SESSION TWO: PRELIMINARY NOTIONS

1. The Torah Has Seventy Faces

a. “One thing God has spoken; two things I have heard.” (Psalms 62:12)

b. “One biblical verse may convey several teachings . . . In R. Ishmael’s School it was taught: [commenting on Jeremiah 23:29] ‘Behold, My word is like fire, declares the LORD, a hammer that shatters the rock.’ Just as [the rock] is split into many splinters, so also may one biblical verse convey many teachings.” (TB Sanhedrin 34a).

c. “The earliest source for the term Shiv‘im panim la-Torah is Numbers Rabba 13:15-16, customarily dated to the twelfth century. . . . The term was used by the rationalist Abraham Ibn Ezra (d. 1167) in the introduction to his Torah commentary, and a century later by the mystic Nahmanides (d. 1270) in his commentary on Genesis 8:4. It also appears several times in the Zohar. That this concept was used both by rationalist and mystical Torah exegetes indicates how fundamental it is to understanding the meaning of Divine revelation. The figure 70 is used in rabbinic literature to indicate a large number, e.g., seventy nations or seventy languages, and here too it reflects the idea that there are many different ways to interpret a biblical verse.” (Allen S. Maller, “A Torah with 70 Different Faces,” Jewish Bible Quarterly, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2013, p. 28 http://jbq.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/411/jbq411shivimpanim.pdf, also https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-312508439/a-torah-with-70-different-faces)

d. “Rabbi Levi said: The Holy One appeared to [Israel at Sinai] as though He were a statue with faces on every side. A thousand people might be looking at the statue, but it would appear to each as being direct at him. So, too, when the Holy One spoke, each and every person in Israel could say, ‘The Divine Word is addressing me.’ . . . The Divine Word spoke to each and every person according to his particular capacity.” Pesikta d’Rav Kahana 12:25 (Cited in Telushkin, Jewish Wisdom, p. 285)

e. Orthodoxy (from Greek ὀρθός, orthos ("right", "true", "straight") and δόξα, doxa ("opinion" or "belief", related to dokein, "to think"), is adherence to accepted norms, more specifically to creeds, especially in religion. (Wikipedia)

f. Conclusion: Jewish tradition has a very powerful and widespread assumption that there are many ways to understand Torah, and by extension, God and therefore Jewish beliefs about the nature of our world, humanity and our relationship with God. In essence: traditional Jewish sources reject a narrowly defined concept of “Orthodoxy”. In studying Jewish Theology, therefore, it is crucial to remember that – although there are parameters for accepted Jewish beliefs – there are nevertheless a wide range of accepted, and often contradictory, beliefs.
2. The necessity of metaphors and parables – and the danger of using them

a. If God does not have a “body” or a physical form, how can we even attempt to describe God in language? Language was developed to describe “things” that exist in the “real world” (the physical world). “Seeing is believing.” But if God has no physical form, God cannot be seen. (Which is one reason many people have a hard time believing.)

b. One way for a modern person to understand God’s existence is to think of God as a Being that exists outside of the “space/time continuum”. But, if the “five senses” we have can only perceive “things” in a physical world, is there some other “sense” we can use to try and perceive a Being that does not exist in the physical world?

c. And, even if we are able to perceive such a Being, how do we then describe our perception to others using language which is generally used to describe things. (Yes, we can also describe abstract ideas. But most of language is designed for things we can see, smell, touch, taste or hear.)

d. The Blind Men and the Elephant (see article)

Conclusion: If God is invisible, we are all like the Blind Men. We occasionally sense (somehow) God’s presence in our lives or in the Universe. And then we must describe that sensation to others. But in each case we have only sensed a small aspect of “God” – not the entire Being.

e. Another parable: driving on a meandering road late at night in the fog with no GPS. Every now and then you see out the car window a sign with an arrow pointing: “This way”. Someone else had been down this road before and tries to give followers sign posts to help guide them in a useful direction.

f. Another parable: The Fish and the Fire (we will see this one in Maimonides toward the end of this class) How would you describe fire to a fish since fire cannot (normally) exist in water where fish must live.

g. Metaphors to describe the indescribable. Use language that normally describes things we can see, touch, taste, etc. [Neil Gillman excerpt from Sacred Fragments]

h. The dangers of parables and metaphors.

- We might forget that they are not to be taken literally. Metaphor about metaphors: They are like telescopes that are designed to help us see something more clearly than we would be able to do without them. BUT, like telescopes, you need to look through them to try and see what they are pointing at, NOT look at them and think you have understood what you are supposed to be seeing.

