

THE JEWISH UNDERSTANDING OF GOD

*It is unfortunate but undeniable that God is often perceived and presented in a foolish or distorted manner. A typical example is the anthropomorphic conception of God which portrays Him as, for example, a grand old man sitting up in heaven. Such a straw-man God is a convenient target for atheists' jibes at believers; it was this caricature that Soviet cosmonauts mocked when they boasted that up in space they saw no God (Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, *Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism*, p. 31).*

Judaism revolutionized the world by introducing monotheism – the understanding that there is only one omnipotent, omniscient God who created, sustains and guides the universe. Is it possible to know His nature? God is essentially unlike man and anything man can conceive of. “To whom will you compare Me,” asks God, “and I will be similar to him?” (Isaiah 40:25). There is no parallel to God on the earth or in heaven, and His essential nature is entirely beyond our comprehension.

Nonetheless, the Torah teaches us certain attributes of God’s nature. Thus, our understanding of God has a place in Jewish thought and, indeed, comprises several of Rambam’s Principles of Faith. This shiur will explore both the Jewish concept of God and some of the pathways through which we develop a personal relationship with Him.

Judaism does not subscribe to Pantheism, the notion that “God is everything and everything is God.” Not everything is inherently holy. Rather, there are both instances of intrinsic spirituality, such as Shabbat and the Land of Israel, and there is potential for spirituality through our thought, speech and actions. (See further the Morasha shiurim on Spirituality as well as Kabbalah).

In this class, we will address the following questions:

- ☞ What is the Jewish conception of God?
- ☞ What does it mean that “God is One?”
- ☞ What do we know about God? How can we get to know Him better?
- ☞ How should the physical descriptions of God in Scripture and Talmudic sources be understood?

Class Outline:

- Section I. The Creator
 - Part A. A Designer World
 - Part B. Omnipotence
 - Part C. Omniscience

- Section II. The First Four Principles of Faith
 - Part A. Absoluteness
 - Part B. Unity
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 - Part D. Eternity

- Section III. God as Wholly Other
 - Part A. Wholly Other
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- Section IV. God is One and Unique
 - Part A. The Only God
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- Section V. Without Body or Form

- Section VI. Forging a Personal Relationship with God
 - Part A. Distant yet Close
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 - Part C. Emulating God
 - Part D. Love and Fear
 - Part E. Torah and Mitzvot

SECTION I: THE CREATOR

The way to know an artist is through his creative artwork. The world is God's creation, and thus the first and foremost way to know God is to take note of His creation.

PART A. A DESIGNER WORLD

According to the Midrash, Avraham's path to God came through honest observation of the world around him.

1. **Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 40:21,26 – Lift up your eyes and see Who created the world.**

Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
Was it not told to you from the beginning?
Do you not understand how the earth was founded? ...

Lift up your eyes to the stars
And see Who has created them
He numbers them all like an army,
He calls them all by name . . .

הלוֹא תדעו הלוֹא תשמעו הלוֹא הגד מראש לַכֶּם הַלוֹא
הַבִּינְתֶם מוֹסְדוֹת הָאָרֶץ:

שֶׁאוֹ מְרוֹם עֵינֵיכֶם וְרֹאוּ מִי בְרָא אֱלֹהֵי הַמוֹצֵיא בַּמַּסְפֵּר
צְבָאָם לְכֹלָם בְּשֵׁם יְקָרָא.

2. **Bereishit (Genesis) Rabbah 39:1 – Avraham looks at the world and realizes that the order he sees is a sign of intelligent planning.**

It is like a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a mansion all lit up. He wondered, "Is it conceivable that the mansion is without a caretaker?" Thereupon, the owner of the mansion appeared to him and said, "I am the owner of this mansion and its caretaker."

Similarly, because Avraham our father wondered, "Is it conceivable that the world be without a caretaker?" therefore, the Holy One, Blessed be He, appeared to him and said, "I am the Master of the universe and its Caretaker."

אָמַר רַבִּי יִצְחָק מִשָּׁל לְאַחַד שֶׁהִיָּה עוֹבֵר מִמְּקוֹם
לְמְקוֹם, וְרָאָה בִּירָה אַחַת דּוֹלֶקֶת אָמַר תֵּאמַר שֶׁהַבִּירָה
זוֹ בְּלֹא מְנַהִיג, הַצִּיץ עָלָיו בַּעַל הַבִּירָה, אָמַר לוֹ אֲנִי הוּא
בַּעַל הַבִּירָה.

כִּךְ לְפִי שֶׁהִיָּה אֲבִינוּ אַבְרָהָם אוֹמֵר תֵּאמַר שֶׁהָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה
בְּלֹא מְנַהִיג, הַצִּיץ עָלָיו הַקַּב"ה וְאָמַר לוֹ אֲנִי הוּא בַּעַל
הָעוֹלָם.

