



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

Walking with God

Edited By
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דרכיה דרכי נעם

In Memory of Louise Held

The Held Foundation

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DEAN AND VICE PRESIDENT

IN THE GLORY DAYS OF THE MIDDLE AGES, TWO TITANS OF JEWISH THOUGHT, Rabbi Moses Maimonides (the Rambam) and Rabbi Moses Nachmanides (the Ramban) sparred. Their argument: was the obligation to believe in God one of the 613 commandments of the Torah, or was it the ground on which all the 613 commandments stood? Neither disputed that Jewish life flows from the fountain of faith, that connecting to God is a life-long journey for the seeking Jew and a pillar of Jewish life and religion.

Not only the Middle Ages, but the modern age affirms that same conviction. Conservative Judaism, in *Emet Ve-Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism*, affirms, “We believe in God. Indeed, Judaism cannot be detached from belief in, or beliefs about God. ... God is the principal figure in the story of the Jews and Judaism.” In the brochure, *Conservative Judaism: Covenant and Commitment*, the Rabbinical Assembly affirms, “God and the Jewish People share a bond of love and sacred responsibility, which expresses itself in our biblical *brit* (covenant).”

It is to aid the contemporary Jew in the duty and privilege of exploring that relationship, of enlisting the rich resources of Judaism’s great sages through the ages, that the **Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University**, in partnership with the **United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism** and the **Rabbinical Assembly**, has compiled and published this adult education course focused on Jewish apprehensions of God. 12 essays and worksheets will open a wide range of insights and conceptualizations of the One who is beyond all words, beyond all conceptualizations, yet – paradoxically – who is as close as the human heart and who permeates all space and time. Typical of Conservative Judaism, these essays integrate traditional and academic insights and approaches, celebrate the pluralism of Jewish diversity throughout history, and insist that open-minded and critical study can energize a faith attained without blinders.

It remains our happy duty to thank the **Held Family Foundation**, and especially **Mr. Harold Held**, dear friend to the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies and the American Jewish University, and a philanthropic visionary, for making the production and dissemination of this remarkable tool possible. I’d also like to thank **Dr. Robert Wexler**, President of the American Jewish University for his steady support and encouragement of this project from its inception, and **Rabbi Jerome Epstein** and the **United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism**, and **Rabbi Joel Meyers** and the **Rabbinical Assembly**, for their partnership in producing the project. Thanks to Rami Wernik, Acting Dean of the Fingerhut School of Education, for his expertise as a pedagogue. And it is also a personal pleasure to thank my student and colleague, **Ms. Deborah Silver**, whose professionalism, insight, patience and diligence have produced a work of real excellence.

May the Holy Blessing One enliven your study, awaken your heart, and open your soul to the wonders of the Divine, and may the essays and worksheets which follow help you to walk the time honored path of Torah and mitzvot in a spirit of wonder, pluralism, openness, intellectual honesty, and strengthened faith.

B’virkat Shalom,

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

Dean, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

Vice President, American Jewish University

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

INTRODUCTION

This book is the first in the Ziegler Adult Learning series. Our aim is to provide high quality, stimulating and challenging materials to enable adults to expand their understanding of the basic concepts and tenets of Conservative Judaism – and to expose them to the thinkers, texts and ideas which underpin our tradition. The audience we have in mind is the questioning adult congregant who might not be entirely familiar with Jewish sources.

The book will enable you to teach a series of twelve adult education classes on the subject of God. It contains twelve self-contained units, which are arranged chronologically. Eleven of these comprise:

- an essay
- a set of four texts, with questions
- a fifth text for further/creative study
- session suggestions

The final unit has no essay: instead, it provides an opportunity for participants to reflect upon and consolidate their learning.

RESOURCES

For each session you will need:

- the essays (for session 1, essays 1 and 2; for the rest, the essay for the subsequent session to hand out at the end)
- copies of the texts

It will also be useful to have copies of the Tanakh, in Hebrew and in English.

For the first session, you might also wish to provide every participant with a notebook. This will serve as a journal, in which the participant's own thoughts and insights can be recorded. If your budget will not accommodate this, it is nevertheless strongly recommended that participants be encouraged to bring their own resources so that they can journal, and/or for you to bring spare paper to every session. Busy congregants are unlikely to be able to keep these materials in their minds from session to session, and a journal will provide them with tangible evidence of their learning, as well as something to refer to after the course is over. You might also wish to provide a ring binder, or a folder of some kind, in which participants can keep the essays and texts.

SUGGESTED SESSION FORMAT

Below is a basic format, with timings, for a two-hour session. Please feel free to amend it as it suits you – you might wish to allow more time for chavruta and less for group work, for example.

INTRODUCTION (5 MINS)

Orientation – recap and consolidate what happened in the last session. Elicit the main points of the essay for today/issues/questions/problems the essay raises (we strongly recommend eliciting rather than 'teaching' – easier on you, and it involves the participants more. It will also be quicker and allow more time for chavruta.)

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

CHAVRUTA (30 MINS)

Study of texts in chavruta

GROUP WORK (35 MINS)

- Presentation from the chavruta groups
- Consolidation of what has been learned from the texts

BREAK (10 MINS)

- (If you use a text for part 2 of the session, you can hand it out here)

GROUP STUDY (40 MINS)

- Various options are provided: see individual session suggestions

CLOSEDOWN/JOURNAL (10 MINS)

- What did we learn?
- How does what we learned today sit in the context of previous sessions?
- Journal entries
- Hand out the essay for next time.