- They are not as precise or as helpful as using language to describe things that everyone can perceive with the five human senses. Our ability to perceive “things” on our own, allows us to better understand the language that is used to
describe them. (and vice versa: the language used to describe these things helps us understand the things themselves better) With God, the process is not nearly as precise or helpful.

i. NOTE: FLY IN THE OINTMENT. Although nearly all (believing) Jews today accept Maimonides’ Principle of Faith that God is “Incorporeal” – that is, God has no body, shape or form – that does not appear to have been always the case.

Reading the Bible on surface level, God does have a head, arms, “sits” on a throne, gets “angry” (and breathes fire out His nostrils, perhaps), walks in the Garden of Eden, etc. Moreover, Rabbinic literature uses similar language to describe God. And even into the Middle Ages, it seems that a significant segment of the Jewish world believed God had some physical form – even if it were not like anything else in the world. (See, e.g., Shapiro, The Limits of Orthodox Theology, pp. 45-70) If God has a body or form, perhaps metaphorical language is not so necessary.

HOWEVER, nearly all believing Jews today do accept that God is incorporeal, and that necessitates not only the use of metaphorical language for the reasons described above, but also necessitates the metaphorical interpretation of all of those Biblical and Rabbinic passages that seem to indicate God has a “body”.

As a Jew living in the 21st Century, I see no reason to believe that God has a physical form. Indeed, it presents all kinds of problems for me personally in trying to understand God. Since that also seems to be the accepted belief of the overwhelming majority of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jews today, I will take this belief as a given in this course.

3. A related discussion concerning Biblical interpretation explains that there are two separate questions in understanding the Bible (and by extension, Rabbinic texts as well)

a. What did it mean to the person(s) who wrote it? And what does it mean to us today?

b. Or, to put it another way, what is the historical reality of the stories in the Bible (if any), and what do the stories teach us about Life, the Universe and Everything.


d. Or: Historical/critical interpretation vs. Traditional/religious interpretation

e. Question: Why are we allowed to ask the question “what does it mean to us today”? Are we allowed to reinterpret Biblical and Rabbinical texts and teachings to fit with our current understanding of the world? Are there limits to the ways in which we can do this reinterpretation? If so, what are the limits?

4. I am not Orthodox (in the usual sense of the word). I am a Conservative Rabbi, raised in Reform Movement, but flirted briefly with Orthodoxy after college. That colors my perspective of this topic, and that is important to state up front.
5. Thinking and Speaking About God

a. **Experiment:** Have you ever felt the presence of God in your life? When? Can you remember the circumstances? What you felt? What made you think/believe God was there? Did you feel that God was communicating something specific to you? Or did you just feel “God’s presence”? What words can you use to describe this experience? Are there any analogies, metaphors, or symbolism that you can use to explain your experience?

b. **Adon Olam.** Two very different conceptions of God. (compare Avinu Malkenu)
   
i. **Transcendence:** God is beyond anything we can imagine, Powerful, Creator, beyond Time, beyond Space, Multi-dimensional. One. Unique. Powers include “The Omni’s” (omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent). But, is God omnipotent? – Then why do bad things happen to good people? (later topic) **Philosopher’s God.**

   ii. **Imminence:** God is right Here, right Now, right next to me, has a relationship with me. **Personal God.**

   iii. As is often the case, Judaism posits two opposing descriptions – at the same time!

c. **Is God a “force” (like Mordecai Kaplan’s “power that provides for salvation”) or a “Being”?** What is the difference?
   
i. **“Being”** metaphor: Self-awareness, ability to choose a course of action, make moral distinctions, ability to think, analyze, remember (but we usually think of a “being” as having a shape or form)

   ii. **“Force”** metaphor: no physical body or form, can be everywhere all at the same time, timeless, permeates Universe. (But we don’t think of a “force” as having cognitive capabilities)

   iii. Perhaps metaphor of “sentient force” fits God better?

d. See excerpts from **“Belief in a Personal God: The Position of Liberal Supernaturalism” by Louis Jacobs**
The Blind Men and the Elephant

A number of disciples went to the Buddha and said, “Sir, there are living here in Savatthi many wandering hermits and scholars who indulge in constant dispute, some saying that the world is infinite and eternal and others that it is finite and not eternal, some saying that the soul dies with the body and others that it lives on forever, and so forth. What, Sir, would you say concerning them?”