3. **Otzar Midrashim, Temurah 7 – Everything has a creator; the world is no different.**

A heretic once asked Rabbi Akiva, "Who created the world?" Rabbi Akiva answered, "The Holy One, Blessed be He." The heretic said, "Show me clear proof," ... Rabbi Akiva asked, "Who wove your shirt?" The heretic replied, "A weaver, of course!" Rabbi Akiva said, "I don't believe you. Prove it to me." The heretic answered, "What's there to prove? Don't you know that it was

וּמַעֲשֵׂה שֶׁבֵּא מִיָּן וְאָמַר לְר' עֲקִיבָא הֲעוּה"ז מִי בְרָאוּ
א"ל הַקַּב"ה, א"ל הֲרֵאִינִי דְבַר בְּרוּר, א"ל לְמַחֵר תֵּבֵא
אֵלַי, לְמַחֵר בֵּא אֲצִלּוּ א"ל מַה אַתָּה לּוֹבֵשׁ, א"ל בְּגַד,
א"ל מִי עֲשָׂאוּ, א"ל הָאוֹרֵג, א"ל אֵינִי מֵאֲמִינֵךְ הֲרֵאִינִי
דְבַר בְּרוּר, א"ל וְמַה אֲרָאָה לָךְ וְאֵין אַתָּה יוֹדֵעַ שֶׁהָאוֹרֵג
עֲשָׂאוּ? א"ל וְאַתָּה אֵינְךָ יוֹדֵעַ שֶׁהַקַּב"ה בְּרָא אֶת עוֹלָמוֹ?

a weaver?" "And don't you know that God made His world?"

The heretic left and Rabbi Akiva then said to his students, "Just as a building testifies to the existence of the builder, and a garment testifies to the existence of the weaver ... so too the world testifies to the existence of the Creator."

נפטר אותו המיזן, אמרו לו תלמידיו מה הדבר ברור, א"ל בני כשם שהבית מודיע על הבנאי והבגד מודיע על האורג והדלת על הנגר, כך העולם מודיע על הקב"ה שהוא בראו!

4. **Rabbeinu Bachya, Chovot HaLevavot (Duties of the Heart) 1:6 – Straightforward logic dictates that a design implies a designer, whether man-made or not.**

There are those who say that the world came into existence by chance, without a Creator Who caused and formed it. I wonder how any rational person in a normal state of mind can entertain such a notion. If one holding such an opinion would hear a person expressing a similar view in regard to a water-wheel that revolves in order to irrigate a portion of a field or garden, and were to say that he thinks it had been set up without any intention on the part of an engineer who labored to assemble and install it, using all his tools so as to obtain this useful result, the one listening would be astonished, and consider the man who made such a statement extremely foolish! He would promptly charge him with lying and would reject his assertion. Now, if such a statement is rejected in regard to a small and insignificant wheel ... how can anyone permit himself to harbor such a thought concerning the immense sphere that encompasses the whole Earth?

ויש בני אדם, שאמרו, שהעולם נהיה במקרה מבלי בורא שהתחילו ויוצר שיצרו. ומן התימה בעיני, איך תעלה בדעת מדבר, בעודנו בבריאותו, כמחשבה הזאת. ואלו היה בעל המאמר הזה שומע אדם, שיאמר כמאמרו בגלגל אחד של מים, שהוא מתגלגל להשקות חלקה אחת של שדה או גנה, וחושב, כי זה נתקן מבלי כוונת אמן, שטרם בחבורו והרכבתו ושם כל כלי מכליו לעומת התועלת, היה לו להפליא ולהגדיל הרבה עליו, ולחשוב אותו בתכלית הסכלות וימהר להכזיבו ולדחות מאמרו. וכיון שידחה המאמר הזה בגלגל קטן ופחות ונבזה, שנעשה בתחבולה קטנה לתקנת חלקה קטנה מהארץ, איך יתיר לעצמו לחשוב כמחשבה הזאת בגלגל הגדול הסובב את כל הארץ וכל אשר עליה מן הברואים, והוא בחכמה, תקצרנה דעות כל בשר ושכלי המדברים להשיג הויתנה, והוא מוכן לתועלת כל הארץ וכל אשר עליה. ואיך יוכל לומר עליו שיהיה מבלי כוונת מכוון ומחשבת חכם בעל יכולת.

PART B. OMNIPOTENCE

Once we understand that God designed and created the world, the next logical step is to realize that He has full control over it as well. Furthermore, as the Creator of all things, it is obvious that every kind of ability that we see in the world is present in God as well. So, for example, if we see and hear then we know that God also sees and hears, and so on.

1. **Yeshayahu 29:16 – The blindness of unbelief.**

How upside down are things!
Is the potter no better than the clay?
Can something say of its maker,
"He did not make me"?
Can a pot say of the potter,
"He has no skill?"