A FEW POINTS TO NOTE:

- We recognize you are busy! The session notes have been designed to enable you to prepare your teaching quickly and easily, so you might want to read them even before you begin to prepare the essay and texts. Basically, if you read the essay & have some answers to the questions on the chavruta texts you will be ready to run the session.
- Four chavruta texts are provided per session, with questions to help guide the study. The idea is that you split your participants into four chavruta groups. Initially, give each group one of the texts. When the time comes to report back, give every group all of the texts so that they can study them as their colleagues report on them, and take them home. This technique enables a lot of learning to be covered in a comparatively short time, and has the added benefit of empowering participants to teach each other. Then again, the sessions are packed and the material is rich, so you might want to be selective.
- You may wish to use only two, or only one, of the texts for chavruta. The session has been designed to work whatever you decide. We only have one plea – please let the participants interact with the actual texts. Even when they are complex – and some of them are – there is a magic in people studying together which invariably means that precious insights arise and are shared. If you wish to change the questions at the bottom of every text to help focus the discussion, please feel free – they are only suggestions.
- It is entirely up to you what you do with the second part of the session. You can use the fifth text, or come up with something of your own – we give some ideas in the session outlines. We have sometimes made the fifth text one with which the participants might already be familiar so they can look at it with new eyes.
- Finally, please do not feel limited by the texts we have provided. There is a huge amount of material outside this book which could be used, and which, for reasons which include copyright and space limitations, we have not been able to include. Popular song lyrics, for example, are a rich resource.

EPILOGUE: GOD ON THE FRONTIER OF JEWISH THOUGHT

RABBI ALANA SUSKIN

This essay is a thinkpiece. It will stimulate discussion of various contemporary issues.

Walking with God: has such a thing ever seemed more difficult, any task more distant? In our communities, who do you know that feels comfortable talking about God, let alone admitting to having a relationship? And yet biologists tell us that, in fact, we are built to experience God. The geography of our brains is hardwired for transcendence.¹ So how is it that this experience has become so difficult to achieve?

On the one hand, we might look wistfully back and say, “Our ancestors [pick an era] did it much better than we do. We have to do things just the way they did.” But nostalgia is a false God; Judaism tells us explicitly not to look backwards in that way. We read:

“And you shall come to the priests the Levites, and to the judge who shall be in those days, and inquire; and they shall declare to you the sentence of judgment. And you shall do according to the sentence, which they of that place which the Lord shall choose shall declare to you; and you shall take care to do according to all that they inform you. According to the sentence of the Torah which they shall teach you, and according to the judgment which they shall tell you, you shall do; you shall not decline from the sentence which they shall declare to you, to the right hand, nor to the left.”²

Rashi comments:

“TO THE JUDGE WHO SHALL BE IN THOSE DAYS: even if he is not like the rest of the judges which came before him, you must listen to him...you have no judge except the one who passes judgment in your days.”

In fact, contrary to the nostalgia currently epitomized by dancing Hassidim in black coats, the great commentator Maimonides plainly regards some of our past practices as less than ideal. In “The Guide for the Perplexed” he discusses why the Torah should command sacrifices. Surely sacrifice is a barbaric custom? He continues:

“It is impossible to go from one extreme to the other...it is therefore according to the nature of man impossible for him suddenly to discontinue everything to which he has been accustomed. Now God sent Moses to make [the Israelites] a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6) by means of the knowledge of God...But the custom which was in those days general among all men... consisted in sacrificing animals in those temples which contained certain images, to bow down to those images, and to bum incense before them...”

It was in accordance with the wisdom and plan of God, as displayed in the whole Creation, that He did not command us to give up and to discontinue all these manners of service; for to obey such a commandment it would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that to which he is used... By this Divine plan it was effected that the traces of idolatry were blotted out, and the truly great principle of our faith, the Existence and Unity of God, was firmly established.”

We see from this that the great Maimonides himself clearly holds the view that the Temple service was given to us not as something to which we should yearn to return, but as a way to wean us off from practices of the past. God’s plan must then have always been to remove us from Temple worship. It appears, then, that “Before” is not always better, and indeed is sometimes worse.³

¹ http://www.beliefnet.com/story/154/story_15451_1.html

² Deuteronomy 17:9-11.

³ Maimonides, **Guide for the Perplexed** Book III, Chapter 32. Translated by M. Friedlander, 1904, Dover Publications, 1956 edition.

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Another tack we can take is to see the challenge of incorporating God with our new ideas about society both as a challenge and as a sign of progress. Our expanded interaction with non-Jews is the flip side of expanded opportunities for Jews; the difficulty we have with authority is the result of our greater freedoms; the struggle to include historically marginalized groups, whether women, or gay men or lesbians, or those with special needs, is because we are able to judge ourselves not yet up to par, and to ask what is it that God expects of us.

Many Jews operate in a milieu in which we have learned to feel silly talking about God. One can feel foolish trying to speak about an immanent God, a God who dwells with us, a personal God. Perhaps this is why, when we can stand to talk about God at all, some of us have gravitated towards the transcendent God, a God above us, disconnected from us, Who looks only at the big picture, a power of nature. This transcendent God is one which emphasizes the din, or judgment aspects of God: separateness, binary opposites, judging of ourselves and of others.

