

**Toward Understanding:
A Journey in Search of God**

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who sustain me.

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ברוכה את שכינה
Brucha at Shekhina who grounds me
Brucha at Shekhina who reminds me that I know
Brucha at Shekhina who guides me
Brucha at Shekhina who gives me the courage to let go.
Ri. J. Turner

למדני Teach Me

למדני אלוהי Teach me, O Lord,
ברך והתפלל How to bless and pray
על סוד עלה קמל upon the secret of a
על נוגה פרי בשל withered leaf,
על החירות הזאת Upon the glow of a
לראות לחוש לנשום ripened fruit,
לדעת לייחל להיכשל Upon this freedom,
To see, to feel, to
breathe,
To know, to yearn, to fail.

למד את שפתותי Teach my lips
ברכה ושיר הלל a blessing and a song of
בהתחדש זמנך praise,
עם בוקר ועם ליל As your time renews
לבל יהיה יומי היום with morn and with night,
כתמול שלשום Lest my day shall be
לבל יהיה עליי יומי הרגל as of yore,
Lest my day shall
become a habit.

Yonina

INTRODUCTION

My thesis began as an exploration of the evolution and diversity of ideas of God in Jewish thought over time. It involved an articulation of my theology coupled with an exploration of other thinkers who have grappled with questions similar to mine. Ultimately, it evolved into an understanding that one can be an authentic Jew who derives deep meaning from rituals and practice, without believing in God.

As I began my journey, I did not want to stand alone in my understanding of the One, of the connection that binds all things, untethered in my thinking, calling my understanding “Jewish” simply because of my lineage. Rather, I wanted to ground my understanding in the work of Jewish theologians and philosophers who began their personal journeys grounded in Jewish text and tradition, and moved beyond traditional conceptions of God. Using Baruch Spinoza, the influential Dutch rationalistic philosopher of Portuguese-Sephardi descent, as a starting point, and Mordechai Kaplan as a central focus, I explored thinkers who built upon their ideas, myself included.

Baruch Spinoza introduced a non-normative concept of God (God or Nature) and the impact was far-reaching. By applying a rationalist lens to religion, and disproving a god who acts in history, Spinoza paved the way for Biblical Criticism, Humanist Judaism, and Secular Humanism. His ideas threatened, and eventually undermined, the divine right of kings, leading to the separation of church and state across Europe and beyond. Three

centuries later, Mordechai Kaplan articulated an evolving, multi-faceted Jewish identity of which religious practice was just one facet.

The evolution of thought is very much like the evolution of art. One idea leads to another, and then another idea builds upon the new idea, and so on. Eventually the connection between the earliest ideas and the latest one isn't overtly evident, but the trail is there. This recalls the story told in the Talmud (Menachot 29b:3-5), in which Moses finds himself transported in time to the *beit midrash* (study hall) of Rabbi Akiva. He is confused, the ideas being discussed are foreign to him, until Rabbi Akiva says, "In the name of my teacher, Moshe Rabbeinu." Moses then understands there has been a natural evolution over time of concepts and practices from him to Rabbi Akiva. Such it is between Spinoza, thru Kaplan, and onward to me.

Each of the following thinkers have something to say about an aspect of my understanding of God, religion, and my religious practice. Reading their relevant works, I aim to ascertain how they answer the following questions, what are the implications of their lens, and where it takes them.

1. Is there a God?
2. If there is, then What is God?
3. Is God sentient and intentional?
4. Does God micromanage the world?
5. Am I commanded to obey God? What happens if I don't?

Scholars/Ideas to be explored:

1. **Baruch Spinoza:** Everything is God, *Echad*. God, or Nature are synonymous.
2. **Mordechai Kaplan:** Judaism as a multifaceted and evolving civilization.
3. **Eric Fromm:** Radical Humanism “a global philosophy which emphasizes the oneness of the human race, the capacity of man to develop his own powers and to arrive at inner harmony and at the establishment of a peaceful world.”¹
4. **Process Theology:** “...a powerful tool for integrating religion and science in a way that respects the integrity of both disciplines as valid ways to relate to the world and to each other.”²
5. **Humanistic Judaism:** “...celebrates Jewish life while foregoing appeals for divine intervention, instead putting our faith in human reason and human power as the best vehicles for improving the world.”³
6. **Casper ter Kuile:** Non-religious Spirituality – finding purpose and community in secular spaces.

¹ Eric Fromm, *You Shall Be As Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (New York: Fawcett, 1966), 14-15.

² Bradley Shavit Artson, *GOD of Becoming and Relationship: The Dynamic Nature of Process Theology* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2013), xv.

³ “What is Humanistic Judaism?” Society for Humanistic Judaism, <https://shj.org/meaning-learning/what-is-humanistic-judaism/>.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

I have long struggled with the question, “Is there a God?” If there is, then what is God? Is God sentient and intentional? Does God micromanage the world? Am I commanded to obey God? Am I commanded to follow Jewish law? What happens if I don’t? Answering these questions is important because for a long time I thought that to be a good Jew demanded a belief in a God to whom you were accountable. While I understand that, unlike Christianity, Judaism is about *deed* rather than *creed*, in my upbringing there were no deeds outside of *Tikkun Olam*, which translated to cleaning up the San Francisco Bay shoreline, or painting the homes of the elderly. There were big lofty concepts, like *Tzedek, Tzedek, Tirdof – Justice, justice, you shall pursue* (Deut. 16:18) but there were no small acts or customs that were a part of daily life. Though we celebrated the major holidays, attended Sunday school, Jewish summer camp, confirmation class and youth group, we followed no dietary restrictions and we enjoyed churchless observances of Christmas and Easter. We attended Friday night services regularly where I enjoyed the music but snuck out of the sermons. I had no connection to the liturgy in either Hebrew or English, and what I did understand of the English referenced a God who played no active role in my life.

When I stood in shul with my father, I felt the warmth of his presence and love. I loved being a part of the community, though sneaking out to the back parking lot to hang out with my friends was the best part. It was like the old joke where an observant man, Schwartz, and an atheist, Cohen, meet every week in shul for years. The rabbi can’t figure out what draws one to the

other. Schwartz, he asks, why do you come? "I come to talk to God," Schwartz replies. Cohen he asks, why do you come? "Me?" says Cohen, "Why do I come? I come to talk to Schwartz." I went to shul to talk to Schwartz.

The idea that to be an observant Jew must include a belief in God, who definitely was a male, father-figure, up in the sky, and who kept an accounting of my actions that would be reviewed on Judgement Day, was literal for me. If I didn't believe in that god, then why observe any of the holidays or Shabbat? How could I be authentically Jewish if I had no faith?

Other elements of what it meant to be Jewish came into play for me. My family on both sides are immigrants, and *Fiddler on the Roof* made a big impression. I understood we were a minority, that we were weak, disliked, and different from other people. We would likely always be persecuted by the majority culture, that we were never really safe, and that the Church was always going to be against us. In sixth grade, I remember wearing a kerchief on my head for months to emulate Tevye's daughters. That was my way of saying "I am Jewish and proud of it." But what was "it"?

Our synagogue had many Holocaust survivors with numbers tattooed on their arms. From them I learned of Emil Fackenheim's 614th commandment, to not give Hitler a posthumous victory, to not be the person who broke the link in the continuous chain of our people's history.⁴ In 1973, I sat in shul on Yom Kippur with my father and the rest of the community,

⁴ Emil Fackenheim, "The Jewish Return into History," in *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader*, ed. Elliot N. Dorff and Louis E. Newman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 387.

listening to the rabbi with one ear, but with the other glued to the radio. When Israel was victorious, the strong, proud, self-assured Israeli Jews were akin to Ari ben Canaan (Paul Newman) from *Exodus*.⁵ But besides building a country where Jews would be safe, in what did Ari ben Canaan believe? Was his identity ethnic and secular? It certainly wasn't built around religious observance.

In 1993 I travelled to Poland where I stood at Majdanek, Treblinka, and Theresienstadt. I saw the piles of children's shoes, the piles of their hair. There is no way to reconcile the reality of those remains with the idea of God who is *El rachum ve'chanun* - a merciful and gracious god. I came home from that trip and didn't go to synagogue for a year.

So, how did I get from that moment to where I am today: an aware and practicing Jew, leading a community, on the brink of rabbinic ordination, with a connection to, and awe of, what some call God? It goes back to "I come to talk to Schwartz." I deeply value the ideas, conversations, community and friendships that have emerged out of my life. I feel a strong sense of interconnectedness and none of that is devalued because I have struggled to understand God. Once I began to explore the WHY of being Jewish, the HOW became easy.

At Mt. Sinai, when offered the Torah, the Children of Israel responded *Na'aseh v'nishmah* - *we will do and we will hear* (Exod. 24:7). The idea that the Children of Israel had such faith in God that they would do whatever they were told, without understanding why in advance, may be inspirational to

⁵ Otto Preminger, dir. *Exodus* (Otto Preminger Films, 1960), film.

some as a statement of blind faith, but for me, it has only led to short-term commitment. While most of my life I was enthusiastic to “do Jew” in whatever form of Judaism was in front of me, it wasn’t until I studied the underlying concepts, outside a framework that mandated a belief in God, that I internalized the reasons for practice. Judaism is a way of life that stands on its own as a system, whether one believes in a god that micromanages the world, has a plan for the Jewish people, or holds one accountable on Judgement Day. Rituals create space to hold emotion and mark important moments in time. As I grew into adulthood, whether I believed in God or not, even if I was mumbling words in a language that at the time I didn’t understand, the action of lighting Shabbat candles on Friday night caused me to slow down, to bring my family together, to create moments that tied us to our heritage. Over time, as I grew in my observance, I came to understand that when we shut off our cellphones and our email on Shabbat, we are, as Heschel said “creating a palace in time.”⁶ By ridding our home of intrusive phone calls and outside stimuli for 25 hours a week, we more easily spent quality time as a family. It wasn’t because the God I didn’t understand, or rabbis I knew little of, had decreed those activities to be akin to lighting a fire or working, but rather because I saw practical benefit. Today, my Jewish practice comes from an internal yearning to act on my ideas and convictions, rather than as an external imposition from a God I don’t believe in.

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Young, 1951).

Over time, as I read more, and as I cast off my pediatric understanding of God, I have found that I have more faith than I thought. Gone is the old man in the sky who was a compilation of ideas ranging from *HaShem*, *Elohim*, or *Adon haNiflaot*/God of wonders, to Jesus as a personal god, to the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost, to George Burns in *Oh, God!*⁷ It took time to allow myself to let go of the need to believe in this God for fear that I would lose my way or assimilate into oblivion. But allowing myself to consider other ideas has allowed me the space grow authentically.

What percolated in my mind and soul has been explored by others as well. I don't want to stand on "feet of clay"⁸ and blithely spew my truths without having explored the ideas of scholars who have come before me. Before I began this thesis project, my exposure to their ideas had been in references by teachers, or in the writings of others. I had not read their work in the original (or in translations of original texts) with the opportunity for in-depth exploration and consideration. I didn't want to graduate from rabbinical school with only a cursory understanding of the relevant literature, Jewish and general.

I was not raised in an environment steeped in Jewish texts. Over time my cognizance of the vastness of Jewish literature, both ancient and contemporary, has grown. I am a product of the twentieth-century Reform movement in Northern California. As I matured and my interest both deepened and broadened, I explored Jewish ideas and practice in liberal West Coast Jewish camps and youth programs, traditional yeshivot in Israel,

⁷ Carl Reiner, dir. *Oh, God!* (Warner Bros. 1977), film.

⁸ According to Wikipedia, "Feet of clay is an expression now commonly used to refer to a weakness or character flaw, especially in people of prominence."

as a Wexner Heritage Fellow, and through my work at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. I went to rabbinical school not so much to train for a profession, but rather to more fully understand where I stand theologically in relation to Jewish ideas and practice. I have long intuited my own sense of where I naturally belong but my position felt ungrounded and perhaps “un-Jewish” in its universalism. In the presence of “experts,” I felt ill-equipped to discuss ideas, to be heard, and to be taken seriously.

I had the idea that in Jewish life there was a right way to be Jewish and a wrong way. As a young adult, I may have had no idea what Judaism said on any given subject, but I was sure that it said *something*. I just needed to learn what it was and do it. I had no idea of the breadth and diversity of Jewish practice.

The Judaism of my childhood was devoid of depth. I looked to Orthodoxy for answers while clinging to the quiet voice in my soul that had the answer but couldn't articulate the ideas. Since graduating college, I've been trapped in a neo-Orthodox paradox, trying to answer the question “Is there a God?” from inside a paradigm focused on conform to God's will through strict Halachic observance. The words of Mordechai Kaplan have opened my eyes and allowed me to stand outside that framing. For the Jew who views Judaism as a civilization, the *raison d'être* is not the depth of the particular that comes from strict Halachic observance or the broadness of the universal that comes from all that we have in common with everyone else. Rather we are drawn to Jewish life by internal desires as the characteristics and aspects

of Jewish civilization align with our being. We are formed by our civilization and thus we propagate it as an expression of our being.

Over the years, my mind filled with the ideas I had encountered and they were in conversation with each other as they emerged in my consciousness. Previously unquestioned truths were seen in a new light and pushed me to articulate what I understand to be the answers to the following questions:

1. Is there a God?
2. If there is, then What is God?
3. Is God sentient and intentional?
4. Does God micromanage the world?
5. Am I commanded to obey God? If yes, what happens if I don't?

JAMIE AND THE 5 QUESTIONS

How did I come to answers to these questions? It was *not* through reading the works of others, that came later. What follows is an articulation of my own sense of divinity. Later, I came to understand that others had walked this way before.

- Everything in the universe is interconnected and is part of one macrosystem
- The sum total of everything in the universe is more than the sum of the individual parts
- God is found in the connection between people
- Human beings are a means to bring godliness into the world.
- I am compelled to live a life enriched by Jewish rituals, marked Jewish time, viewing my decisions through the lens of Jewish ethics and morals

What is the natural tendency of the universe? What will happen in the end?

My awakening to the Big Questions such as “What is the point of the Universe?,” “What does the end of time look like?,” and “What is God?” happened in my tenth-grade biology class. We were discussing negentropy and homeostasis. Negentropy is the process by which things become orderly, the opposite of entropy (the gradual decline into disorder). By “order” is meant organization, structure and function: the opposite of randomness or chaos. Homeostasis is the tendency toward a relatively stable equilibrium between interdependent elements, especially as maintained by physiological processes. I left that classroom convinced that the tendency of the universe was toward homeostasis, and given enough time, the universe would come to a gradual, calm halt and that would be perfection.

Is there a God?

For the person who believes in a god or gods, one's understanding of said god(s) underpins how they act in the world. Different cultures and traditions espouse different ideas. Many traditional Jews affirm a god that acts in history, micromanages the world, and holds one accountable for their actions. For these Jews, God has an ultimate plan and the way to bring about that plan is to live a life in strict observance of Jewish law. I go in a different direction. I understand God to be found in the connection between people; that godliness is expressed by people through their actions; that the Torah was written by man and is the sacred literature of an evolving people.