הפככם אם כחמר היצר יחשב כי יאמר מעשה לעשהו לא עשני ויצר אמר ליצרו לא הבין:

2. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *The Infinite Light*, p. 28 – Omnipotence of the Creator

We must constantly remember that God is the sole Creator of all things. He was the very first, and everything else emanated from Him. It is therefore obvious that God has power over all things. Everything came from Him; therefore, nothing can stop Him or prevent Him from doing as He wishes. God thus told His prophet, “I am God from the beginning of time; none can deliver from My hand. When I act, who can reverse it?” (Isaiah 43:13). God is saying that He is the very first and therefore is Creator and Master of all. His power is unlimited, nothing can hold Him back.

We therefore say that God is omnipotent – all powerful. He is the One Creator and Master of all things and there is no power in existence that can turn Him back or frustrate His ultimate purpose. We hear this in the words of Job when he says, “He is in Unity, who can hold Him back? He does what His own will desires” (Job 23:13). The same concept is also expressed in Jehoshaphat’s prayer, “God of our fathers, You alone are God in heaven. You rule over all kingdoms. In Your hand is mighty power, and none can withstand You” (2 Chronicles 20:5).

This is one of the most important things that we believe about God. He is all powerful and nothing can stand in His way. He rules the world according to His desire. This was one of the very first things that God revealed about Himself when He asked of Abraham, “Is anything too difficult for God?” (Bereishit/Genesis 18:4).

PART C. OMNISCIENCE

God is not only all-powerful; He is all-knowing as well. Past, present, and future are as one to God. Not only does He know what has happened, what is happening now, and what will happen, He even knows hidden things, such as the thoughts of our hearts.

1. Rambam, *Commentary on Mishnah, Sanhedrin, Chap. 10 – Tenth Principle – One of the 13 fundamentals of faith is that God knows all.*

The tenth principle is that God, blessed be He, knows the actions of mankind and does not turn His eyes from them. Not like the opinion of those who say, “[The Lord does not see us;] the Lord has forsaken the land” (Yechezkel/ Ezekiel) 8:12). But rather like it says, “Great in counsel, and mighty in work; for Your eyes are open upon all the ways of the sons of men; to give to every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings” (Yirmiyah/ Jeremiah) 32:19), “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth...” (Bereishit 6:5), and “And the Lord said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great...” (ibid. 18:20). These verses teach us this tenth foundation.

והיסוד העשירי שהוא יתעלה יודע מעשה בני אדם ולא הזניחם, ולא כדעת האומר עזב ה' את הארץ, אלא כמו שאמר גדול העצה ורב העלילה אשר עיניך פקוחות על כל דרכי בני אדם, ואמר וירא ה' כי רבה רעת האדם בארץ, ואמר זעקת סדום ועמורה כי רבה, הרי אלו מורים על היסוד העשירי הזה.

2. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Handbook of Jewish Thought, Volume I*, pp.18-19 – God is aware of His entire creation at all times and He knows our thoughts – past, present, and future.

It is a foundation of our faith to believe that God knows all our deeds as well as everything else that occurs in the universe.

God is therefore spoken of as being omniscient. He fills all creation and gives it existence, and therefore, He is aware of all that takes place in it. God thus said, “Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I will not see him?... Do I then not fill heaven and earth?” (Jeremiah 23:24). It is likewise written, “God’s eyes are in every place, beholding the evil and the good” (Proverbs 15:3).

God knows man’s thoughts, as it is written, “God probes every heart and perceives every urge of thought” (Chronicles I, 28:9). It is likewise written, “[God] knows the secrets of the heart” (Psalms 44:21).

Since God exists outside of time, He knows the future exactly as He knows the past. This precise concept is expressed in His words to His prophet, “I call the generations from the beginning; I, God, am the First, and with the last I am the same” (Isaiah 41:4).

God’s knowledge is identical with His infinite Essence, and therefore His knowledge is also infinite. It is thus written, “[God’s] understanding is infinite” (Psalms 147:5). God can therefore know what is happening to every single atom in the universe at every given instant. No matter how great the number of simultaneous events, it is nothing compared to God’s infinite knowledge.

Our understanding of God’s omnipotence and omniscience form the basis of the concept of *Hashgachah*, God’s Divine Providence in running the world and guiding it toward the fulfillment of its purpose. See further the Morasha classes on Hashgachah Pratit.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ≈ Our primary definition of God is as the Creator of all things. This is highlighted by the opening verse of the Torah: “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.” Indeed, He is the Creator not only of visible things, but even of all things spiritual – of everything that exists.
- ≈ The realization that God is the Creator of everything implies, of course, that there is no other Creator. As we will see later, God is One and Unique, and these attributes follow from His being the Creator. It also infuses all things in the world with underlying purpose. All things, even the smallest, are creations of God; all were fashioned with Divine intelligence, and with purpose and destiny.
- ≈ Beyond His being the Creator, there is very little that we can say about God. Nevertheless, as the Creator of all things, it is obvious that every kind of ability that we see in the world is present also in God. If we see and hear, we know that God also sees and hears – though His “seeing” cannot be compared with ours. If we see positive attributes such as wisdom and love, we know that God also possesses them – though once again, His “wisdom” cannot be compared to the worldly equivalent.
- ≈ God is aware of everything in His creation – past, present, and future simultaneously.

