

GOD-NESS GRACIOUS

Note:

This lesson includes more texts than can be covered in a 90-minute session. We encourage you to explore the texts not covered in class on your own time.

TERMS RELATED TO BELIEF IN GOD

Agnosticism - (Greek - not knowing). A general term to indicate suspension of judgment regarding the existence of God. An agnostic does not know that God exists or that God does not exist.

Atheism - (Greek - no deity). A general term for the position that there is no God/deity. An atheist does not believe in God.

Deism - A system of belief that posits God's existence as the cause of all things and admits God's perfection but rejects Divine revelation and government, proclaiming the all-sufficiency of natural laws. A deist believes in God that set things into motion but is not involved.

Theism - The position that affirms the existence of a deity. A theist believes in (at least one) God who interacts with humans and the known universe via methods of divine intervention.

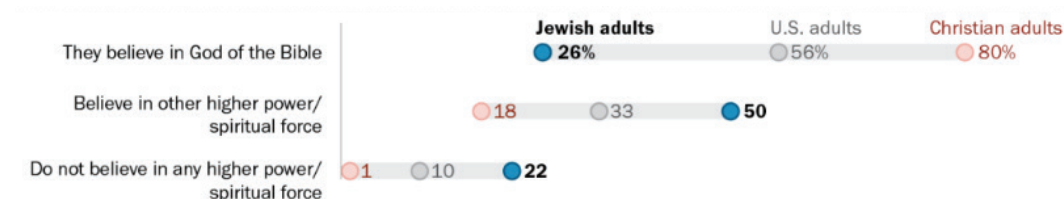
Pantheism - A doctrine that identifies God with the universe, or regards the universe as a manifestation of God. A pantheist considers God identical to the Universe or Nature.

(Based on Jewish Encyclopedia and Jewish Virtual Library)

PEW STUDY ON JEWS AND BELIEF IN GOD

I. COMPARING JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN BELIEF IN GOD IN U.S.

U.S. Jews less likely than Christians to believe in God



Note: Jewish adults include both Jews by religion and Jews of no religion.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. Jews, and Jan. 21-Feb. 3, 2020 (belief in God), and Aug. 3-16, 2020 (importance of religion and attendance), among U.S. adults overall. "Jewish Americans in 2020"

Available at pewresearch.org. Viewed April 2025.

II. JEWISH BELIEF IN GOD ACROSS THE DENOMINATIONS IN THE U.S.

Vast majority of Orthodox Jews say religion is very important to them, but few Reform Jews say the same

% of U.S. Jews who say ...

	All U.S. Jews	Jews by religion	Jews of no religion	Orthodox Jews	Conservative Jews	Reform Jews
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Religion is very important to them	21	28	2	86	33	14
Somewhat important	26	33	6	9	46	33
Not too/not at all important	53	38	91	4	20	53
They attend religious services ...						
Weekly	12	16	<1	73	14	4
Once or twice a month	8	12	<1	11	19	10
A few times a year	27	33	8	13	42	38
Seldom/never	52	38	91	3	25	48
They believe in God of the Bible	26	33	7	93	37	18
Believe in other higher power/spiritual force	50	51	48	6	50	59
Do not believe in any higher power/spiritual force	22	14	44	1	9	21

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults. "Jewish Americans in 2020"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Available at pewresearch.org. Viewed April 2025.

SUMMARY POINTS BASED ON PEW SURVEYS FROM 2013 AND 2020 (BELIEF IN GOD)

Based on 2013 and 2020

- 76% U.S. Jews believe in God or a universal spirit.
- 84% Jews by religion say they believe in God or a universal spirit.
- 55% Among Jews of no religion say they believe in God or a universal spirit.
- Most Jews see no conflict between being Jewish and not believing in God; two-thirds say that a person can be Jewish even if he or she does not believe in God.
- Belief in God is much more common among the general public than among Jews. Even among Jews by religion, belief in God is less common than among members of other major U.S. religious groups. And Jews of no religion are more skeptical of God's existence than is the religiously unaffiliated general public.
- 27% of Jewish adults do not identify with the Jewish religion, according to the [2020](#) Pew Research Center study. They identify as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular" religiously. That's up from 22% from the [2013](#) Pew study.
- Though most Jews express some doubt about God's existence, certainty about God is nearly universal among Orthodox Jews, 89% of whom say they are absolutely convinced of God's existence. Far fewer Jews from other denominational backgrounds share this level of conviction.