What does the text itself tell us about the nature of God? The Hebrew letters that represent the name of God are *Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey*. For some, these letters represent an omniscient, sentient being that acts in history. For others, this is an adjective describing the oneness of all things, all that ever was, is, and will be. Do the letters *Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey* describe what I understand as God: interconnectivity, the urge to do good, awe, reverence and gratitude for the energy that powers the universe? Does *Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey* describe a God? What does the word "god" mean? From where did the word derive?

According to Merriam-Webster:

God : the supreme or ultimate reality: such as the Being perfect in power, wisdom, and goodness who is worshipped (as in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism) as creator and ruler of the universe.

Is this a description of *Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay*? Wikipedia states:

The earliest written form of the Germanic word "god" comes from the 6th century Christian Codex Argenteus, which descends from the Old English *gūþ* from the Proto-Germanic *ǵuðan. While hotly disputed, most agree on the reconstructed Proto-Indo-European form *ǵhu-tó-m, based on the root *ǵhau-, *ǵhauə-, which meant "to call" or "to invoke". Alternatively, "Ghau" may be derived from a posthumously deified chieftain named "Gaut" — a name which sometimes appears for the Norse god Odin or one of his descendants. The Lombardic form of Odin, Godan, may derive from the cognate Proto-Germanic *ǵuðánaz.

The capitalized form "God" was first used in Ulfilas' Gothic translation of the New Testament, to represent the Greek *Theos* (uncertain origin), and the Latin *Deus* (etymology "* Dyeus"). *Because the development of English orthography was dominated by Christian texts, the capitalization (hence personalization and personal name) continues to represent a distinction between monotheistic "God" and the "gods" of pagan polytheism.*

The name "God" now typically refers to the Abrahamic God of Judaism (El (god) YHVH), Christianity (God), and Islam (Allah). Though there are significant cultural divergences that are implied by these different names, "God" remains the common English translation for all. The name may signify any related or similar monotheistic deities, such as the early monotheism of Akhenaten and Zoroastrianism.⁹

If Merriam-Webster's definition accurately portrays what people mean when they use the word God, then for many Jews, there is no God. And when we use the word God, are we not trying to squeeze our understanding of *Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey* into a European construct dominated by a Christian worldview?

Is God sentient and intentional? Does God micromanage the world? Is everything pre-ordained?

"The Big Bang hypothesis states that all of the current and past matter in the Universe came into existence at the same time, roughly 13.8 billion years ago. At this time, all matter was

⁹ "God," *Wikipedia*, <https://www.cs.mcgill.ca/~rwest/wikispeedia/wpcd/wp/g/God.htm>.

compacted into a very small ball with infinite density and intense heat called a Singularity. Suddenly, the Singularity began expanding, and the universe as we know it began."¹⁰

The universe is a closed system and the energy contained within it is finite.¹¹ We do not know what preceded its emergence. There may have been nothing before the Big Bang (though proponents of a multi-verse would suggest that the Big Bang was the emergence of our universe while others existed elsewhere prior). If one hypothesizes there was nothing before our universe emerged, then perhaps there was a state of stasis or stable equilibrium? In the moment of the Big Bang, there was an injection of energy into a closed system. Every movement subsequent to this initial originating event has been a reaction. The scale of the universe is so grand that we are inconsequential to affect any change in its overall trajectory. We simply go along for the ride as the chain reaction of the universe plays itself out until homeostasis is achieved.

If everything subsequent to the Big Bang is a reaction within a closed system, then in effect, everything is pre-ordained. Does this imply that there is “a plan” or an intelligence underlying this process? NO.

Cause and effect: once set in motion in a closed system, everything is inevitable and out of our control as we are part of the system itself. It may seem like we have free will but we are a product of the cause and effect. In this way, everything is thus a reaction to the cause. While we may have the

¹⁰ Matt Williams, “What is the Big Bang Theory?” *Physics.com.*, <https://phys.org/news/2015-12-big-theory.html>

¹¹ I am going out on a limb here, and I am sure my physicist husband will tweak what I am saying, but through 30 years of dinnertime discussions about physics and the universe, this is what I have come to understand.

sense that we have free will, we are managed by reactions of the system.¹² How we understand the system is the key. As sentient beings trying to make meaning of the world and things around us, we ascribe meaning and create a narrative to describe said system. We can't get the full picture of the system of which we are a small, infinitesimal part. As in *Horton Hears a Who!*¹³ we are on the dandelion that Horton sees through his looking glass. We feel we grasp the system around us as far as we can see, but we'll never have the big picture.

Grounding my intuition on the shoulders and work of the scholars of whom I choose to write, like Baruch Spinoza, I understand that everything is God. But does the "everything" have power to make change? Is God sentient? Not as an independent entity, but yes, in the sense that the collective effect of those impelled to make the world a better place (*a la* Kaplan) has the power to make change. We are more than the sum of our parts. We are our physicality, but we are also love, caring, and compassion. All the drives, feelings and the emotions that impel us forward to improve, to explore, to grow and refine ourselves and the world, this part, the non-physical part, is God. We, our collective whole, are the sentience.

Am I commanded to obey God? What happens if I don't?

In the traditional view of the Jewish people's relationship with God, God is the Master; we are the commanded. But given that I do not believe in

¹² This echoes Spinoza's concept of determinism.

¹³ Dr. Seuss, *Horton Hears a Who!* (New York: Random House, 1954).

a god who is the commander, I do not feel *commanded* in my observance. I do feel *compelled*.¹⁴

Commanded vs. compelled. To compel is to have a powerful and irresistible effect, influence, etc. To command is to direct with specific authority. To be *commanded* implies an authoritarian commander. To be *commanded* is to have no choice in the matter, which is to say the commander is omnipotent. To be persuaded is very different than to be commanded, which is the traditional view of our relationship with God. To be *compelled* is to respond to an inner calling; there is a level of choice involved. One has the option to not act, until one is persuaded. If I am indeed commanded by God, what is the authority that commands me? A person's sense of being commanded comes from their conception of God. One who believes in a god that acts in history and micromanages the world, will likely end up with strict adherence to Jewish law either out of fear of punishment or out of a heartfelt desire to fulfill said god's plan. One who understands God as the connection between people which is expressed through their actions, will go in a different direction, as I have. In this scenario, Jewish life will be the creation of a community with shared values rooted in Jewish ideas, literature/text and tradition. This Jewish life will be an expression of feeling compelled and being persuaded.

When I wrote my five questions and I asked if we are bound to obey God, I was actually asking if we are bound to follow *halacha*, which in my mind meant Orthodox Jewish law and by "law," I understood that in a legal

¹⁴ Artson, *GOD of Becoming and Relationship*, calls this feeling/this compulsion the "lure."

sense to be binding. Growing up in the Reform movement, *halacha* was something that we rejected without understanding what it was.

We read in Deuteronomy 10:12:

מה יהוה אלהיך שאל מעמך כי אם ליראה את יהוה אלהיך ללכת בכל דרכיו
ולאהבה אותו ולעבד את יהוה אלהיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך:
לשמר את מצוות יהוה ואת חקתיו אשר אנכי מצוה היום לטוב לך

And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God demand of you? Only this: to revere the LORD your God, to walk only in His paths, to love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and soul, keeping the LORD's commandments and laws, which I enjoin upon you today, for your good.

What does it mean *lalechet b'chol d'rachav* - to walk in His paths? The answer differs as to how you understand the verb *lalechet* and the noun *halacha*.

The word “halacha” comes from the root *hey-lamed-chaf* which means to go or to walk. The noun that forms out of this root, *halacha*, roughly translates as “the going” or “the walking,” i.e., the doing of *lalechet*. The modern Orthodox rabbi and Hartman Institute scholar, Rabbi Micah Goodman writes:

For some two thousand years, religious law has stood at the heart of Jewish life. How has it survived the trials and tribulations of Jewish history? One surprising answer comes from a sage of the Jerusalem Talmud, Rabbi Yannai: “If the Torah had been given sliced (*i.e.*, with one clear answer to every question) there would be no room for the leg to stand [*i.e.*, no room to maneuver]...so that the Torah will be interpreted 49 faces impure and 49 faces pure.” The obscure nature of the Torah’s text invites multiple, contradictory interpretations, which allowed the rabbis to adapt it to ever-evolving circumstances. Had the Torah been “clear-cut” – that is, clear and unambiguous – it would not have produced the interpretive flexibility that made it adaptable to different eras. The Hebrew word *halakha* comes

from the root meaning “to proceed,” and halakha retained its important status because it kept moving forward.¹⁵

For some, the doing of *la'lechet* is to follow specific laws developed over time by the rabbis which are resistant to change. For others, the doing of *la'lechet* is part of a process that moves forward, adapts and evolves. For example, Eric Fromm is a Non-theistic Mystic. For him, “walking in the way,” is the pursuit of justice and love, without being bound to specific rituals or actions. For his contemporary, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the foremost modern Orthodox figure of his day, “walking in the way” is *halacha*, specific laws which must be followed.

The *halacha* which was given to us from Sinai, is the objectification of religion in clear and determinate forms, in precise and authoritative laws, and in definite principles. It translates subjectivity into a fixed pattern of lawfulness.¹⁶

Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist movement, found a middle ground between Fromm and Soloveitchik.

We accept the *halacha*, which is rooted in the Talmud, as the norm of Jewish life, availing ourselves, at the same time, of the method implicit therein to interpret and develop the body of Jewish Law in accordance with the actual conditions and spiritual needs of modern life.¹⁷

Fromm “walks in His ways” by pursuing justice, Soloveitchik by strict adherence to a set of laws given at Sinai, and Kaplan, by a set of laws that are adapted to reflect the moment.

¹⁵ Micah Goodman, *The Wondering Jew: Israel and the Search for Jewish Identity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 31.

¹⁶ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 59.

¹⁷ From the platform of The Society for the Jewish Renaissance founded by Kaplan in 1920.

Another idea of what it means “to walk in his ways” is given in the

V’ahavta.¹⁸

וְאַהֲבַתְּ אֶת יי אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ, וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ, וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ. וְהָיוּ
הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם, עַל-לִבְבְּךָ: וְשָׁנַנְתָּם לְבְנֵיךָ,
וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָּם בְּשַׁבְּתְךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ, וּבְלֶכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ, וּבְקוּמְךָ.
וּקְשַׁרְתָּם לְאוֹת עַל-יָדְךָ, וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ, וְכִתַּבְתָּם עַל מַזְזַת
בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ:

לְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹתַי, וְהֵייתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם: אֲנִי
יי אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, לְהִיּוֹת לְכֶם
לְאֱלֹהִים, אֲנִי יי אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. אָמֵן.

You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions, with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Thus will you remember and do all of my commandments, and so be holy before your God. I am Adonai, your God, who led you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am Adonai your God.

The *V’ahavta* begins by telling us to love God with the fullness of who we are. It then leads us through a process where we are told not only to love God but to teach love of God to all who will listen. Through this process of loving God, we become holy. We may have to work at loving God in the beginning, but by the end, we will be transformed.

What does it mean to love God? Professor Steven Harvey¹⁹ explains that Judaism commands us to act as if one loves, because acting as if one

¹⁸ This prayer is a continuation of the Shema and is found in Deuteronomy 6:5-9 and Numbers 15:40-41.

¹⁹ Professor Steven Harvey teaches medieval Jewish and Islamic Philosophy at Bar Ilan University.

loves, leads to actual love. Love in this case is not romantic love, but rather fulfilling the commandment to treat the “other” as yourself, i.e., how we would want to be treated.

But what is this true love of God? It is the complete and single-minded devotion of oneself to God alone; it is, in Maimonides’ oft-quoted simile, like the exceedingly intense love of the lovesick, where the mind can think of nothing else save the beloved, only this love is even greater. According to the explicit statements of the greatest rabbis and philosophers throughout the ages, this ultimate love of God is the telos²⁰ of man...This ultimate purpose and highest happiness of man lies in love; not surprisingly, as we have seen, the means to this end is love. Judaism commands love, for its goal is to teach man to love.²¹

If love leads to treating each other better, and these improved relationships lead to a better world, a repaired world, a world where things are in calm and in equilibrium, is this not homeostasis? Perhaps there is a biological imperative to love upon which Judaism sheds light? Perhaps loving is a biological imperative whose purpose is to lead us to homeostasis, which is another way of saying a repaired world?

What is love from a biological perspective? Why do we love? Research professors Sue Carter and Stephen Porges of the University of North Carolina Department of Psychiatry write:

Love is deeply biological. It pervades every aspect of our lives and has inspired countless works of art. Love also has a profound effect on our mental and physical state. A “broken heart” or a failed relationship can have disastrous effects; bereavement disrupts human physiology and may even precipitate death. Without loving relationships, humans fail to flourish, even if all of their other basic needs are met. As such,

²⁰ The ultimate object or aim.

²¹ Steven Harvey, “Love,” in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought: Original Essays on Critical Concepts, Movements, and Beliefs*, eds. Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 557-563.

love is clearly not “just” an emotion; it is a biological process that is both dynamic and bidirectional in several dimensions.²²

Returning to negentropy (the movement toward chaos) and homeostasis from my tenth-grade biology class, we live in a closed system. If, as Harvey states, the purpose of Judaism is to teach us to love, and love impels us to treat each other better, love leads us to homeostasis which is the calm of the *world to come*. What would happen if we do not act, if we do not speak out and teach others to love? In a closed system, when the system overheats, it self-destructs. Homeostasis is analogous to the messianic age, and conversely, dyhomeostasis, an imbalance or other breakdown of a homeostasis system, is a vision of the apocalypse.

Let's move from the big picture of how the universe works and the nature of God, to how this is applied to our daily lives. Judaism developed tools and systems to make order of the world: to build a just society, to acknowledge an interrelated whole, and to see all creatures as unique and worthwhile. We are a part of the process of creating the world *we want to come*. One of the most powerful tools given is the Sabbath. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel expressed this:

He who wants to enter the holiness of the day [the Sabbath] must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil. He must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness and fury of acquisitiveness and the betrayal in embezzling his own life. He must say farewell to manual work and learn to understand that

²² Sue Carter and Stephen Porges, “Biochemistry of Love,” in *Noba Textbook Series: Psychology*, eds. R. Biswas-Diener & E. Diener (Champaign, IL: DEF), <https://nobaproject.com/modules/biochemistry-of-love>.

the world has already been created and will survive without the help of man. Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else. Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self.²³

“The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else.” What a beautiful articulation of what it means to *m’chadeish b’chol yom tamid ma’asei b’reishit*, to renew each day—in every moment—the work of creation. That the *“world has our hands”* gives expression to the concept that whatever God is, it is expressed through the work of our hands and our actions in the world. It is through our actions that Jewish communal life takes form. We build the communal structures and develop rituals that allow us to express meaning in a communal way. This understanding impels us to take the future into our hands, to *build the world we want to come*. In accepting this task, we are not asked to check our intellect at the door in blind faith.

²³ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, New York. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 1951), XV.