SECTION II. THE PRINCIPLES OF FAITH

When speaking about God, it is important to distinguish between the fundamental principles of Jewish faith, and additional ideas and beliefs. In this section we quote the first four principles of faith as enumerated by Maimonides, all of which relate to the existence and nature of God.

PART A. ABSOLUTENESS

1. Maimonides, Commentary to Mishnah, Sanhedrin Chap. 10, First Principle – The existence of God: Creator of all.

The existence of the Creator, i.e., that there is an existent Being invested with the highest perfection of existence. He is the cause of the existence of all existent things. In Him they exist and from Him emanates their continued existence. If we could suppose the removal of His existence then the existence of all things would entirely cease and there would not be left any independent existence whatsoever. But if on the other hand we could suppose the removal of all existent things but He, His existence would not cease to be, neither would it suffer any diminution. For He is self-sufficient, and His existence needs the aid of no existence outside of His. Whatever is outside Him, the intelligences (i.e., angels) and the celestial bodies, and things below these, all of them need Him for their existence. This is the first cardinal doctrine of faith, which is indicated by the commandment, “I am the Lord, your God.”

להאמין מציאות הבורא יתברך והוא שיש שם נמצא
שלם בכל דרכי המציאות הוא עילת המציאות,
הנמצאים כולם בו קיום מציאותם וממנו קיומם, ואל
יעלה על הלב העדר מציאותו, כי בהעדר מציאותו
נתבטל מציאות כל הנמצאים ולא נשאר נמצא
שיתקיים מציאותו, ואם נעלה על לבנו העדר הנמצאים
כולם זולתו לא יתבטל מציאות הש"י ולא יגרע, ואין
האחדות והאדנות אלא לו לבד הש"י שמו כי הוא
מסתפק במציאותו ודי לו בעצמו ואין צריך במציאות
זולתו, וכל מה שזולתו מן המלאכים וגופי הגלגלים
ומה שיש בתוכם ומה שיש למטה מהם הכל צריכין
במציאותם אליו, וזה היסוד הראשון מורה עליו דיבור
אנכי ה' אלהיך:

2. Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, Fundamentals and Faith, pp. 32-33 – God’s absoluteness is the basis of our relationship to Him.

It is important to appreciate that the paramount consequence of not perceiving God as absolute is that it stifles man’s urge to serve Him – it leaves nothing for one to truly worship. (Optimally, *avodah* [service or worship] implies fulfilling the Will of the Almighty out of love and a yearning to be close to the Source of all existence.) If God is not absolute, then He is no more than a superman. The difference between man and God becomes quantitative, not qualitative.

We are accustomed to a hierarchy of power. What if God is only more powerful than man, in a human, non-Divine sense? The president, too, is more powerful than we are, but we still feel we can evade him. Man can both avoid and manipulate anyone more powerful than himself; therefore, he would never serve such a being. For man to serve, to submit himself to supplicating God, the Almighty must be essentially different from him. The difference between God and man must be qualitative, not merely quantitative.

If this concept is true, then why do we find so many civilizations serving idols? The idol does not have any absolute existence, it has a contingent one. The idol, like those serving it, has needs and therefore limitations and weaknesses. Human awareness of this dependency invites relating to the idol through barter – service for a payoff. People will serve a god only as long as it offers some kind of benefit. Throughout history, the gods that were favored were those that were able to deliver the rains and victories that their worshippers desired. This form of worship, tit for tat, is self-serving and not sincere submission. The contingent existence of the idol is its inherent weakness, one that makes real submission to it impossible.

The recognition of the Almighty’s absolute existence as the one and only Source of our existence is

what binds us to Him. Submission to Him is predicated upon the knowledge that He is the Cause of the entire world and all the experience that one has within it. This knowledge, then, ultimately carries with it the profound realization that one has no absolute existence at all. It is out of this awareness that Moshe Rabbeinu declared: “We, *what are we?*” (Exodus 15:8; see Chulin 89a). To be aware that one is nothing more than God’s creation and to be aware of all the ramifications of this reality is the highest expression of service.

PART B. UNITY

1. **Maimonides, Commentary to Mishnah, Sanhedrin Chap. 10, Second Principle – Unity of God: The Lord is One.**

The Unity of God. This implies that this Cause of all is One; not one of a genus nor of a species, and not as one human being who is a compound divisible into many unities; not a unity like the ordinary material body which is one in number but takes on endless divisions and parts. But He, the exalted one, is a unity in the sense that there is no unity like His in any way. This is the second cardinal doctrine of faith which is indicated by the assertion, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.”