TEXT 1

OPTION 1 - ELIANA LIGHT, [SKYMAN](#)

Jewish educator, musician, and prayer leader dedicated to making Jewish liturgy and spirituality accessible and meaningful.

(The video is hyperlinked to the title above.)

Dear Skyman, up in the sky,
 Are You friends with all the birds flying by
 Or are You too high up to see them?
 Dear Skyman, looking on us below,
 5 Is there anything that You don't already know,
 Like where I will go, why, what and when?

My teachers tell me all of Your stories
 Of the miracles that You can do.
 10 Arks and floods and a bush that is burning,
 I can only assume it's all true.

They say I should love You,
 They say I should talk to You,
 15 And I try!
 I close my eyes
 And imagine a Dude in the sky.
 Dear Skyman, who created us all,
 Can You really lift me up when I fall
 20 Or are You too tall to reach down here?
 Dear Skyman, do You like when I pray?
 Can You listen to every word that I say
 From so far away, does it sound clear?
 My teachers tell me all of Your powers,
 25 How You give people things they ask for.
 Healing the sick and feeding the hungry,
 You could do all of this and do more.

They say I should love You,
 They say I should talk to You,
 30 And I try!
 I close my eyes
 And imagine a Dude in sky.

Now I know You're not really a man (per se)
 35 But the image still forms in my mind.
 I've tried to change it,
 I'm not sure that I can
 'Cause it's been this way for a long time.

40 I want to be near you,
 I want to be close to you,
 And I try!
 But when I close my eyes...
 I still picture a Dude in the sky.



OPTION 2 -
 ELIANA LIGHT, [EXCERPT FROM ELI TALKS-
 THE GOD GAP](#)

(The video is hyperlinked to the title above.)



TEXT 2 EXODUS (*SHEMOT*) 3:13-15

13 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, ‘By which name?’ what shall I say to them?” **14** And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh,” continuing, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you.’” **15** And God said further to Moses, “Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: GOD [YHVH], the 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.

שְׁמוֹת ג, יג-טו

יג וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי בָא אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם שְׁלַחְנִי אֲלֵיכֶם וְאָמְרוּ לִי מָה שְׁמוֹ מָה אֶמַּר אֲלֵהֶם. יד וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה אֲהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲהִיָּה שְׁלַחְנִי אֲלֵיכֶם. טו וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה כֹּה תֹאמַר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁלַחְנִי אֲלֵיכֶם זֶה שְׁמִי לְעֹלָם וְזֶה זְכוֹרִי לְדֹר דֹּר.



TEXT 3 EXODUS (*SHEMOT*) 20:1-6

1 God spoke all these words, saying:
2 I the ETERNAL am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage:
3 You shall have no other gods besides Me. **4** You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. **5** You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the ETERNAL your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, **6** but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

שמות כ, א-ו

א וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאֹמֶר. ב אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים. ג לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל פָּנָי. ד לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ. ה לֹא תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קָנָא פֶקֶד עוֹן אָבֹת עַל בְּנֵים עַל שְׁלִשִּׁים וְעַל רִבְעִים לְשָׁנָאִי. ו וַעֲשֵׂה חֶסֶד לְאֻלְפִים לְאֹהֲבֵי וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי.



TEXT 4

RABBI NACHMAN OF BRATSLAV, *LIKUTEI MOHARAN* 33:2

(1772–1810) Founder of the Breslov Chasidic movement; great grandson of the Baal Shem Tov; not writing his own works, the books containing his teachings and sayings were compiled and edited by his student Rabbi Natan Sternhartz (1780–1844).

One ought to know that “[God’s] glory fills the whole earth” (Isaiah 6:3), and there is no space empty of God, God filling all the worlds, and surrounding all the worlds.

רבי נחמן מברסלב, לקוטי מוהר"ן לג, ב

צריך לדעת שמלא כל הארץ כבודו ולית אתר פנוי מיניה ואיהו ממלא כל עולם וסובב כל עולם.



TEXT 5

DR. ERICH SELIGMANN FROMM, *SECULAR HUMANISM*

(1900–1980) German-American Jewish social psychologist, psychoanalyst, and humanistic philosopher.

