

## JEWISH BELIEFS ABOUT GOD

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During the several thousand years of Jewish history, much has been written about the nature of the Jewish concept of God. This brief section is a summary of some of the major themes.

There are different definitions of the concept of "God." We do not all mean the same thing when we use the word God, even with a capital "G." While there are some similarities in the Jewish and Christian beliefs about God, it is extremely important to delineate the distinct understandings of the God of Judaism in order to accurately perceive Judaism and avoid simplistic characterizations.

### The Unity of God

One of the central prayers in Judaism, the *Shema*, expresses the most profound tenet of Judaism: the belief in monotheism. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one" (Deut.6:4). Within the Hebrew Bible the struggle against polytheism is a dominant and continuing theme.

According to the biblical book of Genesis, the universe owes its existence to the one God, the creator of heaven and earth. God alone is to be worshiped. God's deeds may vary, but God does not change.

It is the whole God, and the same God, who expresses Godself in different ways on different occasions, or it is we who perceive different aspects or attributes of God. It is always the same God, the whole God, the one God, who acts in many diverse ways, but who always remains changeless and

constant and the same.

Nearly 2,000 years ago Rabbi Akiba said that because God is unique in the universe, God knows the character of every single creature and their minds. The extraordinarily important twelfth-century Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides, asserted in the *Guide for the Perplexed* that human language is completely inadequate to describe God and that even human efforts to describe God's positive attributes impinge upon God's absolute unity.

It is because of the absolute belief in the unity of God that Judaism rejected the idea of Jesus as the incarnation of God and the conception of the Trinity. According to Judaism, such beliefs both violate God's unity and blur the distinction between humanity and God. Judaism is vitally concerned with maintaining God's otherness from human beings; as a result, any physical representations or descriptions of God are forbidden.

### **God's Transcendence and Immanence**

For Jews, God is both the transcendent creator of the universe, above, beyond, and more than the universe, and at the same time an active and personal presence in the world linked by a perpetual covenant with the Jewish people. One of the ways the Talmud addresses this apparent paradox is to make the analogy of the relation of God to the world with the relation of the soul to the body:

As God fills the whole world, so also the soul fills the whole body. As God sees, but cannot be seen, so also the soul sees, but cannot be seen. As God nourishes the whole world, so also the soul nourishes the whole body. As God is pure, so also the soul is pure. As God dwells in the inmost part of the Universe, so also the soul dwells in the inmost part of the body. (*Berakot* 10a)

God's transcendence is evident in Genesis, when God creates heaven and earth, in the prophet Isaiah's declaration that God is beyond human comprehension, and in Job's assertion that God's motives transcend human understanding:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts  
neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa. 40:21-2)

Can you find out the deep things of God?

Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?  
It is higher than heaven—what can you do?  
Deeper than Sheol—what can you know?  
Its measure is longer than the earth,  
and broader than the sea. (Job 11:7-9)

God's immanence is apparent through God's action in history as when God liberates the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, as well as in the doctrine of the *Shekhinah*, God's continuing presence in the world. We read in the Talmud:

Come and see how beloved Israel is before God; for wherever they went into exile, the *Shekhinah* went with them; in Babylon, the *Shekhinah* was with them and in the future, when Israel will be redeemed, the *Shekhinah* will be with them.

According to Jewish tradition, God is not only transcendent but is also personal, concerned, and responsive. God is near and hears the prayers of humankind, the *Shekhinah* is among Jews when they study Torah and is present when people behave justly. Further, there is no need for a mediator between God and humans since people can actively address and seek God directly with their prayers.

### **God's Eternity, Omnipotence, and Omniscience**

Throughout the Hebrew Bible God is described as having neither a beginning nor an end. The Psalmist declared:

Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting thou art God. (Ps. 90:2)

God is described as the Eternal God (Gen. 21:33) who lives forever (Deut. 32:40) and reigns forever (Exod. 15:18, Ps. 10:16). The Divine is the living God and everlasting Sovereign (Jer. 10:10) whose counsel and mercy endure forever (Ps. 33:11, 106:1). God's eternal existence is understood to be different from the rest of creation: God exists permanently without beginning or end.

In the eighteenth century, the Hasidic teacher Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav wrote in *Likkute Maharan, Tinyana*:

God, as is well known, is above all time. This a truly marvelous notion, utterly incomprehensible, impossible for the human mind to grasp. You must appreciate, however, that basically time is the product of ignorance,

that is to say, time only appears real to us because our intellect is so puny. The greater the mind the smaller and less significant does time become for it . . . There is a Mind so elevated that for It the whole of time is counted as naught, for so great is that Mind that for It the whole time span is as nothing whatever.