יחוד השי"י, כלומר שנאמין שזה שהוא סבת הכל אחד ואינו כאחד הזוג ולא כאחד המין ולא כאיש האחד שנחלק לאחדים רבים, ולא אחד כמו הגוף הפשוט האחד במנין שמקבל החלוק לאין סוף, אבל הוא השי"י אחד באחדות שאין כמותה אחדות, וזה היסוד השני מורה עליו מה שנאמר שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד:

2. **Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, Fundamentals and Faith, pp. 38-39 – Unity means that everything that happens is an expression of God’s will.**

The first principle depicts the uniqueness of God in that He is absolutely independent of anything, in contrast to man, who is absolutely dependent upon Him. The second principle emphasizes that everything we experience, the myriads of conflicting forces in our universe, reflects one Unity, a Oneness that knows no parallel. Pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow all have one Source. The good things that happen to bad people and the bad things that happen to good people all have one Origin.

The emphasis on God’s Unity provided by this principle rejects the subtle influences of polytheism which could exist even in a monotheistic system. Man has a tendency to identify good and evil, happiness and suffering, with separate causes, which creates the need for this Principle. One witnesses the various, seemingly conflicting facets of the Almighty’s providence, and he is confused.

It would be easy to resolve these contradictory elements of life by concluding that these facets represent separate, conflicting forces or powers controlling reality. This answer is the lure of polytheism, however. Seen more subtly, in an effort to understand God’s nature, monotheistic man incorrectly identifies with one aspect of the Almighty, such as His mercy, failing to appreciate His unity.

The fact that the Rambam has divided these concepts, the existence of God and the unity of God, into two principles, implies that one must specifically be aware and articulate both concepts in order to serve Him properly.

PART C. INCORPOREAL

1. **Maimonides, Commentary to Mishnah, Sanhedrin Chap. 10, Third Principle – God’s incorporeality: He is not physical in any way.**

The removal of materiality from God. This signifies that this unity is neither a body nor the power of a body, nor can the accidents of bodies overtake him, as e.g., motion and rest, whether in the essential or accidental sense. It was for this reason that the Sages denied to Him both cohesion and separation of parts, when they remarked [Chagiga 15a] “no sitting and no standing, no division and no cohesion.” And the prophet said, “And unto whom will you liken Me that I may be like, says the Holy One” (Yeshaya/ Isaiah 40:25). If God were a body He would be like a body. Wherever in the Scriptures God is spoken of with the attributes of material bodies, like motion, standing, sitting, speaking, and such like, all these are figures of speech, as the Sages said, [Brachot 31b] “The Torah speaks in the language of men.” People have said a great deal on this point. This third fundamental article of faith is indicated by the scriptural expression, “for you have seen no likeness,” i.e., you have not comprehended Him as one who possesses a likeness, for, as we have remarked, He is not a body nor a bodily power.

שלילת הגשמות ממנו, וזהו שנאמין כי האחד הזה שזכרנו אינו גוף ולא כח בגוף ולא ישיגוהו מאורעות הגופים כמו התנועה והמנוחה והמשכן לא מצד עצמות ולא במקרה, ולכן שללו ממנו החכמים ז"ל החיבור והפירוד ואמרו (חגיגה טו.) אין למעלה לא ישיבה ולא עמידה לא עורף ולא עפוי כלומר לא פירוד ולא עורף, והוא חיבור ולא עפוי מלשון ועפו בכתף פלשתים, כלומר ידחפו אותו בכתף להתחברם בהם, ואמר הנביא ואל מי תדמיוני ואשוה יאמר קדוש אילו היה גוף דומה לגופים, וכל מה שבא בכתבי הקודש שמתארים אותו בתארי הגופות כמו ההליכה והעמידה והישיבה והדיבור וכיוצא בזה הכל דרך השאלה, וכן אמרו ז"ל (ברכות לא:) דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם וכבר דיברו החכמים בזה הענין הרבה, והיסוד השלישי הזה הוא מורה עליו מה שנאמר כי לא ראיתם כל תמונה כלומר לא השגתם אותו בעל תמונה, לפי שהוא כמו שזכרנו אינו גוף ולא כח בגוף:

2. **Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, Fundamentals and Faith, pp. 43-44 – The fact that God is not physical means that we cannot elude His awareness.**

It is necessary to understand and be aware of God’s incorporeality because if God occupied space, man could be free of Him. If God occupied space, He would be limited and He would have boundaries. A physical being cannot be in two places at the same time. If the Almighty were limited in space, then man could elude His awareness. If man could elude His awareness, then God could no longer tell humanity how to act. When an individual felt like doing something wrong, he could make sure that it was dark, that he was hidden, and that he had thus escaped, smug in his confidence that God would never find out.