THINKERS WITH MAJOR SIMILARITIES

Ideas build upon ideas and evolve as human beings seek to make sense of the world using our lived experience and growing knowledge. As we gain more of each, outdated ideas are replaced with new understanding. From shamans to magicians to alchemists to scientists. From Copernicus and Galileo to Newton, Einstein to Feynman. From the God of the Bible who created the world, freed the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, and told us to walk in His ways. From the *Mishkan* in the desert, the first and second Temples, through the rabbinic period, the Greek philosophers, the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment, to modernity and the present. This evolution led some to Christianity, others to Judaism, and others to agnosticism. From paganism to scholasticism to rationalism. From Aristotle and Plato, to Maimonides, Spinoza and to Kaplan. And when philosophy and science are blended to answer the questions of modernity, you get Process Theology, or Non-theistic Mysticism, among the possible answers. As Mordechai Kaplan stated eloquently, “Not timelessness but timeliness is the desideratum. Religion is necessarily rooted in the soil of tradition, but its life depends on its ability to send forth new shoots into the light of our own day.”²⁴

²⁴ Mordecai Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1937), 39.

BARUCH SPINOZA

God, as Nature, is both *Natura naturans* [the active, productive aspect of the universe] and *Natura naturata* [that which is produced and sustained by the active aspect], and that the infinite and finite modes are not just effects of God or Nature's power but actually inhere in and express that infinite substance...Nature is an indivisible, eternal or self-caused, substantial whole.²⁵

Spinoza and the 5 Questions

1. Is there a God? YES

If there is, then What is God? God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists (*Ethics*, Part 1, Proposition 11).

2. Is God sentient and intentional? NO
3. Does God micromanage the world? NO
4. Am I commanded to obey God?
Only insofar as one has no choice to follow the laws of Nature.
5. If yes, what happens if I don't?

Background information

Baruch Spinoza was born in Amsterdam on November 24, 1632, to a Portuguese Jewish Marrano family. His father, Michael, was devoutly involved in synagogue life and sent his sons to receive an in-depth Talmud Torah education. Spinoza showed signs of brilliance early, but as his questions deepened, he found his religious teachers' explanations unsatisfactory. He began to look for answers outside of the community. He encountered ration-

²⁵ Steven Nadler, "Baruch Spinoza," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/spinoza/>.

alist Cartesian ideas²⁶ and began integrating these into his public writings, of which the most controversial “accept nothing as true that is not self-evident” led him to deny the existence of an all-powerful God who acts in history. Before long, the Jewish *Ma’amad*²⁷ of Amsterdam excommunicated him and he left the Jewish community for good. By the age of twenty-three, he had published his ideas and subsequently been forced out of the community. From this point on, he refused to publish additional works during his lifetime. While he was socially outgoing and engaged in a vibrant intellectual life, he seems to have kept his head down to avoid reigniting the controversy of his youth. While it doesn’t pertain to his work, it does strike me as notable that he never married. At just the time one would expect him to do so, he was expelled from the community, severing all ties that might have arranged such a union. In general society he didn’t find a partner. Perhaps he was gay. He clearly paid a high personal price for his bold intellectual honesty.

Why did I want to read Baruch Spinoza?

Baruch Spinoza was a controversial and pivotal figure in the evolution of Jewish thought. In the Jerusalem *ba’al tshuva*²⁸ women’s yeshiva where I spent my early twenties, Spinoza was considered a heretic for believing that

²⁶ (1) accept nothing as true that is not self-evident, (2) divide problems into their simplest parts, (3) solve problem by proceeding from simple to complex, and (4) recheck the reasoning.

²⁷ *Ma’amad*, council of elders in a Sephardi community, corresponding to the *kahal* in Ashkenazi communities. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ma-amad-or-mahamad-02/15/2021>

²⁸ Referring to a seminary for those from non-religious backgrounds seeking a more devout lifestyle. See “What Is *Ba’al Teshuvah*?” *My Jewish Learning*, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/baalei-teshuvah/>

God is nature or Nature is God. This simplistic, incomplete understanding of Spinoza was expressed by someone threatened by ideas that might lead young searchers away from a *ba'al t'shuva* path. They needn't have worried. Though the idea did ring true, I discounted the quiet inner voice in my head as coming from the non-observant world that I was desperately trying to leave behind. I wasn't interested in an intellectual exploration of Spinoza. In truth, I never explored the nature of the God within my *ba'al t'shuva* world. I wanted easy answers, to study Jewish texts in a traditional setting, feel observant and authentic, and "do Judaism right." Years later, after I had moved away from that period of robotic, non-inquisitive observance, I encountered Spinoza's ideas in an academic, non-judgmental setting. I could grapple with them and not feel threatened that, if I understood the world as he did, I would no longer be an authentic Jew.

Reading Spinoza is a difficult task. He articulates proof of his views in the language of logic and reason. To aid in discerning his message, I have relied on scholars who have dissected his works, often with conflicting understandings of the content.²⁹ Ultimately, I am less interested in the specifics of how he makes his arguments than the fact that he makes them at all. Spinoza is a lynchpin in the evolution of thought and the development of a methodology using reason and logic to articulate the working of the natural world. That he broke away from the Jewish community, forged a new life, wasn't struck dead by lightning or socially ostracized by an anti-Semitic Dutch world, is fas-

²⁹ One example of this is the article Alison Peterman, "Spinoza on Extension," *Philosopher's Imprint* 15:4 (2015): 1. Peterman argues that what most people take to be Spinoza's meaning – that *modi Extensionis* "is very naturally taken to mean that there are things – substances, modes, or both – that are extended in three dimensions, or take up space. In this paper, however, I argue that this not what Spinoza means..."

cinating. His legacy has grown exponentially over time and his influence has profoundly shaped modern thought.

What does Spinoza say? What is his basic premise?

1. Monism - the doctrine that all of reality is in some sense one. There is only one substance and this substance is God.
2. God did not create the universe and does not micromanages the world as he pleases.
3. Nature is one and the same with the divine power.
4. The mind and the body are one – there is no dualism between them. The mind is an expression of the body.
5. There is no free will. The mind and body are a part of nature and are acted upon by outside forces that are determined by interaction with the various modes. Everything is cause and effect.
6. Even God is unable to contradict the laws of Nature.

Spinoza and the 5 Questions in Detail

I have now explained the nature and properties of God: that he necessarily exists, that he is one alone, that he is and acts solely from the necessity of his own nature, that he is the free cause of all things and how so, that all things are in God and are so dependent on him that they can neither be nor be conceived without him, and lastly, that all things have been predetermined by God, not from his free will or absolute pleasure, but from the absolute nature of God, his infinite power (*Ethics*, Part 1, Appendix).

1. Is there a God? YES

By God I mean an absolute infinite being; that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence (*Ethics*, Part 1, Definitions 6).

2. What is God?

God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists (Ethics, Part 1, Proposition 11).

3. Is God sentient and intentional? NO

As with Kaplan, God is not sentient or intentional, and God has no free will.

4. Does God micromanage the world? NO

Prop 32

Will cannot be called a free cause, but only a necessary cause.

Proof

...Therefore in whatever way will is conceived, whether finite or infinite, it requires a cause by which is determined to exist and to act: and it cannot be said to be a free cause, but only a necessary or constrained cause.

Corollary 1

Hence it follows, firstly, that God does not act from freedom of will (Ethics, Proposition 32).

God does not “do” things for the sake of anything else. The order of things just follows from God’s essences with an inviolable determinism. All talk of God’s purposes, intentions, goals, preferences or aims is just an anthropomorphizing fiction.³⁰

5. Am I commanded to obey God?

Only insofar as one has no choice to follow the laws of Nature.

I find myself asking, if everything is an expression of God, is not our sentience a part of the expression of God? Are not our actions how God makes His manifest desires?

³⁰ Nadler, “Baruch Spinoza,” 6.

Spinoza and Secularism

Often called the first *secular* Jew, while Spinoza broke from the biblical conception of an all-powerful God that acts in history, he doesn't deny the existence of an all-encompassing entity. Did this make him secular? What does it mean to be secular? Merriam-Webster defines secular as:

of or relating to the worldly or temporal (*secular* concerns); not overtly or specifically religious (as in *secular* music); not ecclesiastical or clerical *secular* courts (as in *secular* landowners).

In the theocratic world of the 16th and 17th centuries, which was being challenged by rationalism and ideas of the Enlightenment, being labeled secular must have felt like an insult...“that godless degenerate.”

The line between secular and religious is based on a binary that I find difficult to navigate. When I take a moment before I eat to gratefully acknowledge all that makes the meal in front of me possible, from the natural world that allowed the crops to develop, to the farm workers who picked the produce, to my well-paying job which affords me the ability to purchase, if I don't overtly invoke a Jewish conception of God or say a *bracha* in Hebrew, does that make me secular? This does not feel like a moment devoid of awe, gratitude or a sense of oneness. When I read Spinoza, I hear the voice of someone who has a real sense of the interconnectedness of all things and of his place within that system. Though unaligned with a specific religion, it doesn't feel secular to me.³¹

³¹ While I may be retrojecting my 21st-century understanding of what it means to be a practicing Jew, by today's standards, Spinoza seems almost mainstream, which is perhaps what was feared.

Upon his expulsion from the Jewish community of Amsterdam, rather than convert to Christianity, Baruch Spinoza forged a life outside of any religious community, which was in itself a revolutionary move. A multitude of ideas and movements emerge out of the door that Spinoza, forced open here. From Reconstructionist Judaism to Secular Humanism to Non-theistic Mysticism, and others, much is owed to the work of Baruch Spinoza.

Spinoza and Prophecy

Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* influenced theologians by challenging the idea that prophecy is revealed rather than understood through natural knowledge.

Prophecy, or Revelation is the certain knowledge of something, revealed by God to men. And the prophet is he who interprets the things revealed by God to those who cannot have certain knowledge of them, and who this can only embrace the things revealed by sheer faith... From the definition we have just given [of prophecy] it follows that natural knowledge can be called prophecy. For the things we know by the natural light depend on the knowledge of God and of his eternal decrees. But this natural knowledge is common to all men, since it depends on foundations common to all men. Hence, the people, who are always thirsting for things which are rare and foreign to their nature, and who spurn their natural gifts, so not put much value on it. When they speak a prophetic knowledge, they wish to exclude natural knowledge. Nevertheless, it can be called divine as with as much right as anything else, since God's nature, insofar as we participate in it, and in his decrees, as it were, dictate it to us.³²

His influence is felt by those who studied the bible through the lens of rationalism using tools such as linguistic and literary criticism.

When I considered that the natural light is not only scorned, but condemned by many as a source of impiety, that human inven-

³² Spinoza, Baruch Spinoza, "A Critique of Traditional Religion," in *The Jewish Philosophy Reader*, eds. Daniel Frank, Oliver Leaman, and Charles H. Manekin (New York: Routledge, 2000), 309.

tions are treated as divine teachings, that credulity is considered faith, that the controversies of the Philosophers are debated with the most savage hatreds and disagreements arise, by which men are easily turned to rebellions - when I considered these and a great many other things, which it would take too long to tell her, I resolved earnestly to examine Scripture afresh, with an unimpaired and free spirit, to affirm nothing concerning it, and to admit nothing as its teaching, which it did not very clearly teach me.³³

Spinoza was not a rabbi. He wrote as a natural philosopher. That he felt sure enough to voice strong opinions to the Jewish religious establishment, indeed all the religious establishments of the time, is courageous. He penned his treatise anonymously but he wrote in a self-assured, assertive voice. I can hear his influence in the words of Rabbi Neil Gillman who, in writing about *Midrash* asks:

What makes any one theological statement “true,” or at least “authentic”? And who decides? In actuality, everyone decides - at least, everyone who shares the sense of a tradition that has become problematic and yet holds out the promise of renewing meaning. Everyone who cares about the issues, who is willing to read, study, and think. Everyone who has a stake in the outcome, which is nothing less than the continuity of Judaism. It is one of the glories of the Jewish philosophical tradition that there never was one ultimate authority - a pope, a chief rabbi, or a panel of philosophers - who had the power to declare one statement of Jewish beliefs authentic or another heretical. The concerned community decides – by its very willingness to study and teach, appropriate and transmit, that statement to its children and students. The very readiness to do all of this is itself testimony to its truth.³⁴

Spinoza and Religious Authority

By building a life outside of the semi-autonomous Dutch Jewish community, Spinoza became part of a secular world. Through his actions he

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), xxvi.

demonstrated that a society could separate civil and religious authority. Religious participation was no longer a prerequisite to civic life and indeed, over time, religious authority became subordinate to civic authority in most of Western Europe. Ultimately this led to pluralistic societies with multiple religions/denominations and ethnicities living under one civil authority.

On the home-front, Spinoza's ideas directly challenged the divine right of kings which states:

The divine right of kings, divine right, or God's mandate is a political and religious doctrine of political legitimacy in a monarchy. It stems from a specific metaphysical framework in which a monarch is pre-ordained to inherit the crown before their birth. Under this theory of political legitimacy the subjects of the crown are considered to have actively (rather than merely passively) turned over the metaphysical selection of the king's soul – which will inhabit the body and rule them – over to God. In this way, the "divine right" originates as a metaphysical act of humility or submission towards God. The divine right has been a key element for legitimizing many absolute monarchies.³⁵

In his preface to his *Treatise on Theology and Politics*, Spinoza writes:

What I have been saying makes it clear, and Curtius³⁶ says it neatly: 'Nothing sways the masses more effectively than superstition.' That's why they are easily led, under the pretext of religion, to worship their kings as gods for a while and then switch to cursing and loathing them as the common plague of the human race.

To avoid this evil of switching, tremendous efforts are made to embellish any true religion and any empty cult with so much ceremony and pomp that it will be seen as weightier than every other influence and will be worshipped by everyone with the utmost deference....

The greatest secret and whole aim on monarchic rule is to keep men deceived, and controlled through fear cloaked in a spurious

³⁵ "Divine Right of Kings," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_right_of_kings.

³⁶ Presumably Quintus Curtius Rufus (d. 53 CE), Roman senator, author of *History of Alexander the Great*.

religious covering, so that they'll fight for slavery as they would for salvation, and will think it honorable rather than shameful to give their life's blood so that one man can have something to boast about.³⁷

This can't have gone over well with the divinely invested monarchs of the time. If God is not sentient and intentional then from where comes their authority to rule? What is the nature of revelation and the Word of God? Of prophesy and *the spirit of God*, Spinoza writes,

What they mean is that the prophets had a unique and extraordinary virtue, and that the cultivated piety with an exceptional heart.

And that they perceived God's mind, *i.e.* his judgement; for I have shown that in Hebrew 'spirit' means both the mind and its judgement, so that the Law itself because it expressed God's mind, was called the 'spirit' or 'mind' of God. For the same reason, a prophet's imagination could be called 'the mind of God', and that the prophet could be said to *have* 'the mind of God', because God's decrees were revealed through that imagination. And although God's mind and eternal judgments are inscribed in our minds also so that we too perceive the mind of God (if I may but this in Biblical terms); this is the natural knowledge, but all men have it...So now we can say with no reservations, that the prophets perceived the things revealed by God with the aid of their imaginations... For all of these visions belong to the common man's ways of imagining God and spirits...³⁸

If God is not sentient and intentional, then the divine right of kings has no basis, and prophesy is a product of the individual prophet. Both of these ideas severely undermined the monarchy and the various religious institutions of the day.