Judgment is not a bad thing. It leads to justice, and pursuit of the right and the good, but without the balance of hesed - love, connectedness - it also creates a world of black and white, sorely lacking in shades of gray. We are really only just beginning to struggle with inclusiveness: women, those with special needs, gays and lesbians, the intermarried. If we approach these challenges with a judgment-driven attitude, we say to ourselves: we must deal with these issues, because it is the right thing to do. From this perspective, we end up saying, “we need to deal with ‘them.’”

But who is “them?” Jews married to non-Jews, Jewish women, Jewish gay men and Jewish lesbians, Jews in wheelchairs, Jews who are blind, or deaf or mentally challenged? Rather, there is no “them,” there is “us.” Immanence reminds us to say “we”. Our choice of language changes our approach, and as a direct effect upon how well we might be able to succeed at the task of inclusion.

Others of us, though, may be mired in immanence. If everything is God, how can we possibly sort out crystals and dream catchers, bits and pieces of other peoples’ traditions, from a disciplined approach to God that could actually bring us closer in relationship? Perhaps the main problem if we overindulge in immanence is the difficulty in maintaining boundaries. Hesed without boundaries causes its own problems.

We need boundaries: they tell us who we are, strip away our illusions about ourselves, offer us a true mirror in the eyes of those on the other side. We must instill boundaries in ourselves, and respect them in others. They are the method by which we develop perspective. If one looks at the world, one must look from someplace, preferably not all from the same place. We don’t want to have the same outlook on everything. A world in which all individuals have the same ideas, the same views, is the vision of the tower of Babel that the rabbis abhorred. Commenting on the phrase “And the whole earth was of one language and one speech”, the Rabbis in Midrash Rabba make it clear the “one language” was the result of suppressing any dissenting views.

The message of this midrash, then, is that when all speak with the same voice, they silence those who speak differently. This is an affront to God. This is the unity of fascism, censorship, dictatorship, control of others.

The struggle for God is to find the balance in which din and hesed are in harmony, in which we have both kinds of relationships to God; both love and awe, both intimacy and respect.

The challenges we face can be roughly collapsed into three general areas:

- Inclusion
- Connection/Boundaries
- Authority/Autonomy

Each of these operates on two levels. Each asks us to examine both our relationship to God, and our relationship to one another as Jews.

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INCLUSION: HICAL'LUT

The role of women has changed dramatically over the last 50 years. From the most liberal to the most conservative of denominations, the changes in women's status are not only broad and deep, but, sometimes despite the best efforts of some, ineradicable. Is there a precedent in our tradition for such a change in status, and what do these new roles teach us about our relationship to God?

An excellent resource for tracking the rabbinic change in the status of women is Rabbi Judith Hauptman's *Re-reading the Rabbis*.⁴ She argues, in essence, that the rabbis over time attempted to move our tradition towards one which provided a greater role for women and which attempted to ameliorate the seemingly lesser status attached to them in the Torah.

As far back as the Torah itself, there is precedent for some sort of change in status for women. In Numbers 27:1-11, the daughters of Zelophehad petition Moses for a share in the inheritance of their dead father, who left no sons. Moses consults with God and is told, "The daughters of Zelophehad are right", and it becomes law that if a man dies without sons, his inheritance should pass first to his daughters and only then to other male members of his family.

The Midrash comments:

"AND THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD DREW NEAR. When the daughters of Zelophehad learned that the land would be divided among the tribes to the males but not to the females, all of them gathered together to consult with each other. They said: God's mercy is not like the mercy of human beings. Human beings have mercy upon the male more than upon the female, but God is not thus; rather, God's mercy is upon both males and females, as the Torah says, '[God] gives mercy to all flesh.'" ⁵

So we can argue that there are at least the initial stirrings of a precedent within Judaism for at least some minor changes in the role of women, but what precisely is our motivation for implementing the changes? What underlies the desire for the change in status? Who cares if men get to go to synagogue and pray three times a day? Who cares if they're obligated and women are not? One sometimes hears this very attitude voiced by women who live what they consider to be a more traditional lifestyle: "I'm busy. Who needs it?"

Of course, we acknowledge that there are many ways to be close to God, and that a more secluded role for women is one such way. But public prayer is at the heart of Judaism. In the sources, it is consistently the community which is the basic unit, not the individual, and not the family. If we are serious about our relationship to God, then we need to think carefully about what it means to pray publicly. When we include women in public prayer, we are insisting that in this broken, disconnected, modern world, our connection to God as a nation, as a community, is still important. As we sing joyfully on the High Holidays, *ki anu amecha, v'atah eloheinu*: surely we are your people, and you are our God. The second thing that we can learn from the shift of our perspective regarding those who are marginalized, is that God, too, wants a partner. In Hosea we read that Israel has abandoned God, but God loves Israel so greatly, that God seduces Israel to return, and then on that day Israel will no longer call God "*baali*" – my master, but "*ishi*" – my husband.

If the text of Tanach clearly says that in the era in which Israel truly accepts God in love, we will no longer call God master, but "my man" – quite literally we are saying that in the era of God's rule, we will no longer refer to God in terms of ownership. Israel is the beloved wife, and in our acceptance of our beloved, the beloved ceases to be master, and becomes an equal partner – the "zug" of "isha" – that is the partner of woman, and not the master. Hosea is implying quite

⁴ Judith Hauptman, *Re-Reading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice*, Westview Press, Colorado, 1998

⁵ *Sifre on Numbers 27:1*, paragraph 133 of the Horowitz edition.