The Buddha answered, “Once upon a time there was a certain raja who called to his servant and said, ‘Come, good fellow, go and gather together in one place all the men of Savatthi who were born blind... and show them an elephant.’ ‘Very good, sire,’ replied the servant, and he did as he was told. He said to the blind men assembled there, ‘Here is an elephant,’ and to one man he presented the head of the elephant, to another its ears, to another a tusk, to another the trunk, the foot, back, tail, and tuft of the tail, saying to each one that that was the elephant.

“When the blind men had felt the elephant, the raja went to each of them and said to each, ‘Well, blind man, have you seen the elephant? Tell me, what sort of thing is an elephant?’

“Then they began to quarrel, shouting, ‘Yes it is!’ ‘No, it is not!’ ‘An elephant is not that!’ ‘Yes, it’s like that!’ and so on, till they came to blows over the matter.

“Brethren, the raja was delighted with the scene.

“Just so are these preachers and scholars holding various views blind and unseeing.... In their ignorance they are by nature quarrelsome, wrangling, and disputatious, each maintaining reality is thus and thus.”

Then the Exalted One rendered this meaning by uttering this verse of uplift,

O how they cling and wrangle, some who claim
For preacher and monk the honored name!
For, quarreling, each to his view they cling.
Such folk see only one side of a thing.

Jainism and Buddhism. Udana 68-69: Parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant

Udana 68-69: We give a version of this well-known Indian tale from the Buddhist canon, but some assert it is of Jain origin. It does illustrate well the Jain doctrine of Anekanta, the many sidedness of things. Cf. Tattvarthaslokavartika 116, p. 806. Mihir Yast 10.2: Cf. Analects 15.5, p. 1020.


See also Wikipedia “Blind Men and an Elephant”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant
More important, we [have] the problem of knowing, thinking, or saying *anything* about God. This is the ultimate paradox that pervades all of theological inquiry. Precisely because God is the supremely transcendent reality, neither the human mind nor human language is equipped to characterize Him in any objectively accurate way. We know how to describe those dimensions of the world that are accessible through sensation—colors, chemical reactions, the anatomy of the human body. But the more reality escapes direct sense experience—the internal make-up of the atom or of galaxies beyond ours, for example—the more we must mistrust the literalness of our thinking and speaking. If God is intrinsically other than anything human or natural, then how can we say anything that is literally true about Him, unless of course, we believe, as the traditionalist believes, that God Himself spoke at Sinai and instructed us regarding what to believe about Him.

The dilemma is that we want to say a great deal about God. At the same time, we want to preserve that transcendent quality that makes Him inaccessible to ordinary language. The alternatives are to remain silent or to reduce God to merely human or natural terms, which is idolatry, the cardinal theological sin.

Theological literal-mindedness is idolatrous, not because it claims to describe the transcendent God in human and natural terms—what other terms can we use?—but rather, because it insists that these descriptions are literally accurate and true. Exodus 20:4-5 forbids us from making and worshiping any "sculpted image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth," and the biblical community was justifiably punished for worshiping the golden calf. The problem is not sculpted images, however, but rather conceptual and linguistic images. We are haunted by Isaiah's warning (40:25), "To whom, then, can you liken Me, to whom can I be compared?", and later (55:8-9), "For My plans are not your plans, nor are My ways your ways…But as the heavens are high above the earth, so are My ways high above your ways and My plans above your plans." The assumption that God's nature can be conveyed *in a literal way* by our natural language is as idolatrous as building a golden calf.

We must speak about God, *and* we must also recognize that all of our God-talk is built on a skeleton of metaphors, constructs, models, paradigms, or, more technically, "symbols."