³⁷ Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza, *Treatise on Theology and Politics: Showing that piety and civil peace are not harmed by allowing freedom of thought, but are destroyed by the abolition of freedom of thought*, trans. Jonathan Bennett (n.p.: Jonathan Bennett, 2017), 3. Spinoza's text was originally published in 1670.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

Biblical Criticism

Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise influenced theologians who engaged in Biblical Criticism by moving textual exploration beyond the bounds of religious inquiry and into the realm of science using intellect, reason, and the scientific method. It is not that previous generations hadn't noticed textual anomalies or questioned sources. David Weiss Halivni³⁹ writes that from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah inconsistencies in different versions of the written text were evident and that Ezra and Nehemiah chose to let them remain. Discrepancies in practice between the oral and written traditions were also noted. The sages of the time, rather than change the written text, let the written text stand but declared the practice in accordance with the oral tradition.

If the purveyors of the canonical Torah were also in possession of the knowledge and the tradition that allowed them to displace or suspect the written word, why did they not employ their editorial prerogative to correct the written word? The only possible answer is that they had no such prerogative. For the scribes of canonization themselves, the written word was sacred and inviolable.

Thus, remarkably, the persisting maculations of the Holy Scriptures are themselves the strongest evidence that the canonical Pentateuch was assembled from textual traditions that we regarded by their stewards as holy and beyond correction. The uneven text of the Pentateuch, the *esernekudot*, and the displacement of the written word in actual practice all indicate that Ezra and his scribes were aware that centuries of imperiled textual transmission, through dangerous and hostile times, had made them heirs to a troubled scriptural inheritance. Yet we can be sure that these canonizers were also convinced

³⁹ David Weiss Halivni served as Littauer Professor of Talmud and Classical Rabbinics in the Department of Religion at Columbia University. He retired in 2005.

that their scriptures were the legacy of Sinai, that their Torah was beyond reproach.⁴⁰

A millennia later, the 12th-century Spanish commentator Ibn Ezra commented on textual anomalies, including the last verses of Deuteronomy, ascribing the authorship to Joshua. How could Moses himself have written the following?

So Moses the servant of the LORD died there, in the land of Moab, at the command of the LORD. He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, near Beth-peor; and no one knows his burial place to this day (Deut. 34:5-6).

Ibn Ezra's response though was to let the matter remain as a mystery to be unfolded.

If you can grasp the mystery behind the following problematic passages: 1) The final twelve verses of this book 2) "Moshe wrote..." [31: 22] 3) "At that time, the Canaanites dwelt in the land" [Genesis 12: 6] 4) "...In the mountain of God, He will appear" [Genesis 22: 14] 5) "behold, his bed is a bed of iron..." [3: 11] you will then understand the truth (commentary on Deut. 1:2).

Modern scholars such as Rabbi David Hartman⁴¹ embrace individuality, intellect and reason in their theology. Three excerpts from Hartman's *A Heart of Many Rooms* illustrate this.

#1 - The traditional Jew begins not with immediacy but by listening to a story and by participating in the drama of a community standing before God at Sinai. On the other hand, the Midrash [*Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, 12] says that each Jew standing at Sinai heard the word of God in terms of his or her own individual sensibility. The word of revelation is similar to the manna in the desert: just as each person tasted the manna in accordance with his or her own subjective taste, so each

⁴⁰ David Weiss Halivni, *Revelation Restored: Divine Writ and Critical Responses* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), 26-27.

⁴¹ David Hartman was an American-Israeli author, leader and philosopher of contemporary Judaism and founder of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, Israel.

heard God saying: “I am the Lord *your* God” The hearing is individualistic even though the speech is addressed to a collective.⁴²

#2 - The Judaic tradition’s openness to novelty finds expression in the moment of God’s encounter with Moses at the burning bush. God gave Moses two messages for the children of Israel: “Moses said to God, ‘When I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you, ‘ and they ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” And God said to Moses, “*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* sent me to you.” And God said further to Moses, God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This shall be My name forever, This My appellation for all eternity. (Ex 3:13-16)

I take *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* to mean “I will be – I will be manifest in new ways.” God is understood in two ways: as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and as the God who say that radical understanding of the plenitude of the divide reality. We can build our spiritual lives with two perspectives: with a sense of surprise, wonderment and openness to new possibilities, and, at the same time, with a sense of being totally claimed by our ancestral past.⁴³

#3 - To the person of faith, living according to the majority opinion is significantly different from accepting the one and only authoritative option. If your tradition is based on learning, interpretation, and disagreements among scholars, rather than on the absolute work of prophetic revelation, you cannot escape the haunting uncertainty of knowing that alternative ways are religiously viable and authentic.⁴⁴

Spinoza and Monism

By God I mean an absolute infinite being; that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence (*Ethics*, Part 1, Definitions 6).

Spinoza’s monism, known as Substance Monism, asserts that there is one infinite substance – God or Nature – that exists. This idea, that everything is one, on its surface, seems to be found in all aspects of Judaism. After all, we say daily, “Hear O Israel, *Yud-Hay-Vav-Hey* is God, *Yud-Hay-Vav-Hey* is One.” But scratching below the surface, different movements take this in dif-

⁴² David Hartman, *A Heart of Many Rooms: Celebrating the Many Voices with Judaism* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1999), 138.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

ferent directions. For some, the emphasis of the statement is on “*Yud-Hay-Vav-Hey* is God,” and this God micromanages and judges the world. For others, the emphasis is on “*Yud-Hay-Vav-Hey* is One.” For this second group, whom I classify as spiritual seekers rather than strict conformists, Spinoza’s ideas resonate deeply. We can hear his echoes in the works of Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Rabbi Art Green and Reb Zalman Shachter-Shalomi who are often grouped together as Neo-Hasidists. What is a Neo-Hasidist?

No single definition of neo-Hasidism will comfortably stretch to include all of the various individuals and groups that lay claim to this inheritance, embodying very different approaches to fundamental questions of tradition and practice.^[5] The present study traces the development of neo-Hasidism as defined in religious terms: an approach to Jewish life and practice grounded in the belief that the spiritual legacy of Hasidism can inspire a contemporary spiritual renewal. Neo-Hasidism emerges, first and foremost, from written teachings of Hasidism, which range from complex homilies to pithy tales, as providing both challenge and encouragement. These sources demand continuous growth commitment in the intertwined realms of personal devotion, theological reflection, and ethical performance. While one’s study may not be restricted to Hasidic texts alone, neo-Hasidism is defined by the way that all elements of the religious life are infused by the Hasidic sources and their ethos of inwardness, joy, and a unitive vision of God.⁴⁵

Building on the shoulders of Spinoza and others who followed, Art Green frames his writing,

Elsewhere...I have outlined a theological position that takes as its departure-point an evolutionary approach, both to human origins and to the origins and development of religion. I take for granted that as the twentieth century ran its course, the two great century-long battles fought by traditional religious forces,

⁴⁵ Ariel Evan Mayse, “The Development of Neo-Hasidism: Echoes and Repercussions Part I: Introduction, Hillel Zeitlin, and Martin Buber,” *Lehrhaus*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/the-development-of-neo-hasidism-echoes-and-repercussions-part-i-introduction-hillel-zeitlin-and-martin-buber/>

one against Darwin and the other against Biblical criticism, have both been decided, neither coming out the way those forces might have hoped. In articulating a religious language that will speak to twenty-first-century people, we have to leave both of those struggles behind us, accept their conclusions on the scientific/scholarly plane, but then seek out a way of expressing our sacred truth that reaches beyond them.⁴⁶

Echoing Spinoza's idea of monism, he writes,

There is only One. All exists within what we humans call the mind of God, where Being is a simple, undifferentiated whole. Because God is beyond time, that reality is never changed. Our evolving, ever-changing cosmos and the absolute stasis of Being are two faces of the same One...⁴⁷

Aryeh Kaplan writes,

The Shema ends with "Adonoy is One" (*Adonoy Echad*). Here we are saying that no matter how many different ways we experience the Divine, they are all One all have one source. We recognize that there is a basic Oneness in the universe and beyond, and in our search of the transcendental, it is precisely this Oneness that we are seeking. We see in God the most absolute Unity unimaginable, the Oneness that unifies all create.

The more we realize, this, the more we begin to see that on an ultimate level there is no plurality. If there is no plurality, then we are also one with God. When saying the word "One" (*Echad*) in the Shema, one can realize this in a deep sense.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Green, Arthur Green, "A Neo-Hasidic Life: Credo and Reflections," in *Personal Theology: Essays in Honor of Neil Gillman*, ed. William Plevan (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 67.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁸ Aryeh Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide* (New York: Schocken, 1985), 126.

MORDECHAI KAPLAN

Kaplan and the 5 Questions

1. Is there a God? YES
2. If there is, then What is God?

God is the impulse toward self-fulfillment.

3. Is God sentient and intentional? N/A
4. Does God micromanage the world? N/A
5. Am I commanded to obey God? If yes, what happens if I don't?

Only if one can disobey an internal impulse.

Background Information

Mordechai Menahem Kaplan, was born June 11, 1881, Sventiany, Russia (today's Lithuania) to Rabbi Israel and Haya Kaplan. Died November 8, 1983, New York, at the age of 102.

Kaplan came to this country at the age of eight and settled in New York City with his parents. As a child he attended public and Orthodox religious schools. He studied at the City College of New York, received his ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), and earned a PhD in philosophy from Columbia. He began his career as an Orthodox rabbi at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York city. His emerging reconstructionist ideas led to a schism in the shul and he left to found the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, the first Reconstructionist synagogue. He, along with his son-in-law Ira Eisenstein, are considered the founders of Reconstructionist Judaism, a movement which posits that Judaism is an evolving civilization of which

religion is only one aspect. Though Kaplan taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary for 50 years, he was considered an outsider to such an extent that upon the publication of his *Shabbat Prayer Book*,⁴⁹ several of his colleagues publicly turned against him. Considered a heretic by the modern Orthodox world, his ideas led those who followed in his footsteps to found the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College as well as the then non-denominational school, University of Judaism⁵⁰ (now called the American Jewish University).

Why is Kaplan important and why did I choose him? What were the major events, trends that happened during his life?

Mordechai Kaplan was born in Europe at the end of the Enlightenment/*Haskalah*, lived through both World Wars, the Holocaust, and the establishment of the State of Israel. He was a transitional figure between the old world of traditional Jewish life that thrived in Europe for more than 1000 years, albeit under shifting and often difficult circumstances, and 20th century America.

With the Emancipation⁵¹ which began in France in the late 1700's, Jewish identity shifted. Whereas prior to the Emancipation, Jewish communities had been autonomous and self-governing, now many Jews became citizens of their host countries to varying degrees. While pseudo-acceptance in the majority society was now possible, the ability of the

⁴⁹ Mordechai Kaplan, *Sabbath Prayer Book* (New York: Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, 1945).

⁵⁰ The UJ began as a non-denominational institution. The rabbinical school was conceived as a West Coast branch of Jewish Theological Seminary.

⁵¹ Beginning in the late 18th century, Jewish Emancipation was the process in various nations in Europe of eliminating Jewish quotas, to which European Jews were then subject, and the recognition of Jews as entitled to equality and citizenship rights. It included efforts within the community to integrate into their societies as citizens.

community to enforce religious boundaries disappeared. As the Emancipation phenomenon spread, affiliation to the Jewish community became voluntary and the wave of assimilation and migration in search of a life outside of the tightly bound Jewish community began full force. As Jewish communities dissolved, Jewish identity changed. For some, being Jewish was a religious act (i.e., imbued with or exhibiting religiosity, piety; divine devotion, or “godliness”). For others, being Jewish was a cultural affiliation. And for others, being Jewish was an ethnic descriptor. Kaplan was a child when his family immigrated to the United States. He was thrown into a vibrant New York that teemed with Jews from across Europe who brought with them a diversity of customs or “folkways” as coined by Kaplan. Kaplan’s life work was an effort to reconcile the modern world of science and philosophy, his love of community, and his desire for the Jewish people to thrive in the “New World.” He pondered how to maintain the continuity of Jewish life in a changing world undergoing a paradigm shift. Kaplan’s answer was to expand on the many elements found in thriving Jewish communities, spiritual/religious life being just one of many. He expressed his ideas in referring to the work of Kaufmann Kohler, a theologian of the early American Reform movement.

But there is something radically wrong with the reformist theology. It starts with a false premise as to what it is that makes one a Jew. It assumes that what unites Jews to one another, and differentiates them from the rest of mankind, is their religion. Thus conceived, the Jewish religion comes to be a series of general or universal teachings about God and man, apart from the specific social realities of the Jewish people. Conceiving the Jewish religion as the soul of the Jewish people, Kohler makes

the mistake of hypostatizing the soul and treating it as an entity independently of the body. This error he, in common with all Reformists theorists, falls into, because he insists upon denying the fact that what unites Jews to one another is their nationhood, and what differentiates them is a civilization of which religion is only an element, though undoubtedly the most significant. This error leads him to regard Judaism and Jewish religion nearly as different names of the same thing, with the consequence that every aspect of Jewish life must justify itself by its relation to the God idea, and God comes to be a hypothesized abstraction moving in a vacuum.⁵²

I grew up on the Stanford campus with the pioneers of Silicon Valley all around me. I went to school with their children and my peers now head high tech companies and venture capital firms. We were a highly intellectual community who were handed a pediatric Judaism that espoused universalism. There was no depth to our education.⁵³ I remember in 6th grade a Chabad rabbi visiting our classroom and leading a text study, which was the first time I encountered text or commentary. I LOVED it and I wanted more, and yet, in my synagogue world, there was none. For a non-halachic community in Northern California, at the epicenter of the tech and computer revolution that would change the world, old ideas of meaning, including *kashrut*, strict Shabbat observance, and text study had no place in our lives. By the time I got to college, I began to realize what I did not know and I felt inadequate as a Jew. The more traditional Jews that I met seemed able to articulate a rationale for “Why be Jewish?” beyond “being a link in a chain,” and so I equated authentic Judaism with orthodoxy.

⁵² Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, 14-15.

⁵³ I am not alone in my observations of our education. In 2018, I contacted many of my classmates from those years and surveyed them as to what they got out of our education. For more information, see my unpublished paper, “Kabbalah: A Journey Through Time and an Exercise in Learning to Listen” (2018).

In retrospect, the Judaism of my childhood was many things. It was filled with culture and family and community, but it was running on fumes. There were many survivors in our congregation and while they fiercely valued family and tribe, God and tradition had failed them. They were creating something new in California. It would take time for Jewish life in Northern California to solidify and blossom into its own unique expression rooted in tradition, but not bound by it.

