

JEWISH IDEAS OF GOD

In Judaism, God has been conceived in a variety of ways. Traditionally, Judaism holds that YHWH, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the national god of the Israelites, delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and gave them the Law of Moses at biblical Mount Sinai as described in the Torah.

According to the rationalist stream of Judaism articulated by Maimonides, which later came to dominate much of official traditional Jewish thought, God is understood as the absolute one, indivisible, and incomparable being who is the ultimate cause of all existence. Traditional interpretations of Judaism generally emphasize that God is personal yet also transcendent, while some modern interpretations of Judaism emphasize that God is a force or ideal.

Most of classical Judaism views God as a personal god, meaning that humans can have a relationship with God and vice versa. God as conceived by Judaism is not only the First Cause, the Creative Power, and the World Reason, but also the living and loving Father of Men. He is not only cosmic but also personal. Jewish monotheism thinks of God in terms of definite character or personality, while pantheism is content with a view of God as impersonal." This is shown in the Jewish liturgy, such as in the Adon Olam hymn, which includes a "confident affirmation" that "He is my God, my living God...Who hears and answers."

British chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that God "is not distant in time or detached, but passionately engaged and present."

Kabbalah

According to the kabbalah, every human action here on earth affects the divine realm, either promoting or hindering the union of the Shechina and the Holy One, blessed be He.

God is not a static being, but a dynamic becoming. Without human participation, God remains incomplete, unrealized. It is up to us to actualize the divine potential in the world. God needs us.

Be aware that God fashioned everything and is within everything.

Flashes of intuition will come and go and you will discover a secret here. If you are deserving, you will understand the mystery of God on your own.

In the flow of the holy spirit, one feels the divine life force coursing the pathways of existence, through all desires, all worlds, all nations, all creatures.

By cleaving in love and full awareness to the source of life, the soul shines from the supernal light, and all feelings, thoughts and actions are refined.

The essence of faith is an awareness of the vastness of Infinity.

One may speak of goodness, of love, of justice, of power, of beauty, of life in all its glory, of faith, of the Divine – all these convey the soul’s original nature for what lies beyond everything. All the divine names whether in Hebrew or any other language provide merely a tiny, dim spark of the hidden light for which the soul yearns when it says “God.”

Sanctify your limbs and adorn them with good deeds, making yourself into a throne for the Divine Presence, your body an ark for the Shechina. When you do a good deed, you sanctify yourself.

The Baal Shem Tov (Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer - 1698-1760)

Envision that the Creator, whose glory fills the earth, He and His presence are continually with you. This is the most subtle of all experiences.

Tell yourself, “He is the Master of all that occurs in the world. He can do anything I desire. And therefore, it makes no sense for me to put my confidence in anything else but Him, may He be blessed.”

Rejoice constantly. Ponder and believe with complete faith that the Divine Presence is with you and protecting you; that you are bound up with the Creator and the Creator is bound up with you, with your every limb and every faculty; that your focus is fixed on the Creator and the Creator’s focus is fixed upon you.
And the Creator could do whatever He wants.

If He so desired, He could annihilate all the worlds in a single moment and recreate them all in a single moment. Within Him are rooted all goodness and all stern judgments in the world. For the current of His energy runs through each thing. And you say, “As for me, I do not rely upon, nor do I fear, anyone or anything other than Him, blessed be He.”

—Tzava’at Harivash 137

Stay far away from depression. Let your heart rejoice in God.

—Tzava’at Harivash 15

By celebrating that God will come to your rescue, you have already provided the remedy.

Keter Shem Tov, Appendix, #234.

Rav Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935)

(The first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine in the Land of Israel, the founder of Yeshiva Mercaz HaRav, a Jewish thinker, kabbalist, and renowned scholar. He is considered one of the fathers of religious Zionism.)

If you desire, human being, look at the light of God's Presence in everything.

Look at the Eden of spiritual life, at how it blazes into each corner and crevice of life, spiritual and of this world, right before your eyes of flesh and your eyes of soul...

Gaze at the wonders of creation, at their divine life—not like some dim phenomenon that is placed before your eyes from afar.

But know the reality in which you live.

Know yourself and your world.

Know the thoughts of your heart, and of all who speak and think.

Find the source of life inside you, higher than you, around you. [Find] the beautiful ones alive in this generation in whose midst you are immersed.

The love within you: lift it up to its mighty root, to its beauty of Eden.

Send it spreading out to the entire flood of the soul of the Life of worlds, Whose light is reduced only by incapable human expression.

Gaze at the lights, at what they contain.

Do not let the Names, phrases and letters swallow up your soul.

They have been given over to you.

You have not been given over to them.

Rise up.

Rise up, for you have the power.

You have wings of the spirit, wings of powerful eagles.

Do not deny them, or they will deny you.

Seek them, and you will find them instantly

Be Good to All

When you experience a strong desire to be good to all, realize that an illumination from the supernal world has come to you.

How fortunate you will be if you prepare a proper place in your heart, in your mind, in the acts of your hands and in all your feelings to receive this exalted guest, which is greater and more exalted than the most noble of this earth. Take hold of it and do not let go.