Humanistic religion, on the contrary, is centered around man and his strength. Man must develop his power of reason in order to understand himself, his relationship to his fellow men and his position in the universe. He must recognize the truth, both

- with regard to his limitations and his potentialities. He must develop his power of love for others as well as for himself and experience solidarity of all living beings. He must have principles and norms to guide him in this aim. Religious experience in this kind of religion is the experience of oneness with the All, based on one's relatedness to the world as it is grasped with thought and with love. Man's aim in humanistic religion is to achieve the greatest strength...God is a symbol of man's own power which he tries to realize in his life, and is not a symbol of force and domination, having power over man. . . .

God is not a symbol of power over man but of man's own powers...

- ...in humanistic religion God is the image of man's higher self, a symbol of what man potentially is or ought to become.

Fromm, E. 1961. *Psychoanalysis and Religion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 37, 49.



TEXT 6

RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL, *GOD IN SEARCH OF MAN*

(1907–1972) A religious philosopher in the United States and Professor of Jewish Ethics and Mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

- If I had to make a statement about God, one that is fundamental in Judaism, it would be that God is in search of man. It is the fundamental statement about God in Judaism. It is the fundamental statement in the inner life of a human being in relation to God in the world. If I were to summarize all of human history as seen in the Bible, it would be a simple formula: God in search of man. It is a paradoxical formula, to be sure. It is not a Hellenistic formula. It is a biblical formula. It is a rabbinic formula. . . .

Heschel, A., ed. 1996. *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 158.



TEXT 7

RABBI DEBRA ORENSTEIN, *AT HOME WITH GOD*

Alumna of the first entering class at The Jewish Theological Seminary to include women. Acclaimed Scholar-in-residence and editor of the *Lifecycles* series.

The night before the Passover of my first spring in Los Angeles, I “hid” some stale crackers in several places around the apartment. As I reached for my ritual feather and spoon, I tried to meditate on the spiritual meaning of *hametz*: That there are things, perfectly allowable and appropriate in our lives at a certain point, which, at another time, are no longer fitting. They need to be cleaned out and perhaps ritually or metaphorically burned. I contemplated what I needed to let go—including certain attachments to my parents’ home—and imagined this release as a form of Passover liberation.

10 But these enlightened thoughts did not cure my homesickness nor my sense that I was, in the current ritual, quite ridiculous. How pathetic to hide leaven and then pretend to find it yourself! I was lonely.

15 Suddenly, some strange, disconcerting words came into my head: “This must be how God feels.” The experience of hiding bread and then going through the ironic exercise of “discovering” it is a metaphor for God’s position in the universe. God sows away light for the righteous, only to recover it and bestow it as a gift (Psalms 97:11; Ex. *Rabbah* 35:1); God disseminates broken vessels through the process of creation, that they and the world might be repaired. God plants the seeds of redemption, knowing the end already at the beginning and yet playing the game. In a profound and mysterious twist, God hides God, and relies on humanity to do the looking. . . .

25 . . . There is only a kind of loving game—like the game of “here I am” one plays with a baby, first hiding behind one’s hands, then popping out. Or perhaps the game is hide-and-seek, after all . . .

Sometimes God needs to be found—and sometimes we do, too. Sometimes God turns the corner to find only the divine plan and Self—no partner at all . . . And all through the hiding and the seeking, God dwells on high and in our hearts, and we live in our ancestral and our private homes. And God and home are wherever we let them in.

Orenstein, D. and J. R. Litman, eds. 1997. *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Biblical Themes in Contemporary Life*, volume 2. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 40–43. With permission of Turner Publishing Company, LLC.



TEXT 8

DR. REBECCA GOLDSTEIN, *WHY IS A JEWISH ATHEIST DIFFERENT FROM ALL OTHER ATHEISTS?* (2024)

(b. 1950) Distinguished American philosopher, novelist, and public intellectual.

I don't think I have to name the tune humming beneath my title. Even if you are, like me, a Jewish atheist, you've probably attended a seder recently.

That the ghost of the seder's Four Questions haunts my title encapsulates the paradox I'd like to explore. It's the paradox embodied in those I'd call – and, more important, in those who would call themselves – Jewish atheists. The paradox begins with giving both words equal importance, making it more an exclusive term than an inclusive one: Not all non-believing Jews qualify as Jewish atheists in my sense.