Mordechai Kaplan also saw this in the communities he encountered:

The religion of one age cannot be transferred whole into a subsequent age without being frozen into inertness. If we find that a religion manages to retain its vitality in a new age, we may be sure it has undergone transformation. If its teachings and practices continue to have meaning long after the conditions of life and thought under which they arise have changed, it is because that meaning is not the same they had originally.⁵⁴

Kaplan and the 5 Questions in Detail

1. Is there a God?

For Kaplan, God is not an external being that micromanages the world and acts in history. Rather, God is an impulse, an internal need, a compulsion which drives us forward to improve ourselves and individuals and collectively as a society.

The modern man cannot possibly view earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, devastating storms and floods, famines and plagues, noxious plants and animals, as “necessary” to any preconceived plan or purpose. They are simply that phase of the universe which has not yet been completely penetrated by godhood. Of course, this involves a radical change in the

⁵⁴ Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, 2.

traditional conception of God. It conflicts with that conception of God as infinite and perfect in His omniscience and omnipotence. But the fact is that God does not have to mean to us an absolute being who has planned and decreed every twinge of pain, every act of cruelty, every human sin. It is sufficient that God should mean to us the sum of the animating, organizing forces and relationships which are forever making a cosmos out of chaos. This is what we understand by God as the creative life of the universe. Religion is the endeavor to invoke these animating and organizing forces and relationships and to get us to place ourselves in rapport with them.⁵⁵

The God idea functions to emphasize and validate a people's sense of its historic destiny, and its collective responsibility for achieving the salvation of the individual and of society.⁵⁶

The God idea thus functions to convert what might otherwise have remained an idle fancy into a prophetic vision that assigns objectives to collective effort.⁵⁷

The fact that the nature of God is beyond our understanding does not mean that we can afford to conceive of Him in terms that are clearly not true in accordance with the highest standards of truth. Our conception of God must be self-consistent and consistent with whatever else we hold to be true. That this conception will not describe Him we know, just as our conception of life does not begin to give us the faintest idea of what life means to the infinite variety of living creatures that inhabit the earth. But we do not plead our inability to understand all that life means as an excuse for making assertions about life which are inconsistent with experience. Just so we must insist that whatever we say or think about God shall be in harmony with all else that we hold to be true. We cannot, for example, believe that God performs miracles, and at the same time believe in the uniformities of natural law demanded by scientific theory.⁵⁸

The human mind cannot rest until it finds order in the universe. It is this form-giving trait that is responsible for modern scientific theory. That same need is also operative in formulating a view of the cosmos, which will support the spiritual yearnings of the group and make their faith in the goals and objectives of their group life consistent with the totality of their experience as human beings. Out of this process of thought there arise traditional beliefs as to the origin of the world, man's place in it,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 20.

his ultimate destiny, the role of one's own particular civilization in the scheme of human history, and all those comprehensive systems of belief that try to bring human experience into a consistent pattern... But there is one underlying assumption in all these efforts at giving a consistent meaning to life...and that is the assumption that life is meaningful...The God idea thus expresses itself pragmatically in those fundamental beliefs by which a people tries to work out its life in a consistent pattern and rid itself of those frustrations which result from the distracting confusion of ideals and aims, in a word, beliefs by which it orients itself and the individuals that constitute it to life as a whole. Belief in God, as here conceived can function as the belief in God has always functioned; it can function as an affirmation that life has value. If we believe that assumption to be true...we have faith in God. No metaphysical speculation beyond this fundamental assumption that reality assures both the emergence and the realization of human ideals is necessary for the religious life.⁵⁹

2. What is God?

For Kaplan, God is the impulse toward self-fulfillment and salvation is the point of life. Salvation is individual self-fulfillment. Salvation, says Kaplan, used to be tied to "the world to come," but for modern Jews, salvation is to be found in the present, here on earth.

...The point is that the conduct of people today is motivated not by the desire to win for themselves "a share in the world to come," which would reward all their earthly efforts and compensate for all their earthly suffering, but by the desire to win for themselves a share of life in this world, to win success, honor, love and everything that contributes to human well-being and self-fulfillment on earth...It was not this way in the past... The religious regulations and moral laws of his social heritage were not regarded as methods of achieving an integrated personality and a cooperative society, but as defining the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 27-29

conduct by which he might qualify himself for heavenly bliss in the here-after.⁶⁰

What more comprehensive purpose can there be to human life than the complete and harmonious fulfillment of all the physical, mental and moral powers with which the human self as a social being is endowed?... Self-fulfillment or self-realization is nothing more than the modern equivalent of what in general life is expressed by the term "salvation," and in traditional Jewish life by the phrase "having a share in the world to come."⁶¹

The fact of human mortality puts no temporal limit to the objectives of our idealization. Men are concerned that, even after their death, their world be a safe one for their children to grow up in. But the fact of human mortality does put an end to the opportunity of men to achieve the purpose that the ideal expresses; it is this which often overwhelms men with the sense of human impotence and the futility of living. This sense of frustration can be counteracted only by faith in a God of salvation, faith that inherent in the world as it is constituted is the Power that makes for the fulfillment of all valid ideals.⁶²

In its personal aspect it [salvation] represents the faith in the possibility of achieving an integrated possibility. All those natural impulses, appetites and desires which so often are in conflict with one another must be harmonized...When our mind functions in such a way that we feel that all our powers are actively employed in the achievement of desirable ends, we have achieved personal salvation.⁶³

In its social aspect, salvation means the ultimate achievement of a social order in which all men shall collaborate in the pursuit of common ends in a manner which shall afford to each the maximum opportunity for creative self-expression. There can be no personal salvation so long as injustice and strife exist in the social order; there can be no social salvation so long as the greed for gain and the lust for domination are permitted to inhibit the hunger for human fellowship and sympathy in the hearts of men...salvation must be conceived mainly as an objective of human action, not as a psychic compensation for human suffering.⁶⁴

We do not need to pretend to any knowledge of the ultimate purpose of the universe as a whole, as the theology of the past sometimes claimed for itself. But it is undeniable fact that there

⁶⁰ Ibid., 44

⁶¹ Ibid., 41.

⁶² Ibid., 52.

⁶³ Ibid., 53.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 54.

is something in the nature of life which expresses itself in human personality, which evokes ideals, which send men on the quest of personal and social salvation. By identifying that aspect of reality with God, we are carrying out in modern times the implications of the conception that man is created in God's image. For such an identification implies that there is something divine in the human personality, in that it is the instrument through which the creative life of the world effects the evolution of the human race. The corollary of the thought of man's likeness to God has always been the sense of the sacredness of human personality, of its inherent worth.⁶⁵

3. Is God sentient & intentional? Does God micromanage the world?

For Kaplan these questions do not apply. God is a human impulse toward personal and communal salvation/self-fulfillment, not an external which imposes/exerts itself. As Kaplan describes below, over time, the people of the evolving civilization attributed their group experience to a theurgic origin.⁶⁶

Judaism, not being a religion, did not spring into existence at a particular moment in history. The pattern of life we now call Judaism developed gradually and imperceptibly as the outcome of collective life. The process of living together in Palestine molded the various invading Israelitish tribes into the people that in time evolved the civilization which has come to be known as Judaism. So imperceptible was the development of Judaism, that before long there arose traditions which assigned to it theurgic⁶⁷ origin and an idealized history.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Ibid., 89.

⁶⁶ The art or technique of compelling or persuading a god or beneficent or supernatural power to do or refrain from doing something.

⁶⁷ The operation or effect of a supernatural or divine agency in human affairs.

⁶⁸ Mordechai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2010), 186.

4. Am I commanded to obey God?

5. If yes, what happens if I don't?

As Kaplan doesn't affirm an omniscient, external God who acts in history, one would assume the answer to be no. But if God is an internal drive toward individual and communal salvation and self-fulfillment, are we able to deny this internal human imperative? If not, are we not in fact internally commanded? If we somehow are able to not heed this call, will we not find salvation or fulfillment?

ERICH FROMM

Fromm and the 5 Questions

1. Is there a God?
There is not a God, but there is God.
2. What is God?
God is an historically conditioned expression of an inner experience...God is one of many poetic expressions of the highest value of humans, not a reality in itself.
3. Is God sentient and intentional? NO
4. Does God micromanage the world? NO
5. Am I commanded to obey God? NO

Who was Erich Fromm and why did he write what he did?

Erich Fromm was one of the preeminent psychologists of the twentieth century. A highly prolific writer, he is best known for *The Art of Loving*, *Escape from Freedom*. While he is familiar to the general public for these works, he is of interest to me for *You Shall Be As Gods*, which views Biblical text through a humanist lens.

Erich Fromm was born on March 23, 1900, in Frankfurt am Main, to Orthodox Jewish parents, Rosa (*née* Krause) and Naphtali Fromm. He started his academic studies in 1918 at the University of Frankfurt am Main with two semesters of jurisprudence. During the summer semester of 1919, Fromm studied at the University of Heidelberg, where he began studying sociology in 1922. He began his clinical practice in 1927. In 1930 he joined the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and completed his psychoanalytical training. After the Nazis came to power in Germany, Fromm moved

first to Geneva and then, in 1934, to Columbia University in New York. Fromm belongs to a Neo-Freudian school of psychoanalytical thought. He was on the faculty of Bennington College from 1941 to 1949, and taught courses at the New School for Social Research in New York from 1941 to 1959, Michigan State University from 1957 to 1961, and New York University from 1962. He taught at Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM) until his retirement in 1965, and at the Mexican Society of Psychoanalysis (SMP) until 1974. In 1974 he moved from Mexico City to Muralto, Switzerland, and died at his home in 1980.

What were the major events, trends that happened during his life?

Fromm was fourteen when World War I broke out and his experiences turned him into a pacifist. For the rest of his life, he would theorize about the social and psychological pressures that led nations to go to war.

‘How is it possible that men stand in trenches for years and live like animals – and for what?’ he asked. ‘The irrationality of human behavior impressed me in this way, and I became curious about the problem.’⁶⁹

In 1920, the young Fromm helped Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig create the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus*- the Free Jewish House of Learning in Frankfurt. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore how these thinkers influenced each other. It suffices to note that Buber’s expounding on the intimate I/Thou relationship, and Fromm’s focus on Love, seem unlikely to be coincidental. After Hitler came to power, Fromm fled

⁶⁹ David B. Green, “This Day in Jewish History | 1900: A Psychoanalyst Who Couldn’t Understand War Is Born,” *Haaretz*, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-1900-analyst-who-couldnt-understand-war-1.5340930>

Germany for the United States in 1934. In 1941 he published *Escape from Freedom*, an examination of the root causes of extremism. While for some, nationalism and a Jewish homeland were a response to the Shoah, Fromm had a different response.

Despite some early involvement in Zionist activities, Fromm early on renounced nationalism, in large part because of what he witnessed during the war. As he told an interviewer in 1962, “I just didn’t want to participate in any division of the human race, whether religious or political.’ Together with this, he saw authoritarianism—which included some religious beliefs, in his eyes—as one of the great threats to human freedom.⁷⁰

Why is Fromm important and why did I choose him?

Eric Fromm is an enigma to me and that is why I chose him. He brings together many of my questions as to what it means to be a practicing Jew. Steeped in Jewish learning from a young age and clearly brilliant, like Spinoza, his own questions, intellect and explorations led him away from Orthodox Jewish practice to what he calls Radical Humanism or Non-theistic Mysticism.

Though he turned away from Orthodox Judaism at the age of twenty-six, by his own admission he remained grounded in Jewish thought and tradition. “My interest in and love for the Jewish tradition has never died, and nobody can talk to me for any length of time who will not hear a Talmudic or

⁷⁰ Ibid.

khasidic story.”⁷¹ In fact, he uses text to show that Judaism points the way to humanism and universalism.⁷²

Fromm is characterized by some as an atheist, one who does not believe in the existence of a god or gods. But atheism has a pejorative association of godlessness or lacking morality, while *nontheism* maintains an ethical, humanist morality. If Judaism is about deed not creed, and living a moral life of love and kindness is the point, is it required that one believe in a supernatural, omniscient God that acts in history to live this life? Is some form of practice or observance one of the criteria that I should be using as I ground myself in “their Torah?” Does atheism preclude one from being religious? On Fromm, Rabbi Jeremy Rosen⁷³ comments:

Here was one of the most acclaimed psychiatrists of the century arguing for the benefit of Orthodox Judaism – but without God. He was a completely non-religious, atheist Jew writing about how psychologically important Jewish Law and its behavioral rituals (including keeping Shabbat and Kashrut) were for the sanity of modern society...Fromm argued that religion did not have to be circumscribed by the idea of God. Being religious without God could still be very beneficial. Fromm said that humans should take independent action and use reason to establish moral values rather than blindly adhering to the dictates of authorities. He disliked all authoritarian systems yet argued that humans needed the discipline that religious practice provided. Their rituals and training helped people think about morally right decisions. Otherwise, humans would tend to take the easiest and most selfish way out.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Lawrence J. Friedman, *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 259.

⁷² Fromm, *You Shall Be As Gods*, 87.

⁷³ Rabbi Jeremy Rosen received his rabbinic ordination from Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem. He has worked in the rabbinate, Jewish education, and academia for more than 40 years in Europe and the US. He currently lives in the US, where he writes, teaches, lectures, and serves as rabbi of a small community in New York.

⁷⁴ Jeremy Rosen, “Erich Fromm and Religion Without God,” *The Algemeiner*, January 26, 2020, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2020/01/26/erich-fromm-and-religion-without-god/>.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman⁷⁵ also touches on the same questions. Does one need to believe in God to be Jewish? Does one have to believe in God to be good?

Do I have to believe in God in order to be a Jew?...The answer...is almost certainly no. A defining feature of the Jewish faith is that it is not primarily a system faith, *per se*. Jewish identity entails an intricate balance between collective ethnic affiliation and religious practices and beliefs, with the first alone being necessary and sufficient for basic membership. While it certainly includes modalities of action and faith, Judaism is primarily a modality of being and belonging, an ethnic identity with a strong collective consciousness. Though outsiders could join through marriage, and, since postbiblical times, through conversion. But at its core, to be a Jew is to be born into the Jewish family...The first words of God to Abraham, “Go forth,” spark a journey of multiple faith-tests that in turn legitimize his selection as a covenantal partner...Abraham’s descendants warrant God’s grace by virtue of genealogy... They warrant God’s blessedness and favor not by virtue of anything they do but by simply in consequence of being Abraham’s offspring... That is what I call Genesis Judaism, a Judaism of ethnic identity, of being rather than doing or believing. The God who redeems is the God of Genesis who has entered into a covenantal partnership with the Jewish people irrespective of what they do, by virtue of Abraham having once walked with God.⁷⁶

Does one have to believe in God in order to be good? The primary foundation for answering in the affirmative is the notion that only with a relationship with God do I receive God’s guidance as to what constitutes the good and am able to act accordingly... If the major trend within Jewish tradition upholds the autonomy of the good from the revealed word of God – grounded not in divine command but moral conscience embedded within the human condition - the answer is, again,

⁷⁵ Donniel Hartman is an Israeli Modern Orthodox rabbi and educator. President of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, Israel, he has written books and essays on Judaism and modernity and is a frequent speaker at academic conferences and synagogues in the United States and Canada.