Do not allow any delays and obstacles—whether physical or spiritual—that hinder you from taking this holy inspiration into yourself to stop you. Fight for everything. Rise in your strength. Lift your consciousness to the far reaches and imitate the qualities of God,

Who is good to all and Whose compassion encompasses all His creatures.
Orot Hakodesh III, p. 316

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972)

There are three starting points of contemplation about God; three trails that lead to Him:
 The first is the way of sensing the presence of God in the world, in things,
 The second is the way of sensing His presence in the Bible.
 The third is the way of sensing His presence in sacred deeds.

These three ways correspond in our tradition to the main aspects of religious existence: worship, learning, and action.

In the depth of human thinking we all presuppose some ultimate reality which on the level of discursive thinking is crystallized into the concept of a power, a principle, or a structure.

This, then, is the order in our thinking and existence: the ultimate or God comes first and our reasoning about Him second.

God to the religiously sensitive man is an "ontological presupposition" rather than the conclusion of a logical statement.

Heschel describes three ways in which man can come to an awareness of God.

The first is by going, through wonder, beyond the mere givenness of the facts to awareness of the grandeur and mystery of reality. Such wonder can take different forms: as curiosity it can become the starting point of science, which looks beyond given facts to the laws they exemplify; as radical amazement it can point beyond fact to the ground and power that stand behind all fact and perceptions of fact. To the Biblical man, the sublime is but a form in which the presence of God strikes forth.

The doctrine that actions teach and that religion cannot be acquired merely by cognitive endeavor has led Heschel to the view that Judaism requires the "leap of action" rather than the Kierkegaardian "leap of faith."

In the second way, man reaches an awareness of God by delving into the recesses of his own being, thus realizing that he is not an independent and self-sufficient entity, but part of something greater and more encompassing than his individual ego.

In principle any moment of life and any experience can be regarded by the sensitive believer as such divine address and summons. But in fact, this awareness is felt only rarely in a clear and unambiguous manner.

In the third way, man becomes aware of the *voice* of God. The "holy dimension" of harkening to the voice and acting responsively and responsibly characterizes the biblical view of man as the recipient of divine revelation. It is in facing the transcendent God and His demands that one becomes a moral agent. The dichotomy of faith and works was never a real issue in Judaism since the two are not inimical but inherently complementary.

By doing the *mitzvot* the Jew enters the holy dimension of God's challenge and guidance, and by obediently responding to the divine demand he experiences himself as the object of God's address and concern, thus gaining faith in the Author of the Law by responding to His voice.

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The leap of action is no more a denial of reason than the advice to gain an appreciation and understanding of music by not merely studying its theory but also by listening to and, if possible, performing great works of music.

Rabbi Harold Schulweis (1925-2014)

Does prayer really work? Does God hear our requests? Does God care enough to intervene in our lives? If he doesn't, is it because God can't, or God won't?

That we may not pray magically for a result that defies the laws of nature or that contradicts the laws of logic does not reflect on God's lack of power. It acknowledges the reality that God has created.

The question to be asked of those who seek God is not whether they believe in a noun that cannot be known but whether they believe in the gerunds of Godliness: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, supporting the fallen, pursuing peace, living the neighbor.

MORE MODERN VIEWS OF GOD

Post-Enlightenment Jewish thinkers presented modified conceptions of God that attempted to reconcile modern philosophical trends with Jewish tradition. *These figures tended to stress human liberty and the ethical aspects of God.*

Solomon Formstecher (1808-1889) conceived of God as the spirit of the world, a concept derived from Hegel. God is completely free, and as freedom is a precondition for moral activity, God is the perfect ethical being.

Leo Baeck (1873-1956) presented Judaism as, essentially, ethical monotheism, suggesting that the belief in one God—Judaism's fundamental innovation—is equivalent to the belief in a single source of moral law.

Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) was also, originally, concerned with the ethical implications of God. In his early rationalistic thought, he presented God as the “idea” that guarantees morality. Cohen’s later work, however, was more traditional from a Jewish point of view, and he became more concerned with the reality of God and less concerned with the “idea” of God.

Cohen’s students, **Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1919)** and **Martin Buber (1878-1965)**, eschewed Cohen’s reliance on reason and rooted their philosophies in the experiential.

According to Rosenzweig, God cannot be known through rational inquiry. Rather, God is encountered existentially. These encounters amount to personal revelations. Whereas Rosenzweig believed that these direct revelations are the source of one’s knowledge of God, Buber believed that one comes to know God through one’s relationships with other people.

Buber’s classic work *I and Thou* describes the two types of relationships one could have. The I-It relationship is characterized by, among other things, utility. When one uses something or someone for practical purposes, one is engaged in an I-It relationship; this is also true when one describes, categorizes, or refers to a thing or person through third-person language. The I-Thou relationship, however, is relating for its own sake. It is characterized by equality, openness, and genuine encounter. God is the ultimate “Thou,” and we relate to God whenever we engage in an I-Thou relationship.

Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983) embraced the scientific advances of modernity that touted natural explanations, and he rejected the belief in supernatural forces, including a supernatural God. However, he did not reject Judaism or, “the faith that the world affords men an opportunity for salvation.” Thus, he redefined God as the power *within* nature that makes such salvation possible.