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Adon Olam

The LORD of the Universe
Who ruled before any form was created
When everything was made according to His will,
He was called “Sovereign.”
When everything comes to an end,
He alone will rule in awesomeness.
He was. He is. He will be in glory.
He is One. There is no other to compare to or join Him.
Without beginning. Without end.
To Him is the power and the dominion.
But [and?] he is my God, my Redeemer lives.
The Fortress in my travails in time of distress.
He is my banner and my refuge,
the portion of my cup in the time that I call.
In His hand I entrust my spirit.
When I lie down and when I awake.
And with my soul and my body
God is with me. I shall not fear.
God’s ineffability, however, they too believed that God really is. As the medieval thinkers—Jewish, Christian and Moslem alike—discussed God in the vocabulary they had adopted from the Greeks, He is both transcendent and immanent, in space and time and yet beyond space and time. His essence defying any attempt at comprehension, yet capable of human apprehension through His manifestation, the glory of which fills the universe. Of course, no one who thinks of God as a person is unaware that personhood is associated with the human condition and is totally inappropriate when applied to God; but then, so is all human language. The description of God as personal is meant to imply that there is a Being (this term, too, is totally inadequate) by whom we were brought into existence and whom we encounter and who encounters us. To affirm that God is a person, or, better, not less than a person, is to affirm that He is more than a great idea the emergence of which, like the invention of the wheel and of writing and the discovery of electricity, has shaped civilization. At the same time, the religious mind, always in need of the transcendence that only theism can satisfy, has begun to be haunted by a terrible question: What if theism, desirable though it may be, is not true? Once Darwin offered an explanation of how species developed by the process of natural selection, once astronomers uncovered the vastnesses of a universe in which our whole solar system is no more than a speck in outer space, once Marx pointed to the economic motivation behind religious belief and Freud to the possibility that religion is a collective neurosis, belief in the God who cares for each individual has become highly problematical.

Some religious thinkers, notably Paul Tillich and the “Death of God” theologians on the Christian scene, Mordecai Kaplan and his Reconstructionist school on the Jewish, reluctant to allow victory to the bleak philosophy of atheism, have argued that the only way to meet the challenge is to give up not the idea of theism but the understanding of God as a divine person. Yes, these thinkers concede, after Darwin and the others, it is impossible. But if God is understood as the power in the universe that makes for righteousness, if belief in God means that, by faith, we affirm that the universe is so constituted that goodness will ultimately win out, then God, far from being dead, is truly alive, the most vital reality for the enrichment and ennoblement of human life.

For Jewish thinkers who espouse this doctrine of naturalism, prayer and ritual are still of the highest value. Prayer is not, however, an exercise in trying to beseech an undecided deity to grant our desires; it is, rather, a reaching out to the highest in the universe and in ourselves. In the life of prayer, our attention is called to the eternal values and this, in itself, makes their realization in our lives more feasible. Similarly, the Jewish rituals
though Orthodox Jews are less likely to admit openly to it. The trouble with religious naturalism, however, is that it does not deliver what it promised, a God capable of being worshiped. How can a vague belief that there is a mindless something “out there” be a real substitute for the traditional theistic belief that there is Mind behind and in the universe? The appeal of theism in its traditional form lies precisely in this, that the universe makes sense because it has an Author who continues to guide and watch over His creatures. The traditional argument for the existence of God—pointing to the evidence of or-

The advocates of religious naturalism, influenced by science, appear to imagine that to describe God as an impersonal force or power is more philosophically respectable today than to think of Him as a person. Is it? As the medieval thinkers never tired of saying, all human descriptions of God are really inadmissible; yet since the object of worship, to be worshiped, has to produce some picture in the mind, it is necessary to use halting human language, the only language we have, always with the proviso that the reality is infinitely more than anything we dare utter. We must perforce use in our description terms taken from the highest in our experience and then add “and infinitely more than this.” A force or power, precisely because it is impersonal and hence mindless, is inferior in every way to the human personality. To use the demolition job done by the scientists as a reason for preferring the force or power metaphor is to overlook the obvious fact that scientists themselves operate through their human minds. Of course, from one point of view, it is absurd to speak of God as a person, a term laden with all too human association. But it is even more absurd to speak of God as an It, which is what speaking of Him as a force or power involves.

Maimonides and other medieval thinkers have developed the idea of negative attributes. Regarding God’s essential attributes, those of existence, wisdom, and unity, one can only speak in negative terms. Thus to say that God exists is not to say anything about His actual nature for that is unknowable. All it means—a very big all—is that He is not nonexistent, that there really is an unknowable God. Similarly, to say that god is wise is to say that whatever else He is He is not ignorant. And to say that He is One is to negate multiplicity from His Being. There is a real difficulty here, however. Logically, what dif-

of semantics as it is a matter of psychological need. To pray to God, the worshiper must have some picture of God in his mind. As we have argued, the most effective picture is drawn from human personality, the most significant construct available to man in his universe. But the picture in the mind must never be accepted as the reality; the mental reservation must always be present. As the famous Kabbalist Moses Cordovero puts it: “The mind of the worshiper must run to and fro, running to affirm that God is (and for this the picture is essential) and then immediately recoiling lest the mental picture be imagined to be all that is affirmed.”