If one believes that God is physical, he will feel capable of escaping Him. One need not intellectually follow this logical reasoning to reach this conclusion: a human being will naturally act out the logical consequences of the concepts he believes. A man does not have to be a philosopher in order to realize these logical consequences. Without considering, he instinctively reacts from the position of his beliefs. If he takes the position that God is corporeal, that He occupies space, then he will intuitively conclude that he can hide from Him.

When we say that God is not physical we do not mean that He is instead a spiritual being. In truth, God is beyond both the physical and the spiritual because both are His creations.

3. **Ibid.** – God is beyond both space and time.

Although the concept of God's incorporeality is generally understood, the parallel concept of His non-spirituality is not well known. Although God is frequently referred to as a spiritual Being, we apply the term loosely for lack of another word. If a material object is defined as being confined to time and space, while something spiritual is confined in terms of time but not in terms of space, then it must be concluded that God is neither physical nor spiritual. The Almighty is confined neither in space nor in time. All material and spiritual beings were created by Him, as it is written (Genesis 1:1): "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*"

Our Sages learned that "*the heavens*" is a reference to spiritual creations, such as the angels and the "Throne of Glory" while "*the earth*" refers to all material existence. The souls of human beings, also spiritual entities, were likewise created. Thus, it is incorrect to describe God in spiritual terms. He is unique, neither physical nor spiritual, the Creator of both the physical and the spiritual worlds.

The verse which the Rambam cites as proof of God's incorporeality can also be applied to His non-spirituality. He quotes the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 40:18, 25): "*Who is comparable to the Almighty?*" If God were material, He could be compared to everything material in creation. In the same manner, if He were spiritual, then He could be compared to anything spiritual in creation. Neither comparison can be made, for there is no relationship of any kind that could describe His being the Creator. We can understand Him only in terms of the Creator-creation relationship.

PART D. ETERNITY

1. **Maimonides, Commentary to Mishnah, Sanhedrin Chap. 10, Fourth Principle – God's eternity – He always was, is, and will be.**

The priority of God. This means that the unity Whom we have described is first in the absolute sense. No existent thing outside Him is primary in relation to Him. The proofs of this in the Scriptures are numerous. This fourth principle is indicated by the phrase, "The eternal God is a refuge."

הקדמות, והוא שנאמין כי זה האחד האמור הוא קדמון בהחלט, וכל נמצא זולתו בלתי קדמון בערכו אליו, והראיות על זה בכתבי הקודש רבות, והיסוד הרביעי הזה מורה עליו מה שנאמר מעונה אלהי קדם:

2. **Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, Fundamentals and Faith, pp. 50-51 – God's eternity means that He created the world *ex nihilo*, "something from nothing."**

By adding the idea of eternity, *Ani Ma'amin* (the principles of faith recited in the Morning Service) might be misleading. It implies that the Rambam is referring to God existing outside of time. A careful reading of the Rambam, however, shows that this implication is incorrect. Instead, the Rambam is actually presenting the idea that the Almighty preceded the universe and created it *ex nihilo*. This is evident from the verse he cites (Deuteronomy 33:27): "*God who preceded all existence is a refuge...*"

The Principle is not that "He was the first," a statement which implies that He may have had a beginning; rather, He was "without a beginning," the absolute first: He preceded all Existence and created all Existence from a perfect void.

This Principle of creation *ex nihilo* has been the subject of a classic dispute among philosophers throughout history. In his Guide to the Perplexed (2:25), the Rambam states that it would be possible (although wrong) to accept the story of Creation in Genesis while still assuming that matter was

eternal. This concept of the eternity of matter implies that God and the universe co-existed without any beginning, an idea held by Aristotle.

The Greek philosopher acknowledged a god as creator, but insisted that just as its existence had no beginning and no end, its role as a creator had no beginning and no end. To Aristotle, the eternity of matter was not a contradiction to his belief that God was the Source of all Existence.

It is with this Principle that the Rambam parts company with Aristotle. The god of Aristotle is merely a docile machine. It cannot choose to act or react. It is what it is. It could not and cannot choose to become Creator. It is impotent, with no understanding, no awareness and no freedom. Such a god, so limited, cannot be served.

In contrast, the Rambam's God preceded Creation and is free to choose to create. He observes and controls. The world is His.

Aristotle's god has no control; even man has more control than Aristotle's god. It is bound by its own nature and therefore has no relationship with creation. None of the names of God that describe Him as He relates to creation would be applicable to the god of Aristotle. It is neither a Lord nor a Master nor a Power. In Aristotle's world, there is nothing to serve because it is impossible to serve a limited force.

These four statements about God – that His existence is absolute, that He is One, non-corporeal, and eternal – will be developed more fully throughout the remainder of this class.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ⌘ The fundamental belief of Judaism concerning God does not end with merely believing in His existence. According to Maimonides, one must also believe in a God who entirely transcends human existence and human comprehension in terms of His absoluteness, unity, incorporeality, and eternity:
- ⌘ We must be aware of the absolute nature of God's existence and the ramifications that has for our own lives.
- ⌘ The fact that God is One means that nothing happens outside His direct awareness, His control, or His will.
- ⌘ God's incorporeality means that He is above both space and time; that He is bound by neither.
- ⌘ God's eternity means that He created all of existence from nothing.