To narrow the class down even further, here are Four Questions, sung accordingly:

While other atheists don't identify themselves with their birth religion, why does a Jewish atheist continue to actively identify as Jewish?

While other atheists don't necessarily highlight ethics, why are ethics of such central concern to a Jewish atheist?

While other atheists don't necessarily emphasize the primacy of reason in human endeavor, why does a Jewish atheist see reason as redemptive?

20

While other atheists may be indifferent to the flourishing of those who share their birth religion, why does the well-being of Jews remain of paramount concern to the Jewish atheist?

- 25 These questions indicate a type of atheist with a pronounced ethical sensibility, committed to a reasoned moral universalism that would eliminate all boundaries between peoples, and yet who is acutely responsive to the particularism that goes by the name of "Jewish identity." Jewishness matters to such atheists, in a way not logically entailed by – perhaps not even entirely reconcilable with – robust
- 30 universalism, despite their abiding faith in the redemptive value of reason. The tension of quasi-paradox lives within the Jewish atheist, and tensions are known to inspire creative resolutions . . .

. . .

35

And so it is that, without having one thought too many, we Jewish atheists religiously (so to speak) attend our yearly seders, perhaps making cynical jokes in the spirit of Heine, maybe objecting in the spirit of Spinoza to the narrative of miracles that a supernatural God supposedly performed on behalf of a chosen people. But we

40 are there to celebrate an almost fanatical love of justice and desire for personal independence. We are there to sing, in the spirit of love and eternal hopefulness, "Next year in Jerusalem."

Available at sapirjournals.org. Viewed March 2025.



TEXT 9

RABBI AMY EILBERG, *WHERE IS GOD FOR YOU?* A JEWISH FEMINIST FAITH

(b. 1954) The first woman ordained as a Conservative rabbi by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, she serves as the director of Kol Haneshamah, the Jewish Hospice Program of Ruach Ami, the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center.

. . . We do not think about God as an immediate, caring, comforting presence to be called on at moments of personal need. We do not think of God as a resource at moments of deep feeling. Most of us do not think about God at all. Until, that is, we are really in trouble, really in need, when we are hurting too much to play by the old
5 rules. Then we often find ourselves looking for something more. . . .

[When], as an adult, I experienced private pain and struggle, the spirituality I had known had failed me. I needed something that would be available to me between rallies, between legislative campaigns. For all the richness of Jewish ritual, I still
10 lacked a way to relate to God between Jewish holidays, between Sunday and Friday, when there was no major life passage at hand, when it wasn't time to daven *Minhah* (pray the daily afternoon service) nor *Ma'ariv* (daily evening service). I needed a spiritual discipline that could speak to the private places of pain and joy within me. I needed a God who could envelop me when I suffered shame or grief or loneliness, a
15 God who could celebrate with me when life was full of beauty and blessing. . . .

. . . I learned that I did *not* believe in [the] Sunday school version of God, the God who is the answer to the question, "Is there Someone sitting up there in heaven?" God was becoming for me an answer to a different set of questions: What is it that
20 makes life worth living? What is it that allows people to find meaning in the midst of unspeakable suffering, to find strength in times of pain and loss? How do I cultivate a sense that life is good, that I am cared for, that I am not alone, even in difficult times? What can I do to nourish sanctity in my life?

Orenstein, D. and J. R. Litman, eds. 1997. *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Biblical Themes in Contemporary Life*, volume 2. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 104–110. With permission of Turner Publishing Company, LLC.



TEXT 10

RABBI DR. MORDECAI M. KAPLAN, *THE GOD OF OUR SALVATION*

(1881–1983) American rabbi and founder of the Reconstructionist movement.

January 15, 1931 - After all the years of thinking on the problem of religion, I am still at a loss how to connect the conclusions I hold with the actual situation in which we find ourselves. I know very well what I mean by God. God to me is the process that makes for creativity, integration, love and justice. The function of prayer is

5 to render us conscious of that process. I can react with a sense of holiness and momentousness to existence because it is continually being worked upon by this divine process. I am not troubled in the least by the fact that God is not an identifiable being; for that matter neither is my Ego an identifiable being. Nor am I troubled by the fact that God is not perfect. He [sic] would have to be static to be

10 perfect. Nothing dynamic can be perfect since to be dynamic implies to be in the state of becoming.