⁷⁶ Donniel Hartman, *Putting God Second: How to Save Religion from Itself* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 137-139.

and emphatic no. If the good is good independent of God, then the good itself is independent of faith.⁷⁷

Erich Fromm was a nontheistic mystic but he was not without a religious impulse. His view of interpersonal relationships is derived from an understanding of what it means to walk in God's ways.

Fromm and the 5 Questions in Detail

1. Is there a God?

There is not a God, but there is God.

2. What is God?

God is an historically conditioned expression of an inner experience...God is one of many poetic expressions of the highest value of humans, not a reality in itself.

3. Is God sentient and intentional? NO

4. Does God micromanage the world? NO

5. Am I commanded to obey God? NO

When Fromm uses the word "God," he is not referring to a supernatural sentient being who has a plan and acts in history. Rather, he speaks of "an historically conditioned expression of an inner experience...God is one of many poetic expressions of the highest value of humans, not a reality in itself⁷⁸." Fromm's psychological and psychoanalytic training informed his understanding of God as "ONE who represents the supreme value and the supreme goal for man: the goal of finding union with the world through the development of his specifically human capacities of love and reason⁷⁹."

⁷⁷ Ibid., 145.

⁷⁸ Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods*, 18.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 21.

Fromm describes his philosophy as Radical Humanism or Non-theistic Mysticism.

What is Radical Humanism? What is Non-theistic Mysticism?

Radical Humanism is a global philosophy that emphasizes the oneness of the human race, the capacity of humankind 'to develop its own powers and to arrive at inner harmony and at the establishment of a peaceful world...It considers the goal of man to be complete independence and this implies penetrating through fictions and illusions to be a full awareness of reality...and a skeptical attitude toward the use of force.'⁸⁰

For Fromm, God is a concept and each person brings their own experience to their understanding of God.

Words and concepts referring to phenomena related to psychic or mental experience develop and grow—or deteriorate—with the person to whose experience they refer. They change as he changes; they have a life as he has a life.⁸¹

The concept of God in the Old Testament has its own life and evolution corresponding to the evolution of people within a span of twelve hundred years. There is a common element of experience referred to by the concept of God, but there is also a constant change occurring in this experience and in the meaning of the word and the concept. What is common is the idea that neither nature nor artifacts constitute the ultimate reality or the highest value, but that there is only ONE who represents the supreme value and the supreme goal for man: the goal of finding union with the world through the development of his specifically human capacities of love and reason.⁸²

In his 1966 book *You Shall Be as Gods*, Fromm writes about the evolution of the god concept from an anthropomorphic absolute ruler, to a partner with humanity (first with Noah and later the Israelites), to a nameless God who can only be known by what they are not lest they be idolized. But if

⁸⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁸¹ Ibid., 17.

⁸² Ibid., 21-22.

one cannot know God, how can God be followed? Is God necessary for Fromm?

We have seen that for historical reasons the Jews have given the name "God" to the x, which man should approximate to be fully man. They developed their thought to the point where God ceases to be definable by any positive attributes or essence, and where the right way of living - for individuals and for nations - takes the place of theology. Although logically the next step in the Jewish development would be a system without "God," it is impossible for a theistic-religious system to take this step without losing its identity. Those who cannot accept the concept of God find themselves outside the system of concepts that make up the Jewish religion. They might, however, be close to the spirit of the Jewish tradition, provided they make the task of "right living" the foremost goal of life, although this "right living" would not be the fulfillment of rituals and many specifically Jewish commandments, but acting in the spirit of justice and love within the frame of reference of modern life.⁸³

The God concept is not necessary if "right living and acting in the spirit of justice and love" are the core of Jewish practice. But Judaism as a religion without a God concept might be too shocking, so Fromm tempers this issue with his belief system, Non-theistic Mysticism.

What is Non-theistic Mysticism? What is religion? What is a religious experience? Merriam-Webster defines religion as:

The service and worship of God or the supernatural; commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance; a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices; scrupulous conformity; a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith.

Not all of these definitions require a belief in an all-powerful, supernatural force.

What is mysticism? Merriam-Webster defines mysticism as:

⁸³ Ibid., 44.

The experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality reported by mystics; the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience (such as intuition or insight); vague speculation: a belief without sound basis; a theory postulating the possibility of direct and intuitive acquisition of ineffable knowledge or power.

What is a religious experience and does one have to believe in God to have one? Fromm explains:

Assuming that the attitude underlying the Jewish tradition transcends the ethical realm, the problem arises as to what its particular religious element is. It would be simple to answer that this element consists of belief in God, in a supernatural, supreme Being. According to this view a religious man would be a believer in God who is at the same time (and as a consequence of his belief) an ethical man. Such a definition, however, raises many questions. Is the quality of the religious not founded here entirely on a thought concept, God? Does it follow that Zen Buddhist or the 'pious among Gentiles' cannot be called religious?

At this point we arrive at a central question. Is religious experience necessarily connected with a theistic concept? I believe not; one can describe a 'religious' experience as a human experience which underlies, and is common to, certain types of theistic, as well as nontheistic, atheistic, or even antitheistic conceptualization. What differs is the conceptualization of the experience, not the experiential substratum underlying various conceptualizations. This type of experience is most clearly expressed in Christian, Moslem, and Jewish mysticism, as well as Zen Buddhism. If one analyzes the experience rather than the conceptualization, therefore, one can speak of a theistic as well as a nontheistic religious experience.⁸⁴

Nontheistic mysticism is "a principled set of beliefs that lead to an insightful experience that does not contain a supreme being." Fromm calls this experience the X experience, which he differentiates from a religious experi-

⁸⁴ Ibid., 46-47.

ence as it is not founded on a belief in God. Clearly with this framing, for Fromm, there is no sentient and intentional God.

Regarding the question, are we commanded to obey God, Fromm addresses this by exploring what it means to be fully human, the difference between an ethical person and a religious one, and the difference between authoritarian and humanitarian ethics.⁸⁵

As a nontheistic mystic, Fromm advocates that we strive to be ethical beings. The Torah is the expression of a quest for an ethical society. The society that evolved from the Torah expresses these ethics through the God concept which advocates for us to “*lalechet b’chol d’rachav*,” to follow in God’s ways. The human being is created in God’s image and should approximate God by being holy because God is holy.

How does man try to imitate God’s actions? By practicing the commandments of God, his ‘law.’ What is called God’s law consists of many parts. One part, which constitutes the center of prophetic teaching, is made up of the rules of action which express and bring about love and justice. To free those who are in chains, to feed the hungry, to help the helpless, are the ever-repeated norms of right action which the prophets preach. The Bible and rabbinical tradition have implemented these general norms by hundreds of specific laws, from the biblical prohibition against charging interest on a loan to the rabbinical command to visit the sick, yet not to visit a sick enemy, since he might feel embarrassed.

⁸⁵ Authoritarian ethics are the voice of an internalized authority such as parents or religion. In this case one has internalized the rules and prohibitions and made them his/her own, thus they in fact obey themselves. In authoritarian ethics, there is no distinction between good or evil. Obeying is the goal. Humanistic (autonomous) ethics are the “voice of our total personalities expressing the demands of life and growth. ‘Good’ for the humanistic conscience is all that furthers life; ‘evil’ is all that arrests and strangles it...The person whose conscience is essentially autonomous does the right things not by forcing himself to obey the voice of the internalized authority, but because he *enjoys* doing what is right... He does not do his ‘duty’ by obeying authority, but he is ‘responsible’ because he ‘responds’ to the world of which he a part as an alive, inwardly active human being.” *Ibid.*, 45-46.

This imitation of God by acting the way God acts means becoming more and more like God; it means the same time *knowing* God. Accordingly, to know the ways of God means to know and to follow in practice His dealings with men, His all-embracing principles of justice, unlimited love, loving-kindness and forgiveness.⁸⁶

Over the course of his life, Fromm moved from the particular to the universal, from a focus on Jewish community and practice to all of humanity. I asked myself, as Fromm moved away Jewish ritual and practice, did this make him no longer Jewish? But I have concluded that his move away from the particular was a deeply rooted Jewish move. Fromm shows the Bible as a universalist document, citing the covenant with Noah, God's crying when the Egyptians were drowning (BT *Sanhedrin* 39b), and the following Talmudic description of how man was created with body parts from all corners of the world.

The idea that man has been created in the image of God leads not only to the concept of man's equality with God, or even freedom from God, it also leads to a central humanist conviction that every man carries within himself all of humanity.⁸⁷

Early on in this thesis I described my tenth-grade vision that given enough time, the universe would come to a gradual, calm halt, all conflicts would be resolved, everything would be in its place and the silence of a completed purpose would reign. Fromm describes something similar when he speaks of the commandment to rest on Shabbat. I felt a deep sense of peace when I read this, that my internal sense had been on track since the beginning.

A more detailed analysis of the symbolic meaning of the Sabbath ritual will show that we are dealing not with obsessive

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

overstrictness but with a concept of work and rest that is different from our modern concept.

To begin with, the concept of work underlying the biblical and later Talmudic concepts is not one of physical effort, but it can be defined thus: *“Work” is any interference by man, being constructive or destructive, with the physical world. “Rest” is a state of peace between man and nature.* Man must leave nature untouched, not change it in any way, either by building or by destroying anything. Even the smallest change made by men in the natural process is a violation of rest. The Sabbath is the day of complete harmony between man and nature. “Work” is any kind of disturbance of the man-nature-equilibrium. On the basis of this general definition, we can understand the Sabbath ritual...

The Sabbath symbolizes the state of union between man and nature and between man and man. By not working - that is to say, by not participating in the process of natural and social change - man is free from the chains of time, all though only for one day a week.

The full significance of this idea can be understood only in the context of the biblical philosophy of the relationship between man in nature and the concept of the messianic time. The Sabbath is the anticipation of the messianic time, which is sometimes called “the time of perpetual Sabbath”; but it is not purely the *symbolic* anticipation of the messianic time—it is a real precursor... The Sabbath is the anticipation of the messianic time, not through a magic ritual, but through a form of practice which puts man in a real situation of harmony and peace. This different practice of life transforms man.

“Rest” in the sense of traditional Sabbath concept is quite different from “rest” being defined as not working, or not making an effort...On the Sabbath, man ceases completely to be an animal whose main occupation is to fight for survival and to sustain his biological life. On the Sabbath man is fully man, with no other task than to be human. In the Jewish tradition it is not work which is a supreme value, but rest, the state that has no other purpose than that of being human... The Bible and it’s Sabbath concept, makes an entirely new attempt to solve the problem: by stop being interference with nature for one day, time is eliminated; when there’s no change, no work, no human interference, there is no time. Instead of a Sabbath on which man bows down to the lord of time, the biblical Sabbath

symbolizes man's victory over time. Time is suspended; ...death is suspended and life rules on the Sabbath day.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Ibid., 156-157.

PROCESS THEOLOGY

Process Theology and the 5 Questions

1. Is there a God? YES
2. If there is, then What is God?
Everything is a part of God, God is a part of everything.
3. Is God sentient and intentional? NO
4. Does God micromanage the world? NO
5. Am I commanded to obey God? If yes, what happens if I don't? NO

The human need to make sense out of the world is not new. Our Jewish ancestors' attempts to explain what they saw and experienced led to their conceptions of external god(s) who created and ruled the world. These theological answers framed and guided civilization for millennia until modernity. From the early 1600s on, advances in science, the development of the academic world, the Enlightenment and the dismantlement of the *kehillah* converged. This convergence gradually produced a paradigm shift which replaced theological answers with scientific and rational thought.

Which is not to say that overnight, religious practice was rejected. Indeed, all expressions reflecting the continuous development of Jewish thought and practice are attempts to reconcile rational thought and scientific understanding with Jewish theology and community practice. With the exception of Haredi certainty born out of intransigence with the course of time, it seems all streams of Judaism struggle with authenticity in a time when there are no absolute truths. Each stream accepts or rejects different elements of the Judaism of the previous generation (God as an absolute, the

need for specific rituals, etc.) to allow them to meet the needs of the moment for meaning, purpose, and understanding. Process Theology is one such stream. With its roots in Christianity, Process Theology is not indigenously Jewish, but it has influenced the works of important Jewish theologians.

What is Process Theology?

Process theology (also known as Neoclassical theology) is a school of thought influenced by the metaphysical process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). The concepts of process theology include: God is not omnipotent in the sense of being coercive. The divine has a power of persuasion rather than force.⁸⁹

Rabbi Bradley Artson⁹⁰ describes Process Theology as "...a constellation of ideas sharing the common assertion that the world and God are in a flux of dynamic change, of related interaction and becoming."⁹¹

Jewish ideas of God have evolved from the all-powerful, anthropomorphic, intentional Biblical God, to include ideas put forth by Greek philosophers which then influenced Jewish theology. The all-knowing, non-anthropomorphic understanding of God put forth by Maimonides is a prime example.⁹² From the Age of Reason/Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, to Spinoza's platform/treatise of "God, and Nature," to Process Theologians, and beyond. Each evolutionary step in thought occurred as a

⁸⁹ "Process Theology," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Process_theology.

⁹⁰ Rabbi Artson is dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University. He is a leading figure in Process Theology from a Jewish perspective.

⁹¹ Bradley Shavit Artson, "BA-DEREKH: On The Way: A Presentation of Process Theology," *NewCAJE*, <http://www.newcaje.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/BA-Derekh-On-the-Way-A-presentation-of-Process-Theology-by-Rabbi-Bradley-Shavit-Artson.pdf>

⁹² Maimonides, *Kitāb al-Sirāj*, tractate Sanhedrin, chapter 10.

result of confrontation between lived experience and theology. If there is an all-powerful, benevolent God that we dutifully serve, how can the innocent suffer? If there is an all-knowing God, who micromanages the world, is there free will? For a Process Theologian, there are authentic and immediate answers to the questions, not merely the mystery of “It’s beyond human comprehension.” A process theologian is not asked to check their intellect at the door or discount what is empirically proven. Maimonides, for example, when confronted with a conflict between Torah and Reason, chose Reason with the caveat that the Torah was not wrong, we just can’t understand it. Others, like Spinoza, chose Reason over Torah and walked away from the Jewish community.

Rabbi Toba Spitzer, the former president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, in her article “Why We Need Process Theology,” writes,

Building on the then-new discoveries of quantum mechanics, the early twentieth-century mathematician Alfred North Whitehead and his followers created new categories with which to think about God and the nature of divinity. The most fundamental claim on process philosophy is that every aspect of our reality is in some way ‘in process’...the process understanding of reality implies ongoing interconnectivity of all levels of being. All life, whether electrons or humans, are ‘in process’ in that they interact with the environment around them, are affected by that environment, and incorporate this experience in the next moment of becoming... God’s reality does not stand at an untouchable remove from the created world, but encompasses it, is in process *with* it...In the words of our liturgy, *Ehyeh* is that which *m’chadeish b’chol yom tamid ma’aseih b’reishit*

(renews each and every day – in every moment – the work of creation).⁹³

Process Theology and the 5 Questions in Detail

1. Is there a God in Process Theology?

In Process Theology, everything is a unified, pulsating, closed system that is moving from *chaos to cosmos*.⁹⁴ There is no independent God who acts in history. For process theologians, everything is a part of God, God is a part of everything.