SECTION III: GOD AS WHOLLY OTHER

Before we begin to discuss the nature of God in greater detail, we must again emphasize that God is "wholly other" – entirely unlike any existence known to humankind. He cannot even be paralleled to angelic beings that are entirely spiritual, or "Godly." He is beyond comparison.

PART A: WHOLLY OTHER

1. Yeshayahu 40:25 – God is incomparable with any other essence

“To whom will you compare Me, and I will be similar to him,” says the Holy One.

ואל מי תדמיוני ואשוה יאמר קדוש:

2. Yeshayahu 55:8-9 – The “ways” and “thoughts” of God are not like ours.

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” says Hashem.

כי לא מחשבותי מחשבותיכם ולא דרכיכם דרכי נאם ה':

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.

כי גבהו שמים מארץ כן גבהו דרכי מדרכיכם ומחשבותי ממוחשבותיכם:

3. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, The Faith of Maimonides, pg. 40 – God as “wholly other.”

The significance of this “One” – and this is what lends it the whole depth of its meaning as a religious belief – is that it is qualitative and not quantitative. God is one in the sense that He is in no way similar to anything whose qualities or attributes are conceived by human consciousness. In the language of philosophy, He is the transcendent God, the God who is beyond anything which exists in human awareness, whether it be sense perception or imaginative conception.

4. Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Derech Hashem (The Way of God) 1:1:2, Translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan – We cannot understand the nature of God; we only know that He is ultimately perfect.

It is furthermore necessary to know that God’s true nature cannot be understood at all by any being other than Himself. The only thing that we know about Him is that He is perfect in every possible way and devoid of every conceivable deficiency.

עוד צריך שידע, שהמצוי הזה ית”ש, אין אמתת מציאותו מושגת לזולתו כלל, ורק זה נודע בו, שהוא מצוי שלם בכל מיני שלימות, ולא נמצא בו חסרון כלל.

There is an important insight in the above words of Ramchal. Although we do not know the nature of God, we may state that He is perfect with all forms of perfection.

5. Ibid. 1:1:5 – God’s essence, Translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan – God’s essence is unified (simple).

It is likewise necessary to know that God’s essence is absolutely simple without any structure or additional qualities whatsoever. Every possible perfection exists in Him but in an absolutely simple manner. [We can understand this with an example.] The human mind has many different faculties, each with its own area of activity. Thus, for example, memory is one domain, desire another, and imagination still another, and none of them impinge on the other. Memory, for

וכן צריך שידע, שמציאותו ית’ מציאות פשוט בלי הרכבה וריבוי כלל, וכל השלימויות כלם נמצאים בו בדרך פשוט. פירוש - כי הנה בנפש ימצאו כחות רבים שונים שכל אחד מהם גדרו בפני עצמו. דרך משל, הזכרון כח אחד, והרצון כח אחר, והדמיון כח אחר, ואין אחד מאלה נכנס בגדר חבירו כלל. כי הנה גדר הזכרון גדר אחד וגדר הרצון גדר אחר, ואין הרצון נכנס בגדר הזכרון ולא הזכרון בגדר הרצון, וכן כלם.

example, has its own domain, as does desire, and desire does not penetrate the domain of memory, nor does memory enter that of desire. The same is true of all the mind's faculties. [The human mind can therefore be said to have structure and is not simple.]

When we speak of God, however, these are not different faculties. There exist in Him qualities that in a human being would be different, since He has desire, wisdom and ability, and is perfect in every conceivable way. Nevertheless, the true nature of His essence is a Oneness that intrinsically contains and encompasses everything that can be considered perfection. All perfection therefore exists in God, not as something added on to His existence, but as an integral part of His intrinsic identity, whose essence includes all types of perfection. By virtue of its intrinsic nature, it is impossible that His essence not include all perfection. Admittedly, this is something far beyond the grasp of our understanding and imagination, and there hardly exists a way to express it and put it into words. Our intellect and imagination are only capable of grasping things bound by the natural limitations created by God, since these are the only things that our senses can detect and convey to our minds. [We are incapable of conceiving these different qualities as a single simple essence, since] among created things, they are different, separate concepts.