But how shall I relate all these ideas to the problem of Jewish religion?

Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. 2000. "Mordecai Kaplan's Diary and the Search for Meaning." *Reconstructionism Today* 7(3).

. . . as far as Jewish religion, with its teachings and rituals, is concerned, it matters very little how we conceive of God, as long as we so believe in God that belief in Him makes a tremendous difference in our lives.

Kaplan, M. 1956. *Questions Jews Ask*. New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 87.



TEXT 11
RABBI DAVID AARON, VIDEO:
[HOW CAN WE DESCRIBE GOD?](#)

Founder and Dean of Isralight, an international organization dedicated to inspiring a renaissance in Jewish life.

(The video is hyperlinked to the title above.)



TEXT 12
RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL MORGENSZTERN OF
KOTZK, *GOD'S DWELLING*

(1787–1859) Chasidic rabbi and leader in Poland, better known as the Kotzker Rebbe.

“Where is the dwelling of God?”

This was the question with which the rabbi of Kotzk surprised a number of learned men who happened to be visting him.

5

They laughed at him: “What a thing to ask! Is not the whole world full of his glory!”
 Then he answered his own question:

“God dwells wherever man lets him in.”

Buber, M. 1948. *Tales of the Hasidim – The Later Masters*. New York: Schocken, 277.

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KEY TERMS

Chasidut. [חסידות]

1. [Piety] An abstract noun form of the Hebrew word *chesed* indicating the collection of traits and attitudes associated with righteous, devout living.
2. A Jewish mystical, ascetic movement in the German Rhineland during the 12th and 13th centuries.
3. A mystical-spiritual movement that developed in southern Poland at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries. The movement emphasized the importance of joy and *devekut* (דְּבִיקוּת, lit. “cleaving”) to God in Jewish life. Each particular group of Chasidim gather around a teacher or charismatic leader, known as a rebbe or *tzaddik*. The movement was faced with opposition in its first century of existence, and some tensions still remain between adherents of the movement and their opponents (*mitnagdim*).

Humanistic Judaism. A human-centered philosophy that combines the celebration of Jewish culture and identity with an adherence to humanistic values and ideas. Established by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine (1928–2007) in 1963 in Detroit, Michigan, it offers a non-theistic alternative in contemporary Jewish life.

KEY NAMES

Aaron, Rabbi David. Educator, spiritual leader, and author, renowned for his deep exploration of Jewish mysticism and his commitment to making Torah teachings accessible. In 1986, he founded Isralight, an organization dedicated to inspiring a worldwide Jewish renaissance through innovative educational solutions that empower Jews to experience the relevance, wisdom, and joy of Jewish living.

Eilberg, Rabbi Amy. (b. 1954) First woman ordained as a Conservative rabbi by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. She serves as the director of the Pardes Rodef Shalom Communities Program, helping synagogues and Jewish organizations place the pursuit of peace in interpersonal relationships at the center of their communal mission. She also serves as a spiritual director and interfaith activist in the San Francisco Bay area.

Fromm, Erich Seligman. (1900–1980) A German-American Jewish social psychologist, psychoanalyst, humanistic philosopher, and democratic socialist, he was associated with what became known as the Frankfurt School of critical theory. He studied Talmud as a young man while working toward his doctorate in sociology, but turned away from Orthodox Judaism in 1926 toward secular interpretations of scriptural ideals.

Goldstein, Rebecca Newberger. (b. 1950) Distinguished American philosopher, novelist, and public intellectual. Throughout her academic career, she has taught philosophy at institutions including Barnard College, Columbia University, Rutgers University, Trinity College, Harvard University, and New York University. Her writings include “Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity” (2006). In 1996, she received a MacArthur Fellowship, often referred to as the “Genius Grant.” She was awarded the National Humanities Medal in 2014 by President Barack Obama. Additionally, she was named Humanist of the Year in 2011 by the American Humanist Association.

Heschel, Abraham Joshua. (1907–1972). A religious philosopher. Served as professor of Jewish ethics and mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Author of numerous books on philosophy, Bible, *kabbalah*, and Chasidism including *The Prophets*, *A Passion for Truth*, *The Earth Is the Lord’s*, *Man’s Quest for God*, *The Sabbath*, and *God in Search of Man*.

