, nothing can live by anything else. It enlivens them; its existence exists in each existent. Do not attribute duality to God. Let God be solely God. If you suppose that Ein Sof emanates until a certain point, and that from that point on is outside of it, you have dualized. God forbid! Realize rather, that Ein Sof exists in each existent. Do not say: “This is a stone and not God.” God forbid! Rather, all existence is God, and the stone is a thing pervaded by divinity.

**Rabbi Yehuda Arye Ger, the Sefat Emet (1870-1905, Poland)** **Everything that exists in the world, spiritual and physical, is God Himself.** It is only because of the contraction [*tsimtsum*] that was God's will, blessed be He and His name, that holiness descended rung after rung, until actual physical things were formed out of it. These things are true without a doubt. **Because of this, every person can attach himself [to God] wherever he is, through the holiness that exists within every single thing, even corporeal things.** You only have to be negated in the spark of holiness. In this way you truly bring about ascents in the upper worlds, causing true pleasure to God. A person in such a state lacks for nothing, for he can attach himself to God through whatever place he is. This is the foundation of all the mystical formulations in the world. **Each person can attach himself to the holiness within his own limbs, physical and spiritual, going very, very high, truly to God.**

**The essential task of worship is the opening of this point. On the Sabbath that gate is indeed open,** as is written: “The gate to the inner courtyard will be closed on the six workdays and open on the Sabbath and the New Moon’ (Ezekiel 46:1) Thus it is easy to experience holiness on the Sabbath. In the same way, we should understand that the glory of God's kingdom is everywhere, even though it is unseen. This is the faith that every Jew has in God's oneness. **The meaning of "One" is that there is nothing except God Himself. God is the all.** Even though we are incapable of understanding this properly, we still need to believe it. This faith will lead us to truth

## The God of Modernity

...A profound change in our spiritual practices has indeed taken place during the last half of the twentieth century but not in the usual sense. ...a subtle reordering ... has taken place in how Americans understand the sacred itself. In brief, I argue that a traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places has given way to a new spirituality of seeking—that people have been losing faith in a metaphysic that can make them feel at home in the universe and that they increasingly negotiate among competing glimpses of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom... A spirituality of dwelling emphasizes habitation: God occupies a definite place in the universe and creates a sacred space in which humans too can dwell; to inhabit sacred space is to know its territory and to feel secure. A spirituality of seeking emphasizes negotiation: individuals search for sacred moments that reinforce their conviction that the divine exists, but these moments are fleeting; rather than knowing the territory, people explore new spiritual vistas, and they may have to negotiate among complex and confusing meanings of spirituality. Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven, Spirituality in America since 1950*.

## Abraham Joshua Heschel, God In Search of Man

Wonder, or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious man's attitude toward history and nature. One attitude is alien to his spirit: taking things for granted, regarding events as a natural course of things. To find an approximate cause of a phenomenon is no answer to his ultimate wonder. He knows that there are laws that regulate the course of natural processes; he is aware of the regularity and pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to mitigate his sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all. Looking at the world he would say, "This is the Lord's doing, it is marvelous in our eyes." (Psalms 118:23)

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understand that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.

Awareness of the divine begins with wonder. It is the result of what man does with his higher incomprehension. The greatest hindrance to such awareness is our adjustment to conventional notions, to mental cliches. Wonder or radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is therefore a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is.

*Radical amazement* has a wider scope than any other act of man...What fills us with radical amazement is not the relations in which everything is embedded but the fact that even the minimum of perception is a maximum of enigma. The most incomprehensible fact is the fact that we comprehend at all. The way to faith leads through acts of wonder and radical amazement.

This is an insight we gain in acts of wonder: not to measure meaning in terms of our own mind, but to sense a meaning infinitely greater than ourselves.

### **Harold M. Schulweis, "Predicate Theology"**

I propose a shift of focus, from noun to verb, from subject to predicate, from God as person to Godliness, in Hebrew *Elohit*. Not the qualities of divinity but the divinity of the qualities is essential to belief. To illustrate this inversion, let's turn to the liturgical life and specifically to the translation of benedictions. How are the blessings of the prayer book to be understood in accordance with the idea of Godliness? One of the first blessings we learn is the benediction over bread: "Blessed art thou O Lord our God King of the universe who brings forth bread from the earth." With the idea of Godliness in mind, we direct our attention not to the noun but to the activity that brings forth bread from the earth. What are the events that bring this bread to the table? The benediction is a meditation on the transactions between nature and human beings in the process. The transactions involve the given-ness of the earth, water, sun, and seed (attributed to Elohim, God) and the preparations of the soil, the weeding and plowing, grinding and baking (attributed to Adonai, the Lord that through human beings transforms nature).

To believe in Godliness is to believe in the verbs and adverbs that refer to the activities of divinity. To behave in a godly fashion is to realize in one's life the attributes of Godliness that are potential in all human and nonhuman energies. Atheism is not the disbelief in the reality and goodness of the noun but disbelief in the reality and goodness of the attributes. The question to be asked of those who seek God is not whether they believe in a noun that cannot be known but whether they believe in the gerunds of Godliness: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, supporting the fallen, pursuing peace, loving the neighbor.

I know nothing of God as a noun. I know, from the collective experiences of my people, recorded in sacred texts and from my own experiences, only the gerunds, the verbs, of God: healing the sick, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, pursuing peace, loving my people and my neighbors. I am bound to testify to the verbs of God by the adverbs of my conduct. God is behaved.