While God's timelessness is, for most Jews, an impenetrable mystery, the belief in God's eternity is a major feature of Jewish theology. Similarly, the belief in God's omnipotence has been a central feature of Judaism since biblical times.

In Genesis, Sarah expressed astonishment at the suggestion that she could bear a child at the age of ninety, and she was criticized: "The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say "Shall I indeed bear a child now that I am old?" Is anything too hard for the Lord?"' (Gen. 18:13-3).

The Jewish view is that there is nothing that God cannot do: what appears impossible is within God's power. In spite of the difficulties that are presented by proclaiming an omnipotent God and yet acknowledging the existence of evil in the world, Judaism rejects any limits to God's power.

Although God is all-powerful, the close relationship of God and humanity—and according to Judaism, especially in the close relationship of God and the Jewish people—the actions of humanity affect God. Jews throughout the ages have affirmed that God is not only omnipotent but also all-knowing. In the Hebrew Bible we read:

The Lord looks down from heaven,  
God sees all of humanity. . .  
God who fashions that hearts of them all,  
and observes all their deeds. (Ps. 33:13,15)

Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up;  
thou discernest my thoughts from afar.  
Thou searchest out my path and my lying down,  
and art acquainted with all my ways. (Ps. 139:2-3)

Following biblical teachings, rabbinic Judaism asserts that God's knowledge is not limited by space and time. Rather, nothing is hidden from God. However, the rabbis declared that God's omniscience does not deprive human beings of free will.

We read in the Talmud: "All is in the hands of Heaven, but the fear of Heaven." It is a crucial tenet of Jewish belief that while God knows past, present, and future, human beings have free will or freedom of choice in their own lives.

## **The God of Justice and Mercy**

Judaism teaches that God is a God of both justice and mercy. According to the Talmud:

God says, "All I do, I do in justice. If I sought to pass beyond justice but once, the world could not endure," as it says in Isaiah 26:4, "If I were to overstep justice by a single step, I should set all on fire, and the world would be burnt up." (*Tanhuma*, Mishpatim 41b)

They that are born are destined to die; and the dead to be brought to life again; and the living to be judged, to know, to make known, and to be made conscious that God is the Maker, the Creator, the Discerner, the Judge, the Witness, the Complainant; God it is that will, in future, judge, blessed be God. (R. Elazar ha-Kappar, *Aboth* 4:29)

Although God's ways and methods are often incomprehensible, ultimately they are absolutely just.

The rabbis constantly emphasize the mercy of God, stressing that God's compassion outweighs God's justice. Human beings are warned against presuming too much upon this compassion and love. Frequent use is made of Job 33:23-5 in rabbinic interpretations of God's mercy:

Even though there be nine hundred and ninety-nine accusers against a person, and only one who ascribes to that person merit, God, as it were, inclines [the scale] to merit. (*Pesikta Rabbati* 38b)

Also cited frequently is Psalm 5:4, "You are not a God that has pleasure in wickedness." This psalm is interpreted to mean that God has no pleasure in condemning any creature. On the contrary, God has pleasure in pronouncing creatures righteous and in forgiving them.

As a result, Judaism teaches that the divine attribute of mercy takes precedence over the attribute of justice. As Claude G. Montefiore, the British Jewish scholar, writes: "So far from the ordinary view being accurate that the Jewish God is a God of stern justice, the very opposite would be nearer the truth. The Rabbinic God is a God of tender compassion. Unrepentant and high-handed must be the sinner whom God finally and irretrievably condemns."

Professor David Blumenthal of Emory University has written: "[In Judaism, f]aithfulness and unmerited love are located in real contexts of history and human living—in peoplehood, in land, in Torah, in study, in ethics, in prayer."

## The God of Israel

Judaism teaches that the Jewish people entered into an eternal covenant with God at Mt. Sinai following the Exodus from Egypt. As a result of this covenant, God is frequently referred to as *elohay yisrael*, the God of Israel. This name represents an intimate, albeit complex relationship between divinity and a particular people in history.

Belief in a universal transcendent God who is also the God of Israel represents a singular tenet of Jewish belief. It is a concept filled with theological tension as well as spiritual comfort.

Indeed, following the Holocaust, some Jewish thinkers asked: “Where was the God of Israel when the people of Israel was suffering at Auschwitz?” It is a question that continues to be a major theme of current Jewish theology.