Kaplan, Mordecai M. (1881–1983) Essayist and Jewish educator, ideologue of the Reconstructionist Judaism movement. In 1889, he immigrated with his mother and sisters to the United States to join his father in New York. From 1893 to 1902 he studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Kaplan began his career as an Orthodox rabbi. From 1934 until 1970 Kaplan wrote a series of books in which he expressed his Reconstructionist ideology, centered on the “concept of Judaism as a civilization.” He was a prolific writer, keeping a journal throughout most of his life.

Light, Eliana. Jewish educator, musician, and prayer leader dedicated to making Jewish liturgy and spirituality accessible and meaningful. Raised in a nurturing Jewish home in Memphis, Tennessee, by her parents—a rabbi and a Jewish educator—she developed a deep love for Jewish ritual, culture, and sacred music. She is the founder and head “T’fillahsopher” of The Light Lab, a center dedicated to prayer education and transformative t’fillah experiences. Additionally, she co-hosts The Light Lab Podcast, exploring various facets of Jewish prayer and spirituality.

Maimonides. (1135–1204) Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, also known as Moses Maimonides, was born in Spain, but he lived most of his life in Egypt, where he served as a physician and leader of the Jewish community. He is one of the pre-eminent Jewish philosophers and codifiers of all time. His *Mishneh Torah* became one of the central works of halakhic literature and his *Guide for the Perplexed* (*Moreh Nevukhim*) is one of the most important Jewish philosophical treatises ever written.

Morgensztern, Menachem Mendel (Kotzker Rebbe). (1787–1859) A Chasidic rabbi and leader, he was born to a non-Chasidic family in Goraj near Lublin, Poland, and became attracted to Chasidim in his youth. He was known for having acquired impressive talmudic and kabbalistic knowledge at a young age. He is known for his incisive and down-to-earth philosophies and sharp-witted sayings. From 1839 until the end of his life twenty years later, he lived in seclusion.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. (1772 –1810) The founder of the Breslov Chasidic movement, he was a great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov. He breathed new life into the Chasidic movement by combining classic teachings with insightful psychological interpretations. He attracted thousands of followers during his lifetime and his influence continues until today.

Orenstein, Rabbi Debra. Seventh-generation rabbi and a member of the first class at The Jewish Theological Seminary to ordain women. She has been serving as the spiritual leader of Congregation B’nai Israel in Emerson, New Jersey, since 2010. Previously, she taught at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles for twenty years, instructing in various programs including rabbinical and continuing education. She has contributed to six books, notably the award-winning “Lifecycles” series, which explores Jewish women’s experiences with life passages and personal milestones. Recognized by *The Jewish Forward* as “One of America’s Most Inspiring Rabbis,” she is a sought-after speaker and scholar-in-residence, bringing the relevance of Jewish tradition to audiences across North America.

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APPENDIX

The Appendix of the lesson presents two texts that address the debate among Jewish medieval philosophers on how to understand the physical descriptions of God in the Torah.



TEXT A MAIMONIDES (RAMBAM), *MISHNEH TORAH*, *FOUNDATIONS OF TORAH 1:8–9*

(1135–1204) (Moshe ben Maimon) Philosopher, codifier, communal leader, and doctor in Spain and Egypt.

8. Indeed, it is clearly indicated in the Torah and in the Prophets that God has no body, as it says, “that the Lord, (your God) is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (Deuteronomy 4:39), and a corporeal being cannot be in two places simultaneously. It also says, “For you did not see any physical substance”
5 (Deuteronomy 4:15) and “To whom would you liken Me, for Me to be their equal?” (Isaiah 40:25)—had God been corporeal, God would be like other corporeal entities.

9. If that is so, what does it mean when it is written in the Torah, “beneath [God’s] feet” (Exodus 24:10), “written with the finger of God” (Exodus 31:18), “the hand
10 of God” (Exodus 9:3), “the eyes of God” (Deuteronomy 11:12), “the ears of God” (Numbers 11:18), and more like expressions? All [these expressions] are in keeping with what people – that are familiar with corporeal entities – know, and [so], the Torah used terminology [familiar] to people. [In reality, though,] all of these are [just] euphemisms . . . for [God] has no image or form, and everything [described by
15 the verse are things seen only] in prophetic visions. The truth, however, is that the human mind is incapable of understanding, nor can it grasp or comprehend [God]. This is as the verse says, “Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?” (Job 11:7).