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strongly that the messianic ideal is that one not be over another – not even God! I can think of few more radical texts than this. The strong implication is that there is a value in an egalitarian affection. Not only that, but it would also appear that the flattening of hierarchy is a desirable goal.

Judaism has had a tendency since rabbinic times to see a certain group of people as “us” and anyone who doesn’t fit neatly into that category as Jews, yes, but as Jews who are problematic, as “others” who need to be dealt with in some way, rather than as part of “us” with a voice in the proceedings. Yet there is a kabbalistic notion what we do as Jews directly affects God. The *Sefer Ha-Bahir* notes that there are two directions of interaction: that the flow from God influences us as we are open to it, but also that there is an upward sequence of sefirot which emanate from humans through which we influence the sefirot through an “awakening from below.”

If we are unsuccessful at including all Jews in our community, there are pieces missing in our relationship to God. As long as there is a “them” and an “us” within the boundaries of Judaism, we are closing ourselves off from being the full community in relation to God. And just as we are then breaking our own community into pieces, we are also breaking God into pieces. Not only women, but gays, lesbians, those with special needs: all of these are people are “us.”

BOUNDARIES: GVULIN

Another matter which presses upon us is the question of how to deal with the growing numbers of intermarried Jews. Jewish law has never been wishy-washy on this topic⁶. We all know that as far as halakhah is concerned, and for good reasons, it’s simply not permitted⁷. But that’s a fairly bland answer to a more complex problem. The fact is, a significant number of us are marrying non-Jews, and we need to know what to do after the halakhic issues have been addressed. (How) do we welcome the Jewish partner; (how) do we welcome the non-Jewish partner?

Salman Rushdie, in his 2002 essay “Step Across This Line” writes as follows:

“At the frontier our liberty is stripped away—we hope temporarily—and we enter the universe of control. Even the freest of free societies are unfree at the edge, where things and people go out and other people and things come in; where only the right things and people must go in and out. Here, at the edge, we submit to scrutiny, to inspection, to judgment. These people, guarding these lines, must tell us who we are.”⁸

Intermarriage is our frontier in a rather literal way. It brings into our families and communities people who live based on ideas that are different from Jewish ones. They are not obligated to live according to mitzvot, and so the ways that they behave, too, are different. Together with these people, we raise our children. And we want to know, whose values will these children have?

This is only a question, though, if we start from the perspective that Jewish values are not generic goodness and common sense but rather that Jews have a mission of holiness. If we do not start from that perspective but rather from a universalistic one, we encounter other, troubling questions: What do we believe? Why be Jewish, and why not assimilate? Is Judaism more than an ethnicity? If we do think that Judaism is important, we need to be able to articulate why Jews are not simply an ethnic group (or, actually, many ethnic groups with some sort of relationship to one another). Why does it matter to be Jewish?

It is not because we are “better.” Judaism has always held that the pious of the nations of the world have a place in the world to come. Rather, it is because we have a particular relationship with God, one which we can bring to the world.

⁶ For example see *Ezra 10: 10 – 12*.

⁷ Barring some extreme circumstances that one would rather not invoke, such as *mamzerut* – the result of adulterous or incestuous relations.

⁸ *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, delivered at Yale University, February 25 and 26, 2002.



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We have a mission to repair the world in a particular way, and that way can only be reached through the discipline imposed on us by living a Jewish life. For example, there is nothing better or worse about being a world-class cellist than there is in being an Olympic level gymnast: however, except for the discipline it takes to do both, there is little in common. They are both beautiful but in different ways.

Jewish tradition tells us, “Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone.”⁹ A lot of people know that quote, but many people don’t know how it continues: “Who is honored? The one who honors all God’s creatures.” The rabbis often used the term “briot”, created ones, to refer to human beings, but the sense is of persons. We even have a phrase, “*Kavod habriot*” meaning “respect for others,” which appears a number of times in the Talmud¹⁰. This principle is taken so seriously that it can override a negative commandment. Things don’t get more serious than that.

These principles give us some clues as to what intermarriage can teach us about ourselves and how to relate to God.

First, although we consider it of highest value to try and persuade the non-Jewish partner to convert, we need to consider what it means to respect the beliefs and choices of the non-Jewish partner. Hence we should be clear about what roles in our lives are limited to Jews, as well as speaking respectfully about the faith that the partner does have. If we are honest, we must also acknowledge that in respecting a partner who does not choose to convert, one’s life as a Jew is probably also limited by that choice, as is often the richness of the Jewish identities of the children of such a couple.

Secondly, we might do well to listen to the non-Jewish partner to hear what they can teach us, as Jews, about being Jewish. One thing that many Christians do much better than Jews is spontaneous prayer. Jews often are very uncomfortable with the idea of just making up a prayer and speaking with God. When we view the relationships of others with God through their own lens, we can learn much about what our own lacks are, and how to enrich our own Judaism. While endogamy is still of exceptionally high value to Jews and is something to be encouraged and sought, intermarriage presents an opportunity for us to learn about ourselves and to grow closer to God, and sometimes, even for a Jew with little connection to tradition may be challenged into taking another look at Judaism.

AUTHORITY AND AUTONOMY: SAMKHUT

This is likely to be the hottest of all the hot topics of the near future. Many of the most vibrant, lively places to pray and to gather in community are independent minyans, places which lack an official authority.