2. What is God? Is God sentient and intentional?

For the process theologian, rather than a sentient, intentional being that acts in history, God is the force that *persuades* the universe to love and peace. Love, unconditional selflessness, is the mechanism that causes this movement.

I see this persuasion, this lure, played out daily, as I am tugged along by my dog on a leash. I don't really need the leash. When I let her run freely, she bounds away from me. After a moderate distance, or if I get out of sight, she happily turns around and runs back. She loves me. She is lured back by her internal need to be close to me. This internal need, whether psychological because she was abandoned and joined our family as a rescue; biological, to stay near her protector; or by choice (akin to a

⁹³ Toba Spitzer, "Why We Need Process Theology," *CCAR Reform Jewish Quarterly* (Winter 2012): 84-95.

⁹⁴ Bradley Shavit Artson, "Vibrating over the Face of the Deep: God's Creating, and Ours," *CCAR Reform Jewish Quarterly* (Winter 2010): 40-47.

theological decision to adopt a life of *mitzvot*), is the lure and persuasion of the process theologian.

3. Does God micromanage the world? NO

4. Am I commanded to obey God? Yes

Commanded is defined as compelled, impelled or lured.

Quoting John B. Cobb,⁹⁵ Rabbi Artson writes:

'God does not establish a set of objective laws and then leave it to individuals to obey or disobey. The relations between God and humanity is far more intimate. God's call comes moment by moment, and the human response is constantly new.' Judaism's *mitzvot*, then, are the deeds that allow us to meet and respond: to the Divine and to each other through our behavior. The commandedness of the *mitzvot* comes from within – the imperatives that emerge from empathy, love, and belonging – and blossom into the sacred actions that can transform our world and bind our hearts.⁹⁶

...in Judaism the deed is central whereas the theology remains secondary⁹⁷...The more you want to do Jewish, to engage, the stronger the lure, to do *mitzvot*...And just as thought discovers itself by tracking the actions in which it becomes visible, Jewish thought requires the implementation of *mitzvot* to actualize Judaism's potential to inspire lives of goodness and holiness. Responding Jews (and engaged non-Jews) mold their actions to do Torah.⁹⁸

So it is true that *mitzvot* emerge as implementations of the divine lure and as manifestations of Jewish thinking, expressions of Torah consciousness in the details of behavior. It is further the case that many brilliant sages have productively used *mitzvot* as elements to fashion a systematic expression of Jewish symbolic thought...Yet for all its resonances as a concrete manifestation and an evocative set of building blocks for Jewish thoughts, there is a special relationship between *mitzvot—the sacred deeds— and halakhah, which is often*

⁹⁵ John Boswell Cobb, Jr. is an American theologian, philosopher, and environmentalist. Cobb is often regarded as the preeminent scholar in the field of process philosophy and process theology, the school of thought associated with the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead.

⁹⁶ John B. Cobb, Jr., "Process Theology," *Religion Online*, <http://processandfaith.org/writings/article/process-theology>.

⁹⁷ Artson, *GOD of Becoming*, 91.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

compared to a tree—living luxuriant, and supple. *Mitzvot* are not random behaviors and they are not abstractions set into deed. For religious literalists and liberals alike, *mitzvot* are the fruit on the tree of *halakha*, and *halakha* is the systemic effort of the Rabbis to translate the Torah into action. In true Process form, they are dynamically interconnected.⁹⁹

5. **What happens if I don't follow God's commandments?**

For a Process theologian, this isn't the right question, rather, the question is, why wouldn't you follow your natural impulse toward love and peace? For a Process theologian such as Rabbi Artson, the path is through *halakhah*, defined as adherence to Jewish law.

We affirm that the *mitzvot* connect us to God; link us to the Torah and the best of Jewish values; forge a relationship between our individual lives, families, and those of the Jewish people around the world and across the ages. We affirm that *halakhah* provides a system to integrate our newest insights and advancing knowledge into the scaffold of Torah and the cathedral of deeds that Judaism erects in God's praise and for human betterment.¹⁰⁰

Process Theology is not specifically Jewish and others will follow the lure according to the precepts of their respective traditions.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 94.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 98.

HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

Humanism is “an outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters. Humanist beliefs stress the potential value and goodness of human beings, emphasize common human needs, and seek solely rational ways of solving human problems.”¹⁰¹ Humanistic Judaism “celebrates Jewish life while foregoing appeals for divine intervention, instead putting our faith in human reason and human power as the best vehicles for improving the world.”¹⁰²

Secular humanism is a comprehensive, non-religious lifeway incorporating a naturalistic philosophy, A cosmic outlook rooted in science, and a consequentialist ethical system.¹⁰³

Secular Humanistic Judaism “is a cultural Jewish identity lived through this human-focused non-theistic philosophy of life.”¹⁰⁴

Humanistic Judaism and the 5 Questions

1. Is there a God? NO
2. If there is, then What is God? N/A
3. Is God sentient and intentional? N/A
4. Does God micromanage the world? N/A
5. Am I commanded to obey God? If yes, what happens if I don't? N/A

Secular or Religious?

I've been grappling with the question of whether Humanistic Jews are religious or secular? So often we hear the term “secular humanist” lumped together as if they are one, but they are not. The definition of the word secular isn't much help either. “Secular: of or relating to worldly things or to

¹⁰¹ “Humanism,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/humanism>.

¹⁰² Society for Humanistic Judaism, “What is Humanistic Judaism?”

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, “Secular Humanistic Judaism,” <https://iishj.org/about-us/secular-humanistic-judaism/>.

things that are not regarded as religious, spiritual, or sacred; temporal.”¹⁰⁵

Scholar Aaron Hahn Tapper¹⁰⁶ writes:

One of the most common ways to understand Jews is as adherents to the religion called Judaism. But what does “religion” mean? We can approach this question by looking at the etymology of the word. Unfortunately, its definitive roots are unknown. Some trace it to the Latin *religio*, meaning a supernaturally imposed prohibition; others to *religare*, that which ties believers to something (e.g., God). Moving forward, if we put aside what “religion” means within the context of an individual’s life (as in, “I had a religious experience”), many use the term religion to describe a given group’s set of beliefs. Using this criterion, it is easy to show how a core set of textually based principles have been part of the Jewish tradition for millennia. But there are at least three basic challenges to saying that Jews are members of a religious community and ending the conversation there. First, many Jews, even those who are religiously observant, argue that ritual practice is much more important to being a Jew than belief...Second, one’s Jewishness cannot be judged on the basis of ritual observance alone...A third challenge is that many twenty-first-century American and Israeli Jews reject the notion that Judaism is their religion, preferring instead to call it their culture, ethnicity or heritage.¹⁰⁷

I have understood secular to mean someone devoid of ritual or practice, who doesn’t believe in God, but this is not correct. Was Erich Fromm secular with the Jewish textual lens he brought to his writing? Was Baruch Spinoza secular? Though he rejected religious practice, he didn’t

¹⁰⁵ “Secular,” *Dictionary.com*, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/secular>.

¹⁰⁶ Aaron J. Hahn Tapper is the Mae and Benjamin Swig Associate Professor in Jewish Studies and the Founder and Director of the Swig Program in Jewish Studies and Social Justice at the University of San Francisco.

¹⁰⁷ Aaron Hahn-Tapper, *Judaism(s): A Twenty-First-Century Introduction to Jews and Jewish Identities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 4.

disavow a belief in God, rather he espoused that everything is God. What about the Humanism of Rabbi Sherwin Wine? All three are labeled secular but retain certain concepts that are often attributed to religion (Spinoza, an understanding of God; Fromm, a textual lens; Wine, a connection to ritual). Religious practice is expressed in multiple, highly diverse, but equally authentic forms of Judaism such as Reconstructionist Judaism, Non-theistic Mysticism, Process Theology, and even Spinoza who espoused “God, or Nature” as he walked away from Jewish practice toward universalism. I do not accept the secular/religious binary. Just because one is not a practicing member of a specific religious community does not mean they are devoid of *any* ritual or practice which gives their life meaning.

Humanists do not believe in God but does that make them secular? Both Humanistic Judaism and Secular Humanist Judaism look to Jewish texts and history to inform their nontheistic practice and rituals. There are Shabbat rituals, holiday observances, *b'nei mitzvot* and weddings under the umbrella of Jewish life. These practices are infused with Jewish content, are Jewishly meaningful and tie the participants to the Jewish past and the Jewish future.

Perhaps the key is how the reservoir of Jewish texts and history are used in the present? In writing about the early years after the State of Israel was founded, Israeli scholar Micah Goodman notes:

Both religious and secular Jews can devote themselves to their tradition's founding texts, but there is still a vast difference between them. For religious Jews, the written word is a source of authority; for secular Jews in the style of Ahad Ha'am, it is a source of inspiration. Books that are sources of authority control

their readers; books that are sources of inspiration enrich and empower them.¹⁰⁸

Rabbi Sherwin Wine, the founder of Humanistic Judaism writes:

Now there are different kinds of atheism. The most popular kind is “ontological” atheism, a firm denial that there is any creator or manager of the universe. There is “ethical” atheism, a firm conviction that, even if there is a creator/manager of the world, he does not run things in accordance with the human moral agenda, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked. There is “existential” atheism, a nery assertion that even if there is a God, he has no authority to be the boss of my life. There is “agnostic” atheism, a cautious denial which claims that God’s existence can be neither proven nor disproven, but which ends up with behavior no different from that of the ontological atheist. There is “ignostic” atheism, another cautious denial, which claims that the word “God” is so confusing that it is meaningless and which translates into the same behavior as the ontological atheist. There is “pragmatic” atheism, which regards God as irrelevant to ethical and successful living, and which views all discussions about God as a waste of time.

Most Humanistic Jews are “atheists” in one of these senses. But for all Humanistic Jews, atheism is not at the heart of their belief system, especially in a liberal theological world where the word “God” can meant anything you want it to mean. At the heart of Humanistic Judaism is a positive answer to the central question of all historic religions and pragmatic philosophies: where do we find the source of power, strength and wisdom to cope with the problems of life? The central focus of humanism is people and the forces of the natural world. We are not Atheistic Judaism. We are Humanistic Judaism.¹⁰⁹

So what does it mean to be secular in a Jewish context? Where did the idea of the secular Jew come from? When did the idea emerge that to be Jewish was a religious act? One would posit that it began when self-

¹⁰⁸ Micah Goodman, *The Wondering Jew: Israel and the Search for Jewish Identity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 48.

¹⁰⁹ Sherwin T. Wine, “Reflections,” in *A Life of Courage: Sherwin Wine and Humanistic Judaism*, eds. Dan Cohn-Sherbock, Harry T. Cook, and Marilyn Rowens (Farmington Hills, MI: International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, 2003), 285.

governing, autonomous communities were in place. If you lived within said community, that culture governed all aspects of your life. If you ventured outside the metaphoric walls, you ventured into a totally different culture. The culture and accompanying practices grew out of Jewish texts which reflected the biblical understanding of God. This theocentric view of Jewish identity was viewed as religious. Cultures that functioned around other, non-theocentric principles were deemed secular. It is only in modernity, as boundaries became fluid, one could choose to stay in the community, not practice the religion but live in the culture.

NON-RELIGIOUS SPIRITUALITY

In his article with Angie Thurston, author and Harvard Divinity School Ministry Innovation Fellow, Casper ter Kuile explored seemingly secular institutions and gathering hubs which function in ways similar to religious communities. In his book *The Power of Ritual*, he explores how turning everyday activities into intentional rituals can transform our lives.

So when do we reclaim our time and well-being? How can we give ourselves the space to reflect - deeply and honestly - about how we're doing? ... I'll share with you two transformative practices for connecting with ourselves: sacred reading and Sabbath time . Both these practices are gifts from our ancestors that allow us to bring intentional rituals to our modern lives. Like CrossFit and other secular practices that fill gaps in our hunger for meaning and community as we turn away from religion, sacred reading and Sabbath time are things you probably already do that give you joy, a sense of purpose, a meditative space, and a feeling of connection to your authentic self. What's critical is that we see these daily rituals as part of a larger shift toward a new definition of spirituality.¹¹⁰

Is the profound, life-changing sense of community and purpose one experiences by belonging to CrossFit a religious experience? What is a religious experience? John Edwin Smith defines a religious experience as “both special experience of the divine or ultimate and the viewing of any experience as pointing to the divine or ultimate.”¹¹¹ But there is not consensus on what a religious experience is. Clearly the definition is subjective. Smith continues:

¹¹⁰ Casper ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual: Turning Everyday Activities into Soulful Practices* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020), 32.

¹¹¹ John Edwin Smith, “Religious Experience,” *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/religious-experience>

Proponents of mysticism, such as Rudolf Otto, Rufus Jones, and W.T. Stace, maintained the validity of immediate experience of the divine, and theologians such as Emil Brunner stressed the self-authenticating character of the human being's encounter with God. Naturalistically oriented psychologists, such as Sigmund Freud and J.H. Leuba, rejected such claims and explained religion in psychological and genetic terms as a projection of human wishes and desires. Philosophers such as William James, Josiah Royce, William E. Hocking, and Wilbur M. Urban represented an idealist tradition in interpreting religion, stressing the concepts of purpose, value, and meaning as essential for understanding the nature of God. Naturalist philosophers, of whom John Dewey was typical, have focused on the "religious" as a quality of experience and an attitude toward life that is more expressive of the human spirit than of any supernatural reality. The theologians Douglas Clyde Macintosh and Henry Nelson Wieman sought to build an "empirical theology" on the basis of religious experience understood as involving a direct perception of God. Unlike Macintosh, Wieman held that such a perception is sensory in character. Personalist philosophers, such as Edgar S. Brightman and Peter Bertocci, have regarded the person as the basic category for understanding all experience and have interpreted religious experience as the medium through which God is apprehended as the cosmic person. Existential thinkers, such as Søren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, and Paul Tillich, have seen God manifested in experience in the form of a power that overcomes estrangement and enables human beings to fulfill themselves as integrated personalities. Process philosophers, such as Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, have held that the idea of God emerges in religious experience but that the nature and reality of God are problems calling for logical argument and metaphysical interpretation, in which emphasis falls on the relation between God and the world being realized in a temporal process. Logical empiricists (also called logical positivists), of whom A.J. Ayer was typical, have held that religious and theological expressions are without literal significance, because there is no way in which they can be either justified or falsified (refuted). On this view, religious experience is entirely emotive, lacking all cognitive value. Analytic philosophers following the lead of Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Austrian British thinker, approach religious experience through the structure of religious language, attempting to discover exactly how this language functions within the community of believers who use it.¹¹²

¹¹² Ibid.

Years ago I was in Aspen on an intense weeklong Jewish retreat. During one of our few unprogrammed moments, I rented a bike and went for a ride out in the aspen trees. It was spectacularly beautiful but as I rode by myself through the forest, I was transported back to Poland where I had spent the previous summer. It is also spectacularly beautiful in Poland, but there, I had constantly asked myself how could there have been such evil in a place of such beauty? And then, on my beautiful ride, I was overcome with pure terror. I could sense the presence of evil behind the beautiful trees in Aspen. If there had been unspeakable evil in the beauty of Poland, was there evil around me in Colorado? I prayed to God in that moment to get me back to the hotel in safety. It was a tremendously powerful experience that I'll never forget. Was it a religious experience? Was it a spiritual moment? Did I really talk to God? Was it psychological? Was it all in my head? Yes, and yes. Are the psychological and the religious mutually exclusive?