רב מִשְׁנֵה בֶּן מִימּוֹן (רמב"ם), מִשְׁנֵה תוֹרָה, הִלְכוֹת יְסוּדֵי הַתּוֹרָה א, ח-ט
 ח. הָרִי מִפְּרֹשׁ בַּתּוֹרָה וּבִנְיָאִים שְׂאִין תְּקַדּוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא גּוֹף וּגּוּיָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר כִּי ה' (אֱלֹהֵיכֶם) הוּא
 אֱלֹהִים בְּשִׁמְיָם מִמַּעַל וְעַל הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְהַגּוֹף לֹא יִהְיֶה בְּשֵׁנֵי מְקוֹמוֹת וְנֶאֱמַר כִּי לֹא רָאִיתֶם כָּל תְּמוּנָה
 וְנֶאֱמַר וְאֵל מִי תִדְמִינִי וְאִשּׁוּה וְאֵלֹהֵי הָיָה גּוֹף הָיָה דּוֹמָה לְשָׂאֵר גּוֹפִים.
 ט. אִם כֵּן מֵהוּ זֶה שֶׁכְּתוּב בַּתּוֹרָה וְתַחַת רַגְלָיו כְּתוּבִים בְּאֶצְבָּעֵי אֱלֹהִים יָד ה' עֵינֵי ה' אָזְנֵי ה' וְכִיּוֹצֵא
 בְּדִבְרֵים הָאֵלֹהִים הַכֹּל לִפִּי דַעְתּוֹ שֶׁל בְּנֵי אָדָם הוּא שְׂאִינָן מִכִּירִין אֶלָּא הַגּוֹפּוֹת וְדִבְרֵה תוֹרָה כְּלִשׁוֹן בְּנֵי
 אָדָם וְהַכֹּל כְּנוּיִם הֵן . . . שְׂאִין לוֹ דְמוּת וְצוּרָה אֶלָּא הַכֹּל בְּמִרְאֵה הַנְּבוּאָה וּבְמַחְזָה וְאַמִּתּוּת הַדְּבָר אֵין
 דַּעְתּוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם מִבֵּין וְלֹא יְכוּלָה לְהַשְׁיִגּוֹ וּלְתַקְרֹר וְזֶה שֶׁאֵמַר הַכְּתוּב הַחֲקֹר אֱלֹהִים תִּמְצָא אִם עַד תִּמְלִית
 שְׂדֵי תִמְצָא.



TEXT B

RA'AVAD, MISHNEH TORAH, LAWS OF REPENTANCE 3:7

(1125–1198) Rabbi Abraham ben David from Provence, mystic, commentator on Talmud and halacha including the Mishne Torah of Maimonides.

“One who admits there is only one master [of the universe], but that [this master] has a body and physical substance.” Says Avraham: Why would [Rambam] call a [person who believes] this a heretic? [After all,] many are there that are greater and better than he that held this view [of God] based on what they saw in the biblical verses, and even more, based on what they saw in the rabbinic *aggadot* that

5 confuse the minds.

רב אַבְרָהָם בֶּן דָּוִד (רַאב"ד), מִשְׁנֵה תוֹרָה, הִלְכוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה ג, ז
 וְהָאֵמַר שֶׁיֵּשׁ שֵׁם רַבּוֹן אֶחָד אֶלָּא שֶׁהוּא גּוֹף וּבִעַל תְּמוּנָה. אָמַר אַבְרָהָם: וְלָמָּה קָרָא לָזֶה מִין וְכִמָּה
 גְּדוּלִים וְטוֹבִים מִמֶּנּוּ הָלָכוּ בְּזוֹ הַמַּחֲשָׁבָה לִפִּי מָה שֶׁרָאוּ בְּמִקְרָאוֹת וְיוֹתֵר מִמָּה שֶׁרָאוּ בְּדִבְרֵי הָאֲגָדוֹת
 הַמְשַׁבְּשׁוֹת אֶת הַדַּעוֹת.