Americans do not much like authority. We really dislike the idea of someone telling us what to do. Yet Judaism is steeped in traditions of authority:

“Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you.”¹¹

In the Mishnah, in the first chapter of Pirkei Avot, we find that we are advised to “get for yourself a teacher” no fewer than three times.¹² And in the Talmud we find other texts which suggest that the worst possible curse is for a community to be without learned advisors and leaders¹³. In the light of these texts we may ask: if respect for authority is so deeply embedded in our tradition, is there a valid place for these minyans, the communities without official leaders?

In order to answer this question, we need to analyze why it is that these minyans are successful. The reason they are so vibrant is because they take upon themselves the obligation we have as Jews to learn. They epitomize relationship

⁹ *Pirke Avot* 4:1

¹⁰ *B. Berakhot* 19b; *B. Shabbat* 81b, 94b; *B. Eruvin* 41b; *B. Megillah* 3b; *B. Bava Kama* 79b; *B. Menahot* 37b-38a.

¹¹ *Dvarim* 32:7

¹² *Pirke Avot* 1:1, 1:6 and 1:16, respectively.

¹³ *Babylonian Talmud Hagigah* 14a



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to God through study, which is one of Judaism's deepest held and most beloved traditions.¹⁴ When the entire community is responsible for leading services and reading Torah, then the opportunities arise to expand and grow, to study in depth, learning becomes a necessity for everyone. More importantly, many of these communities have created successful experiments of various kinds: pluralist communities, where people of deeply divergent understandings of halakhah can pray together. They may come together around social justice work, or study – or both. They rely on one another to learn – and many of them have rabbis as community members, as well as knowledgeable Jewish professionals, scholars and teachers. It is long past the time for us to acknowledge that many of our Jewish experts and teachers are not ordained, and to consult and respect them.

What, then, will be the role of the rabbi for these communities? Rabbis will have the gift of being able to return to what is, in many ways, a more traditional role. They will be the community's organizers, helping to teach the children as well as the adults. They will set up times, places and teachers for study, and will learn together with members of the community. These rabbis also will, hopefully, be the person to whom the community comes when there are questions about practice. Ultimately, although we Americans don't care for authority, we do need someone who can be a decisor, and we need to develop some humility about having such a person in the community and making use of them.

The question of who should be in charge, though, has wider implications. Although we prefer our models of God to represent God as partner, that is not God's only relationship to us. Judaism has two modes of relating to God: *Yirah* – fear/awe, and *ahavah* - love/intimacy. Both of these are necessary. In Psalms, it says, “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom”.¹⁵ In just a very quick glance at the Torah, we find the repetition of the commandment to fear, and separately (and sometimes together) the command to love, God literally dozens of times¹⁶.

Yirah – fearing God – implies an element of submission. That's a very difficult concept for us, but it is one that we need. In fact, it's not so foreign to us as we might like to think. Much of our lives involve us submitting to authority in a way that is invisible to us. Consider what happens when a police siren sounds behind you on the highway: most of us pull over. Most of us grumble about having to acquire a driver's license and the hassle of car registration, yet we make time in our schedules to update these mechanical details of our social order. Submission to God, in its full Jewish context, leads us not to acquiesce to society, but to rebel against its coarse or wrong aspects. This brings me to my conclusion.

CONCLUSION

The various points I have outlined, from the rejoining of Jewish law to its ethical precepts, to the new pluralistic minyanim, to the relationship between Jews and non-Jews, to the expanding role of women are not separate frontiers. They overlap, and flow together. “God on the Frontier of Jewish Thought” has to do both with our individual relationships with God, and how we think God wants us to relate to one another. Ultimately, in terms of our relationship with God, the “new frontier” is returning to the idea of an immanent God but to also bring yirah, awe, into that relationship. God as totally transcendent and not immanent, God as all love and no discipline, is now passé. Our frontiers are returning to what is really a more traditional view of God.

God gave us the Torah as part of an ongoing project to make us holy. Since God, being omniscient, knew that a nation just liberated from slavery would not be able to comprehend a non-hierarchical society, God deliberately gave us the Torah written ambiguously enough that we would need to interpret it. God wishes of us to move as a nation toward partnership, toward a more holy understanding of ourselves and the world, and so God created the language of the Torah in such a way that we would have to re-examine ourselves over and over again, growing, changing, and becoming closer to one another and to God as we develop.

¹⁴ see, for example, *Pirke Avot* 2:6, which reminds us, ‘an ignorant person cannot be pious’.

¹⁵ *Psalms* 111:10

¹⁶ A small sample: Love: *Deuteronomy* 6:5, 10:12, 11:1, 11:13, 11:23, 13:4, 19:9, 30:6, 30:20; fear: *Leviticus* 19:14, 19:32, *Deuteronomy* 6:2, 6:13, 6:24, 8:6, 10:12, 10:20, 13:5, 31:12, 31:13. Not nearly exhaustive.

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We can see from the texts here that God has always wanted us to be loving and inclusive in our relationships with each other, but society has not been ready to take those giant leaps; earlier generations were not able to hear that message the same way we are hearing it now. We are finally ready to begin hearing God, but in order to do so, we have to open our books and study, to hear all the voices that have come down to us in holiness. The trend of both secular society and Jewish tradition is towards greater equality and more care for kavod habriot, and consequently the gap between the Reform movement's commitment to social justice and the Orthodox movement's commitment to halakhah, is narrowing. It is about time. The distinction made between moral and ritual law is as false as our commentators have always implied. To the contrary, neither is possible without the other. Jewish law is not a discrete system, but a holistic one. It is a matter of common sense to recognize, given both economic and social realities, that inclusion, strengthened yet transparent borders, and humility in our dialogue with God, while simultaneously recognizing a God who dwells among us, who longs for a relationship with us, is a necessity of Jewish development and holiness.