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There are thus three attitudes on the question of God for the modern Jew: He can be an atheist, he can be a religious naturalist, or he can be a religious supernaturalist. In other words, he can deny that God exists, he can reinterpret the idea of God in terms of the force or power that makes for righteousness, or he can believe in the personal God of the Jewish tradition. It all depends on which attitude makes the most sense of human life and is the most coherent philosophy of existence. One man’s coherence is another’s incoher-

To think of God as a person is first to justify coherence itself. For if, as the atheist maintains, the universe is just there as brute fact, and if, as the religious naturalist maintains, the force that works for righteousness is similarly just there, how does one explain that feature of coherence in the universe by which science operates—indeed, by which all human reasoning operates? Taylor’s famous illustration is germane in this connection.\textsuperscript{13} In some English railway stations near the Welsh border, small pebbles are arranged to form the words “Welcome to Wales.” A skeptical passenger in the railway carriage may decide that, somehow, the pebbles just happened to have gotten there, coincidentally, to form these words by accident. What that skeptic cannot reasonably do, based on his perception, is to turn to his fellow passengers and inform them that they are entering Wales. The liberal supernaturalist would not mistake the welcome sign for an accidental formation of pebbles, but neither does he attempt to explain everything in this strange and mysterious universe, which he believes has been created by a benevolent Mind. He cannot understand why there is evil in the universe, for instance. But he can explain why humans have this constant urge to explain, the human mind exploring the workings of Infinite Mind behind the universe. In the other two hypotheses, all is random development. But randomness implies that all is fortuitous and coincidental so that ultimately there is no meaning to meaning. Unless there is a personal God, whence came personality? Unless there is Mind behind the universe, whence came human reasoning powers? Unless righteousness is written large in the universe, whence came the power that makes for righteousness—indeed, whence came the very concept of righteousness? If everything just happened to be, it would not only be re-

The Jewish supernaturalist obviously rejects agnosticism as he rejects atheism. The term agnosticism, which was coined by T.H. Huxley in the last century, was intended to convey the idea that there can be no “gnosis,” no knowledge, about God.\textsuperscript{18} He was not saying, as many agnostics do nowadays, that he could not decide whether or not God exists, but rather that since the whole subject is not amenable to proof, it is impossible to decide one way or the other. There is thus a “hard” and a “soft” agnosticism. The “hard” agnostic holds that one can never know whether or not God exists. The “soft” agnostic cannot make up his mind on the question. The fallacy in the “soft” option is that belief in God profoundly affects a person’s life, the whole quality of which is different from the life of the atheist. As Chesterton rightly said: “Show me a man’s philosophy and I’ll show you the man.” One can adopt an agnostic attitude towards certain questions with little
consequence: one can, for example, live perfectly well without ever knowing whether there are intelligent beings on other planets. But a man and a woman may agonize for a lifetime over whether they really love one another and thus never marry. And by leaving the matter in abeyance, by not deciding whether or not he believes in God, the agnostic, in fact, has decided to live without God. To remain undecided all of one’s life, then, is, in effect, to decide against.

As for “hard” agnosticism, it is difficult to understand on what grounds it is affirmed that one can never know whether or not God exists. How does the agnostic know that he can never know? All the pros and cons have been presented to him. Why should the human mind be incapable of deciding one way or the other on this question as it decides on other questions?

For all that, the liberal supernaturalist, while ruling out agnosticism on the basic question of God’s existence, may well adopt an attitude of reverent or religious agnosticism on other questions. Because of his liberal stance, he will weigh dogma in the light of history and of reason and may come up with views that are less traditional but more coherent to him in the light of new knowledge; or he may feel that the problem is too complicated for a tidy yes or no to be given and must be left to God.

Take the problem of evil, often expressed in the form: Either God can prevent evil and does not choose to do so, in which case He cannot be good. Or he wishes to prevent evil but cannot do so, in which case He cannot be omnipotent. An answer often given is that God does have the power to banish evil but does not do so because in some way evil serves the cause of good; for example, a universe in which there was no evil would be a universe in which freedom to choose the good would be impossible. Exponents of the limited God idea, however, see no dilemma. God is good and would prevent evil if He could but He cannot. He is not, in fact, omnipotent, and evil is simply there. Of course God can and does mitigate the banefulness of evil, and He can and does urge His creatures to fight evil and be on the side of good.