The Holocaust also impelled many theologians to reconsider the Jewish conception of God. According to biblical theology, evil and suffering afflict the Jewish people as a result of their sins. However, the extensive horrors of the Holocaust made this theological explanation unacceptable to many thinkers.

Richard Rubenstein has articulated the most radical theological response to the Nazi atrocities. According to Rubenstein, God is dead. One cannot viably assert traditional Judaism or a belief in the Jewish God in light of the Holocaust.

Jewish feminism has also posed challenges to the traditional Jewish God. Contemporary feminist thinkers like **Judith Plaskow** and **Rachel Adler** have noted that the images of God in traditional Jewish literature and liturgy are almost exclusively male. However, this is only the surface of the problem. The real issue is that a religious community’s descriptions of God represent the attributes and values that it holds dearest. Thus, by depicting God as only male, Judaism implicitly values men over women. In addition, for most of history men have been the guiding communal leaders of Judaism, and so Judaism reflects the experiences and concerns of men.

The feminist critique of Jewish theology cannot be resolved by simply adding female God pronouns to Jewish liturgy. Conceptions of God need to be molded out of female as well as male experiences of Judaism. Some Jewish feminists, including liturgist Marcia Falk and many within the Jewish renewal movement, revisit and make expansive use of the few traditional female images of God (like the *Shekhinah* of kabbalah), and experiment with new ways of envisioning and naming God in light of Jewish women's experiences and contemporary feminist insights.

REFORM MOVEMENT

Reform Judaism affirms the central tenets of Judaism - God, Torah and Israel - even as it acknowledges the diversity of Reform Jewish beliefs and practices. We believe that all human beings are created in the image of God, and that we are God's partners in improving the world. *Tikkun olam* — repairing the world — is a hallmark of Reform Judaism as we strive to bring peace, freedom, and justice to all people.

We affirm the reality and oneness of God, even as we may differ in our understanding of the Divine presence.

We affirm that the Jewish people is bound to God by an eternal ברית (*b'rit*), covenant, as reflected in our varied understandings of Creation, Revelation and Redemption.

We affirm that every human being is created בצלם אלהים (*b'tzelem Elohim*), in the image of God, and that therefore every human life is sacred.

We regard with reverence all of God's creation and recognize our human responsibility for its preservation and protection.

We encounter God's presence in moments of awe and wonder, in acts of justice and compassion, in loving relationships and in the experiences of everyday life.

We respond to God daily: through public and private prayer, through study and through the performance of other מצוות (*mitzvot*), sacred obligations -- בין אדם למקום (*bein adam la Makom*), to God, and בין אדם לאדם (*bein adam la-chaveiro*), to other human beings.

We strive for a faith that fortifies us through the vicissitudes of our lives -- illness and healing, transgression and repentance, bereavement and consolation, despair and hope.

We continue to have faith that, in spite of the unspeakable evils committed against our people and the sufferings endured by others, the partnership of God and humanity will ultimately prevail.

We trust in our tradition's promise that, although God created us as finite beings, the spirit within us is eternal.

In all these ways and more, God gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

RECONSTRUCTIONISM

Reconstructionist Judaism defines Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people.

By evolving we mean that Judaism has changed over the centuries of its existence. The faith of the ancient Israelites in the days of Solomon's Temple was not the same as that of the early rabbis. And neither of those faiths was the same as that of our more recent European ancestors. Each generation of Jews has subtly reshaped the faith and traditions of the Jewish people. Reconstructionist Jews seek to nurture this evolution. We see it as the lifeblood of Judaism, the power that allows Judaism to continue as a dynamic tradition in every age.

By religious we mean that Judaism is the means by which we conduct our search for ultimate meaning in life. God is the source of meaning. We struggle, to be sure, with doubts and uncertainties.

Reconstructionists affirm that struggle; we believe it is the duty of all Jews to question and to study in order to find unique paths to the divine. We believe in a God who inhabits this world and especially the human heart. God is the source of our generosity, sensitivity and concern for the world around us. God is also the power within us that urges us toward self-fulfillment and ethical behavior. We find God when we look for meaning in the world, when we are motivated toward study and when we work to realize the goals of morality and social justice.

By **civilization** we mean that Judaism is more than a religion. The Jewish people share historical memory and historical destiny. Judaism includes a commitment to our ancient homeland and language. We share a love for Jewish culture, Jewish morality and Jewish philosophy. We are heirs to a rich legacy of literary and artistic achievement, of laughter and tears, a legacy which continues to grow in our day.

By **the Jewish people** we mean that all Jews, whether by birth or by choice, are members of the extended Jewish family. We recognize a diversity of Jewish religious ideology and practice and seek to join with other Jews in accepting that diversity while working toward a shared vision of Jewish peoplehood. The Reconstructionist philosophy affirms the uniqueness of the Jewish people and its heritage among the peoples of the world. However, our affirmation of Judaism's uniqueness implies no sense of superiority over others. Reconstructionists believe that all peoples are called to the service of righteousness, and

we welcome dialogue with people of good will from all traditions.