We look outward towards our frontiers, and ask, "If we cross, what will we find on the other side?" But in reality, we are already crossing these borders, we are walking: walking towards, and walking away. The question is now towards Whom do we walk, and what are we leaving behind? In the end, the frontier is not feminism, or intermarriage, or independent minyans: in the end, the frontier is God.

GOD ON THE FRONTIER OF JEWISH THOUGHT

הושע ב:טז-כב

טז לכן הנה אנכי מפתיה והלכתיה המדבר ודברתי על-לבה: יז ונתתי לה את-ברמיה משם ואת-עמק עבור לפתח תקוה וענתה שמה כימי נעוריה וכיום עלותה מארץ-מצרים: יח והנה ביום-ההוא נאסי תקראי אישי ולא-תקראי לי עוד בעלי: יט והסרתי את-שמות הבעלים מפיה ולא-יוזכרו עוד בשמם: כ וכרתי להם ברית ביום ההוא עם-חית השדה ועם-עוף השמים ורמש האדמה וקשת וחרב ומלחמה אשבור מן-הארץ והשכבתים לבטח: כא וארשתיד לי לעולם וארשתיד לי בצדק ובמשפט ובחסד וברחמים: כב וארשתיד לי באמונה וידעת את-יי: כג והנה | ביום ההוא אענה נאסי אענה את-השמים והם יענו את-הארץ: כד והארץ תענה את-הדגן ואת-התירוש ואת-היצהר והם יענו את-יורעאל: כה וזרעתיה לי בארץ ורחמתי את-לא רחמה ואמרתי ללא-עמי עמי אתה והוא יאמר אלהי:

EQUALITY

HOSEA 2:16-25

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And I will give her vineyards from there, and the valley of Achor for a gate of hope; and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came out of the land of Egypt.

And it shall be at that day, says the Lord, that you shall call me My husband (“Ishi”); and shall no more call me My master (“Baali”).

For I will take away the names of Baalim from her mouth, and they shall no more be mentioned by their name. And in that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, and with the birds of heaven, and with the creeping things of the ground; and I will break the bow and the sword and the battle out of the earth, and will make them lie down safely.

And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in grace, and in compassion. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord.

And it shall come to pass in that day, I will answer, says the Lord, I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth; and the earth shall answer the grain, and the wine, and the oil; and they shall answer Jezreel.

And I will sow her to me in the earth; and I will have compassion upon her who had not obtained compassion; and I will say to them who were not my people, You are my people; and they shall say, You are my God.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What do you think is the difference between “ishi” and “ba’ali”? Why do you think the distinction is made?
- What kinds of imagery are being used here?
- Who are “them who were not my people” in the final verse?
- Do you consider this text represents the relationship between God and the Jewish people today? Why/why not?

GOD ON THE FRONTIER OF JEWISH THOUGHT

תלמוד בבלי, מגילה נ.ב.

אמר רבא: פשיטא לי: עבודה ומקרא מגילה – מקרא מגילה עדיף, מדרבי יוסי בר חנינא. תלמוד תורה ומקרא מגילה – מקרא מגילה עדיף, מודסמכו של בית רבי. תלמוד תורה ומת מצוה – מת מצוה עדיף, מודתניא: מבטלין תלמוד תורה להוצאת מת ולהכנסת כלה. עבודה ומת מצוה – מת מצוה עדיף, (במדבר ו') מולאחתו דתניא: ולאחותו מה תלמוד לומר? הרי שהיה הולך לשחוט את פסחו ולמול את בנו, ושמע שמת לו מת, יכול יטמא – אמרת: לא יטמא. יכול כשם שאינו מיטמא לאחותו כך אינו מיטמא למת מצוה – תלמוד לומר ולאחתו: לאחותו הוא דאינו מיטמא, אבל מיטמא למת מצוה. בעי רבא: מקרא מגילה ומת מצוה הי מינייהו עדיף? מקרא מגילה עדיף משום פרסומי ניסא, או דלמא מת מצוה עדיף – משום כבוד הבריות? בתר דבעיא הדר פשטה: מת מצוה עדיף. דאמר מר: גדול כבוד הבריות שדוחה את לא תעשה שבתורה.

KAVOD HABRIOT

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, MEGILLAH 3B

Rava said: it is entirely clear to me that reading the Megillah takes priority over the Temple sacrificial service, as can be proved by the statement of Rabbi Yosi bar Chanina on the subject. Similarly, reading the Megillah takes priority over Torah study, as shown by the fact that students from the school of Rabbi relied on R Yosi's ruling [and interrupted their Torah study to go and hear the Megillah]. Burying a met mitzvah takes priority over Torah study, since we know [from a Baraita] that one may take time away from studying Torah in order to bury the dead or to accompany a bride to the canopy. Burying a met mitzvah takes priority over the Temple sacrificial service...but as between reading the Megillah and burying a met mitzvah, which takes priority over which? Is it that reading the Megillah takes priority because of the obligation to publicize the miracle? Or is it that burying a met mitzvah takes priority because of human dignity [kavod habriot]?