To bring this thesis full circle, perhaps I was experiencing what Spinoza would call "natural knowledge." Perhaps, I was tapped into God and like the prophets, perceiving things revealed by God with the aid of my imagination.

CONCLUSIONS

So where do I find myself at the end of this journey? When I first was accepted to rabbinical school, people asked me what I would do when I finished. I didn't begin this as a vocational choice. No, this was a personal quest for clarity, depth and self-confidence. I have not been disappointed. I have grown in unexpected ways. I am bridging the blurred line between secular and religious, between mundane moments to those humanly infused with meaning which become sacred. I am emerging into awareness and gratitude when I see the life in a blooming tree, the glow of the sunset and the majesty of the mountains.

The journey has led me to the knowledge that I am authentic when I daven the Amidah that I wrote, in English, at DLTI.¹¹³ It is not that I don't understand the Hebrew upon which it is based, I do, but English is my mother tongue and my connection to the divine is what is important. Maneuvering into a foreign language shouldn't get in the way.

And lastly, the journey has led me to embrace the widest reach of those who would opt into the Jewish people. The community with whom I pray, and the community which I help to lead, are reflections of this diversity, of the *shivim panim*, the 70 faces of the Torah.

As I type the last few lines of this thesis, I bring it to a close with the recognition that it will never feel finished. There will always be an-

¹¹³ The Davennan Leadership Training Institute is a two-year training program in the art of leading public prayer, sponsored by the ALEPH Network.

other area in which to dive deeper, another scholar worth mentioning who has inspired me. Here's to the journey...!

APPENDIX #1

Jamie's Amidah

AVOT - Prayer should be a first choice, not a last resort

STRENGTH - The cycle of life is sustained - powered – maintained – flows...from your energy – Your constancy is never doubted *m'hayeh hameytim*.

HOLINESS - There is sanctity in this process.... I/we acknowledge and give in to this vast process of which we are a part.

KNOWLEDGE (being “woke”) - We have been created aware of our unity, able to discern our differences, grow in our knowledge and understand what a unique quality has been developed in us.

REPENTANCE (becoming aware) - Let me/us (?) be open to your teaching and through that become a force for good toward a repaired world, a world in stasis, bringing others to awareness of the oneness of all things.

FORGIVENESS - Let not the past hold us back. It is in the now that we build the world we want to come.

REDEMPTION - Let calm and stillness be the known effect of our efforts.

HEALING - It is reciprocal. Awareness of oneness brings calm and repair.

PROSPERITY - May we be blessed with a good year and all our needs be met. May we give blessing to the land, treating her with respect that we may be sustained by her goodness.

GATHERING THE EXILES - May our community and indeed, all people be blessed with a land free from strife and fear; a land that produces and sustains its inhabitants. May all the people of the planet, across the 4 corners of the earth, come to know that we are one.

JUSTICE - We pray for justice and counsel/advice to be through the lens of understanding that we are all interconnected and created in the image of God.

AGAINST ENEMIES - May those who slander and misrepresent and who sow the seeds of enmity among people grow to know their mistakes and work to repair the damage they have wrought.

ON THE RIGHTEOUS - And for those who understand, who teach our inter-connection, who work and teach and bring others to the light, may the world be gentle.

JERUSALEM and KINGDOM OF DAVID - May Jerusalem be an "ir shalom" - a city of peace - where all people, all created in the image of God, feel welcome and dwell in peace. And may we build and bring about "the world we want to come."

RESPONSE to prayer - May our prayers be heard - by the Oneness that connects us, by those that are connected. My gentleness and compassion hold us as we travel on our journeys.

TEMPLE service - May humanity come to understand that we are one and may we act together to bring calm and stillness, love, compassion and justice to the world.

THANKSGIVING - We are grateful/we are full with knowledge that we are a part of the great Oneness that is all that was/is/and will be. We will tell it like it is, as all we are is a part of all that is. All the wonders, all the beauty, all the goodness, evening, morning and afternoon. All the compassion and the goodness that is, we are a part of building the world that we want to come. May everyone come to know they are a part of the One.

PEACE - Grant peace and goodness and blessing and grace and compassions on us and all your people. Bless us as we are all one in your light, and in this light has sprung forth our way of life, in the love of kindness, justice, blessing, compassion, life and peace. And may your people be blessed in every moment and hour in your peace.

ELOHAI - May my words and my thoughts always move knowledge and awareness of Oneness forward. May my heart and my deeds always bring about Oneness, and may my soul and spirit always pursue building the world we want to come.

For your name (for our Oneness), for your presence (for our Oneness) made manifest through the works of our hands, for your sanctity(for our Oneness), for your way of being in the world/for our Oneness. May it be the desire of my words and my heart, Oneness is my foundation and my way forward. Make peace and fullness in the vastness of this understanding, the Oneness which makes peace and fullness for and with us, and all Israel and let us say: Amen.

APPENDIX #2
Excerpted from
The Rabbi Finds Her Way
by Robert Schoen and Catherine deCuir
Used with permission from the authors

(To Michael, because this sounds like us ☺).

*DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD?*¹¹⁴

“So, Ruth said she’d play for Kol Nidre?”

“Yes. And Shelly was overjoyed. He hasn’t stopped thanking me. He’s acting like *I’m* the cellist.”

“Well, sometimes things do work out.”

The dark room was lit, as usual, by candles as well as by the Ner Tamid nightlight. Marriage plans were progressing and they were both very happy. She’d never felt closer to anyone.

She spoke again, just above a whisper.

“Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

She waited for him to respond.

“You want to ask me a personal question?”

“Yes.”

He waited, then said, “All right. You can ask me a personal question. You can ask me anything, except one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“You can’t ask me about my prostate.”

“*What?*”

“Yep. That’s where I draw the line. No prostate-related questions.”

She started giggling. She never knew what he would say at any given moment, and it was usually something that made her laugh. The only other person who made her laugh like this was Mary Fresa [her best friend].

“Sure, go ahead and laugh,” he said in a very serious tone.

“Jack,” she replied, while trying to regain her composure.

“I don’t even know what a prostate *is!*”

¹¹⁴ Excerpted from Robert Schoen and Catherine deCuir, *The Rabbi Finds Her Way* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press), 2019. (used with permission from the authors).

“It’s nothing but trouble. Just ask my father. You don’t want to know.”

How could she ask him a serious question when did this to her? But she forged ahead.

“Okay, no prostate questions.”

“Good.”

“As a matter of fact, it’s sort of a serious question.”

“Pearl, there’s nothing more serious than your prostate. If you have one, that is.”

“Would you please stop already with the prostate! I have a serious, personal question to ask you.”

“Shoot.”

This wasn’t going the way she thought it would. The hell with it. She just asked her question.

“Do you believe in God?”

He took a deep, audible breath. “Wow, here I thought you were going to ask me something really difficult and personal. Instead you throw me a softball.”

After a few moments of silence, he closed his eyes and started making snoring sounds.

“Jack! Stop it!”

“Oh. You’re still here.”

“Jack!”

“Do I believe in God? Was that the question?”

“Yes. Do you believe in God? You heard me.”

“Okay, I heard you.”

She waited. He didn’t answer. She decided to wait it out. Finally, he spoke.

“This is a trick question. I just know it.”

She smiled in the semi-darkness. “*Do you believe in God?*”

A trick question. She had to hand it to him.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I can see where this might be headed, and I don’t like what I see, Rabbi.”

“Jack, don’t call me “Rabbi” when we’re in bed together. Okay?”

He said, “All right. I changed my mind. You can ask me about my prostate.”

She was getting exasperated.

“Why is this so hard for you to talk about? You’re Jewish. You had a bar mitzvah. You come to services. I see you recite the prayers and read in Hebrew. Do you believe in God?”

Silence. Then he said, “Fine. I’ll answer your question. I’ll talk to you about God. But you just have to tell me something first.”

“What?”

“Is this the deal-breaker? If I give you the wrong answer, or an inadequate explanation, or screw up the response in some way, is that it? I’m back on the street?”

“Back on the street?”

“Yeah. I have to start looking for a new girlfriend who tops you? Which will be impossible. So I’ll just wind up going back to South America, living out the rest of my days with spiders and snakes in the rain forest?”

Pearl sighed. “You are beginning to piss me off. Just answer the damned questions, will you? You’re not leaving me and you’re not going back to South America or any of that nonsense! I just want to know. Can we leave it at that?”

More silence. “Okay. I’ll answer. But it’s not a simple answer, because it is not a simple question.” She waited what seemed like a long time. He leaned over on one elbow so he could face her. Then he held her hand and spoke.

“Pearl, I am a scientist. I’ve always been a scientist. Scientists are skeptics; they have to be. We’re always asking “Why?”

“Why is the sky blue? Why do scorpions do their little mating dance? Why did the American Chestnuts die? What happened to the dinosaurs?”

“That sounds like my father. He still wants to know where Jimmy Hoffa is buried.”

“Exactly. And then there are the medical questions, and the geological question, and the logical questions. If the lady gets sawed in half, where’s the blood?”

“I get it,” she said. “I’m also hoping you’re getting to the point.”

“Okay, so let’s talk about God. There I am, sitting in my temple in Florida. First I’m a little kid. Then I’m a bigger kid. And then a teenager. And the whole time I’m asking myself: Why isn’t the burning bush consumed? Did the sea really part? What’s with the frogs? Did Elijah go to heaven in a flaming chariot, and if so, where can I get one? Where’s my jet pack? Don’t even get me started with Noah.”

“Miracle after miracle, they keep coming at me, and I’m sitting there with my little budding scientist mind questioning everything. I start asking the rabbi, my parents, the Hebrew school teacher, and all they do is give me stupid, nonsensical answers.”

“So, I’m having to deal with all this by myself, and I’m not really equipped. Because in science, you question things until you find an answer. You know the answer may not be perfect, or even accurate, but it’s an answer and it has to do until a better answer comes along, and you’ll be the one who finds it.”

“Pearl, I’ve read about this process and I’ve seen it happen myself - and I’m still fairly young. Scientific “truths” will often be found to be false. Hell, maybe I’ll debunk some so-called facts myself.”

“But with God and the Bible? That’s not the way it works. You can come up with explanations for why something *could* have happened. Like, “It wasn’t really the Red Sea, it was the Reed Sea; and it was just some tides that moved water around so Moses and the gang could get through, and then the moon came up or went down and the waters flooded and drowned all the bad guys, and Miriam took out the old tambourine and sang her song. End of story.”

Pearl moved closer to him and softly “I love you.”

He kissed her hand. “But all of that is just a story. A myth. At some point I came to the conclusion that trying to “scientize” biblical stories is worse than just believing them. Like, how come the unicorns didn’t make it onto the ark? Did Noah screw up? People drive themselves and everyone else crazy with this kind of nonsense.

“Einstein once said, “God does not play dice.” He had a God *he* believed in. I read a story about once where he said, “Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind.”

Pearl whispered, “I didn’t know that Einstein said...” But Jack cut her off.

“Richard Feynman said that he doesn’t believe that science can disprove the existence of God; it’s just impossible. And if it’s impossible to disprove, then isn’t a belief in science *and* God a consistent possibility? He said something like that. He didn’t say that he *believed* in God: just that you can’t *disprove* God. Einstein. Feynman. These were smart guys.”

Pearl said, “I read a book by Feynman one time, and ...”

“So you ask me, just an ordinary scientist, if I believe in God? Sure, why not? Because when you come right down to it, you gotta ask yourself, “Who or what started the Big Bang? Who or what caused cells to evolve into organisms? Who or what caused animals to move from the sea to the land? Who put the ram in...”

“...the rama lama ding dong?”

“Right. So sure, I believe in God. Why not? Can you think of something better to believe in?” Pearl waited for him to continue.

“My image of God is probably different, though. It seems a lot of people like the image of the old guy in the sky with the long white beard. But that’s ridiculous. The God I believe in created some incredible things “billions and billions” of years ago. And if that was just six days of ‘God-time,’ that’s fine with me. Because *dust you are and to dust you will return*. No stoppin’ it.”

He was finished. She could tell. And all she could think was, *WOW*. He actually turned over in bed, facing away from her. She turned over next to him and pressed her breasts against his back.

“Thank you,” she said softly to him, as she reached over and stroked the hair on his chest. “I guess that wasn’t easy.”

“No. Remind me to explain all about the prostate. It’s much easier.”

“Maybe it is. And you don’t have to quote scripture.”

A long silence. Then he spoke.

“And what about you? Do you believe in God? Is that part of the deal to be a rabbi? Why did you even ask me?”

She touched his arm. He had glorious triceps.

She spoke quietly. “My belief in God goes way back, and it had nothing to do with my being Jewish. I learned about God from Mary Fresa – after her mother had been killed and she lost her eye and suffered injuries that would prevent her from ever having children.”

“Fresa taught me about faith, and belief, and courage, and so many other things. I’d watch her pray in church. Hell, she even prayed when we sat at Shabbat services in the temple. If she was in a House of God, boy, there was nothing stopping her. It was like she had God all to herself, and God gave courage, and strength, and fortitude. And I said to myself, *Hey, I want to feel that*. And after a while I did. And then I learned more about what God means to me, and that God is different for each person. And if a person doesn’t want to believe, well, that’s his or her own business.”

She reached for a glass of water that was on the night table, took a sip, put it back down, and snuggled back into position.

“I’ve been a rabbi for a very short time, but I’ll tell you what happens when people come to talk to me about something that’s bothering them – I’m talking about adults, not kids. The first thing they say is, “Well, Rabbi, my boyfriend and I want to get married, and we want to get married in the temple, and we want you to officiate, but I just have to let know that I don’t believe in God.”

“Or, ‘It looks like my father’s going to die any day now, he’s got pancreatic cancer, and he told me he wants to be buried in the Jewish cemetery, and we’d like you to be at the funeral service; but it’s important for you to know, Rabbi, that my dad doesn’t believe in God – never did. Neither do I, for the matter,’

“Craig [the senior rabbi] warned me about this non-believing-in-God business. He said that probably most of the people in our congregation will tell you the first thing that they don’t believe in God.”

Jack turned over, put his arm under her shoulders, and said, “What did Craig say you should tell these people?”

“He said you should just smile, be sincere, and explain that not believing in God isn’t a barrier to being married. Or being buried in a cemetery. Or pretty much anything, including being a good Jew or a good human being. He also said that people often change their minds about God.

“Hell, lots of rabbis I’ve met have questioned their belief in God. I don’t hold it against them. Or anyone. It’s a very personal thing.”

“Is that why you asked me?”

“No. I asked you because I want to know what I am getting myself into.”

“Now you know. I hope my answer was satisfactory.”

“Considering that it was a trick question, you did just fine.”

He grumbled a little. She fell asleep with a smile on her face.

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