After putting the question, Rava answered it himself. [He said:] burying a met mitzvah takes priority, since it was said by a Master, "Human dignity is so great that it takes priority over even a negative commandment in the Torah [which means it will definitely take priority over a positive commandment such as reading the Megillah]".

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Why do you think Rava ruled as he did? Do you agree with his ruling?
- Why do you think the example for human dignity is a dead body?
- Do you consider that there are circumstances in which human dignity can be overridden? If so, which circumstances?
- Do you consider that Rava's ruling could be understood as permitting people not to observe mitzvot in general?

GOD ON THE FRONTIER OF JEWISH THOUGHT

ספר עזרא פרק ט-י

א וכבולות אלה נגשו אלי השרים לאמר לא נבדלו העם ישראל והכהנים והלוים מעמי הארצות פתועבתיים לכנעני החתי הפרזי היבואי העמני המאבי המצרי והאמרי: ב כי נשאנו מבנותיהם להם ולבנותיהם והתערבו ורע הקדש בעמי הארצות ויד השרים והסננים היתה במעל הזה ראשונה: ג וכשמעו את הדבר הזה קרעתי את בגדי ומעילי ואמרטה משער ראשי וזקני ואשבה משומם: ד ואלי יאספו כל הרד בדברי אלהי ישראל על מעל הגולה ואני ישב משומם עד למנתת הערב...א וכהתפלל עזרא וכהתודתו בכה ומתנפל לפני בית האלהים נקבצו אליו מישראל קהל רב מאד אנשים ונשים וילדים כי כבו העם הרבה בכה: ב ויען שכננה בן יחיאל מבני עולם ועילבו ויאמר לעזרא אנהנו מעלנו באלהינו ונשב נשים נכריות מעמי הארץ ועתה יש מקנה לישראל על- זאת: ג ועתה נכרת ברית לאלהינו להוציא כל- נשים והנולד מהם בעצת אדני והחרדים במצות אלהינו ובתורה ועשה: ד קום כי עליך הדבר ואנחנו עמך חונק ועשה: ה ויקם עזרא וישבע את- שרי הכהנים הלוים וכל ישראל לעשות בדבר הזה וישבעו: ו ויקם עזרא מלפני בית האלהים וילך אל- לשפת יהושפט ויהונן בן אלישיב וילך שם לחם לא- אכל ומים לא- שתה כי מתאבל על- מעל הגולה: ז ויעבירו קול ביהודה וירושלם לכל בני הגולה להקבץ וירושלם: ח וכל אשר לא- יבוא לשלשת הימים בעצת השרים והזקנים יחרם כל- רכושו והוא יכרל מקהל הגולה: ט ויקבצו כל אנשי יהודה ובנימן | ירושלם לשלשת הימים הוא חדש התשיעי בעשרים בתדש וישבו כל- העם ברחוב בית האלהים מרעידים על- הדבר ומהנשמים: י ויקם עזרא הכהן ויאמר אלהם אתם מעלתם ותשיבו נשים נכריות להוסיף על- אשמת ישראל: יא ועתה תנו תודה ליי אלהי- אבותיכם ועשו רצונו והבדלו מעמי הארץ ומן- הנשים הנכריות: יב ויענו כל- הקהל ויאמרו קול גדול בן בדבריה עלינו לעשות:

INTERMARRIAGE

FROM EZRA CHAPTERS 9 AND 10

And when these things were done, the princes came to me [Ezra], saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not set themselves apart from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons; so that the holy seed have mixed themselves with the people of those lands; and the hand of the princes and rulers has been foremost in this trespass. And when I heard this matter, I tore my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down appalled. Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those who had been carried to exile, gathered around me, while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice....And while Ezra prayed, and confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men and women and children gathered to him out of Israel; for the people wept bitterly. And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said to Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken alien wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this matter. And now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all such women, and those born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the Torah. Arise; for it is your task, and we are with you. Be of good courage and do it! Then Ezra arose, and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, swear that they should do according to this word. And they swore. Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib; and when he came there, he did not eat bread, nor drink water; for he mourned because of the transgression of the exiles. And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles, that they should gather themselves together at Jerusalem; And that whoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his goods should be forfeited, and he himself set apart from the congregation of the exiles. Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together at Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month; and all the people sat in the street of the house of God, trembling because of this matter, and because of the heavy rain. And Ezra the priest stood up, and said to them, You have transgressed, and have taken foreign wives, to increase the guilt of Israel. And now make confession to the Lord God of your fathers, and do his will; and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the foreign wives. Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As you have said, so must we do.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What motives might Ezra have had for behaving as he did?
- Why do you think the people agreed to do as he said?
- Why do you think there was (apparently) unanimous agreement?
- Do you consider this text has any place in the way we think today? Why/why not?

GOD ON THE FRONTIER OF JEWISH THOUGHT

תלמוד בבלי, סנהדרין יז.ב.
ותניא: כל עיר שאין בה עשרה דברים הללו אין תלמיד חכם רשאי לדור בתוכה: בית דין מכין ועונשין, וקופה של צדקה נגבית בשנים ומתחלקת בשלשה, ובית הכנסת, ובית המרחץ, ובית הכסא, רופא, ואומן, ולבלר, [ומבחה] ומלמד תינוקות. משום רבי עקיבא אמרו: אף מיני פירא, מפני שמיני פירא מאירין את העינים.

AUTHORITY

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, SANHEDRIN 17B

It was taught [in a Baraita]: A scholar may not live in any town which does not have these ten things:

1. A court that administers lashes and other punishments.
2. A charity fund collected by two people.
3. And [the charity fund must be] distributed by three.
4. A synagogue
5. A bathhouse
6. An outhouse
7. A doctor
8. A blood-letter
9. A scribe
10. A teacher of children

In the name of Rabbi Akiva they said: varieties of fruit are also required because varieties of fruit brighten the [sight of one's] eyes.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What do you think might be missing from this list?
- Why do you think the text specifies that these things are important for a scholar?
- Are teachers more important than leaders? Why?
- Is it possible for a community to exist without a leader and/or a scholar?

GOD ON THE FRONTIER OF JEWISH THOUGHT – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

There are no such things as 'women's issues...' Women's voices have to be heard as lawmakers, but it is not enough for women to be heard as advocates in court, or as mikvah ladies. When power is limited, it is limited, and in the Jewish community power is wielded through the judiciary – ie. the rabbinate. There is no halakhic reason why women cannot be poskot [those who make authoritative rulings in Jewish law] even in the most traditional of Jewish communities. Women need to be part of the conversation – all of it. There is no Jewish topic that does not affect both men and women. Furthermore, women's decisions need to affect men as well.

An interesting model for this is that of the tallit...the wearing of a tallit by women began to be popular around the time of the beginning to the DIY (“Do It Yourself”) havurah movements in the 1970s. When this began, tallitot were mostly polyester, white and blue or white and black; in some very traditional congregations they were wool, but again white and blue or white and black, or in a few cases, white and white. When women began wearing tallitot, part of the ambivalence about how women should wear them was expressed through women trying different kinds of tallitot. Since there are no legal requirements of a tallit other than it have four corners to which the requisite fringes are attached, women started tie-dyeing them, wearing them in different shapes, different colors and even different fabrics, such as painted silk or soft rayon.

After some time, many men realized that they were wearing boring tallitot, that there was no halakhic reason for them to wear boring tallitot and that they did not have to wear polyester, black and white tallitot. Shortly, men, too, began wearing tallitot that were more expressive of their own aesthetics...today, there is hardly a synagogue around the country, including Orthodox ones, where a colored tallit cannot be found. There is an entire industry devoted to producing beautiful tallitot- and we now have a widespread new custom of hiddur mitzvah [fulfilling a commandment in an aesthetically beautiful way] via the adoption of a mitzvah by women. It seems to me that this is a wonderful metaphor for how halakhic reinterpretation ought to happen regarding women. It is not enough to “add women and stir”. When women participate, it means that the roles of both men and women have changed: otherwise attempts to include women have not really changed anything.

Rabbi Alana Suskin, A Feminist Theory of Halakhah, taken from The Unfolding Tradition: Jewish Law After Sinai, Elliot N Dorff, Aviv Press 2005.

SESSION SUGGESTIONS – GOD ON THE FRONTIER OF JEWISH THOUGHT

In this session, the group will consider various contemporary issues. Participants may well have sensitivities to some of the content of the essay. The texts have also been deliberately chosen to stimulate discussion about our current, and future, relationship with God and how that manifests in some of our social and religious institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Briefly remind people of the content of the essay. Some questions to generate a brief recap might be:

- What does ‘being on the frontier’ mean?
- What are the areas the author focuses upon?
- What conclusions does the author draw?

TEXT STUDY

Split the class into [up to] 4 chavruta groups and hand out the texts. The questions provided should help generate the discussion. You might need to brief the ‘Ezra group’ about who Ezra was and the historical circumstances out of which the text arose. The texts have deliberately been chosen from a good distance back in the tradition – the aim here is for people to read them through the lens of the essay and see if this means they understand them differently.

Allow each group to report back on their understanding of the texts and their answers to the questions, and then draw the discussion together. You might wish to ask if they consider there are other areas in Jewish life where the frontier of our relationship with God is being redefined – Israel would be one obvious example, though beware of the session being hijacked by this subject.

ADDITIONAL STUDY

It is suggested that participants take a closer look at a piece of Rabbi Suskin’s work. The section provided is taken from her essay “A Feminist Theory of Halakhah” and should provide a good basis for a discussion about how change might take place in the other ‘frontier’ areas dealt with in her essay.

If you wished, though, this is a good opportunity for you to provide an alternative text you consider relevant for your participants that deals with one of the frontiers of our relationship with God set out in the essay – for example, some of the Conservative teshuvot on intermarriage, available from the Rabbinical Assembly website, or a newspaper article about small minyanim.

CONCLUSION

Allow participants time to journal their thoughts. Hand out the essay for next time, and conclude the session.

CONTRIBUTORS

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RABBI ALANA SUSKIN was ordained in 2003 at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University. Her essays, poetry and other writing have appeared in a wide variety of journals, books and anthologies. Her most recent project, "Ethical Smachot" (with Rabbi Joshua Ginsberg and Jews United for Justice), can be found online at http://www.myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/About_Jewish_Lifecycle/Overview_Themes/ethicalsmahot.htm.

DEBORAH SILVER is entering her third year at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University. She holds a Master's Degree in Hebrew Studies from Cambridge University, England, as well as an MA in the theory and practice of literary translation. She is past holder of the George Webber Prize for Hebrew Translation, and she is the Senior English Editor of the Oxford English-Hebrew Dictionary of Current Usage (Oxford, 1996). Prior to coming to Los Angeles, she practiced as an attorney before becoming an Associate Professor at BPP Law School, London.

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HALAKHAH

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