אך האדון ית"ש איננו בעל כחות שונים, אע"פ שבאמת יש בו ענינים שבנו הם שונים, כי הרי הוא רוצה והוא חכם והוא יכול והוא שלם בכל שלימות. אמנם אמתת מציאותו הוא ענין אחד שכולל באמתתו וגדרו [פירוש - אמתת ענינו. כי אין שייך גדר בו ית' אלא על צד היתר לשון] כל מה שהוא שלימות. ונמצא שיש בו כל השלימות לא כדבר נוסף על מהותו ואמתת ענינו, אלא מצד אמתת ענינו בעצמה שכוללת באמתת כל השלימות, שאי אפשר לענין שהוא מבלתי כל השלימות מצד עצמו. והנה באמת הדרך הזה רחוק מאד מהשגותינו וציורינו, וכמעט שאין לנו דרך לכארו ומלות לפרשו. כי אין ציורינו ודמיונותינו תופסים אלא ענינים מוגבלים בגבול הטבע הנברא ממנו ית', שזה מה שחושינו מרגישים ומביאים ציורו אל השכל, ובברואים הנה הענינים רבים ונפרדים. אולם כבר הקדמנו, שאמתת מציאותו ית' אינה מושגת, ואין להקיש ממה שרואים בברואים על הבורא ית', כי אין ענינם ומציאותם שוה כלל שנוכל לדון מזה על זה.

PART B: INFINITE

Part of God's being Wholly Other is His being infinite. All things worldly are finite; they are limited within particular boundaries, which define their essence. This applies to both essences that we know as physical, and even to *spiritual* essences such as angels, all of which are bounded by their fundamental essence. God, however, Who is not a *creation*, is not defined or limited by any boundaries. He is fundamentally infinite.

The concept of infinity is not easy to grasp; in fact, for finite beings, it is impossible to grasp. In thinking about God, we have to get used to the idea of our having limited understanding.

1. **Melachim (Kings) I 8:27 – God cannot be contained.**

Behold, the heavens and the upper heavens will not contain You.

הנה השמים ושמי השמים לא יכלכלוך.

2. **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *The Infinite Light*, pg. 25 – To an infinite Being, the entire universe is like nothing.**

The act of creation involved absolutely no effort on the part of God. When the Torah says that He “rested” on the seventh day, it does not mean that He rested because He was weary or tired after six days of hard work. Rather it means that God stopped creating after six days, since the world was completed with the creation of man. The act of creation, however, involved absolutely no effort on the part of God, as the prophet Isaiah taught, “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord, the everlasting God, Creator of the wide world, grows neither weary nor faint” (Isaiah 40:28).

This is because God is absolutely infinite. To an infinite Being, the entire universe is like nothing, and therefore, its creation involves no effort. The Bible thus says, “Everything on earth is like nothing to Him, He does as He wills with the host of heaven and the hordes of the earth” (Daniel 4:32). Every possible thing, even the creation of a universe, is infinitely easy for an infinite God.

3. **Alexander Seinfeld, *The Art of Amazement*, pp. 40-41 – Being finite ourselves, we cannot fathom infinity.**

Even the word “infinite” is a limiting name, because, like all names, it excludes other possibilities. By definition, the Infinite must include all possibilities. But we have no better word than “infinite” to describe that which goes on forever. It seems that, for finite creatures like us, an effort to imagine infinity is no more plausible than my desktop computer appreciating these words as I type them. We’re simply not built for that.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

⇒ **God is Wholly Other. He is unlike anything we know, and transcends anything we can even imagine. The nature of His existence is unknowable and undefined.**

SECTION IV: GOD IS ONE AND UNIQUE

In its simple sense, the concept of Divine unity implies that there is no other god besides the true God, or that there is no independent power other than Him. As we have already noted, He alone is the Creator, and there is none besides Him.

In a deeper sense, though, the unity of God implies that there is no other essence besides God. Only God is true existence, and for anything to exist it must have some participation in the true existence of God. In this sense, God is One, and there is *nothing* besides Him.

PART A. NO OTHER GOD

1. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 6:4 – Shema Yisrael, a declaration of God’s unity, is the most basic statement of Jewish faith.**

Hear O Israel the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

שמע ישראל ה' א-להינו ה' אחד:

2. **Yeshayahu 44:6, 8 – There is no god besides God.**

I am first and I am last, and besides Me there is no God... There is no other God besides Me, no other Creator. There is no rock I do not know (i.e., no power independent of mine – Targum).

... אני ראשון ואני אחרון ומבלעדי אין א-להים ... היש אלוה מבלעדי ואין צור בל ידעתי - (ת"י ולית דתקיף אלהן דמן קדמי מתיבה ליה תקיף:)

3. **Tehillim (Psalms) 89:7-9 – God is unique.**

Who in the skies can compare to God?
Who is like Him of the sons of might?
A God too dreadful for the holy ones,
Too great and awesome for all around him.
O Lord of hosts, who is like You?
Mighty God, girded with faith.

כי מי בשחק יערך לה' ידמה לה' בבני אלים:
אל נערץ בסוד קדשים רבה ונורא על כל סביביו:
ה' א-להי צבאות מי כמוך חסין יה ואמונתך סביבותך:

4. **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, The Infinite Light, p. 32 – The great declaration of faith.**

This is the Shema, our declaration of faith. Twice each day, the believing Jew cries out these words. They are among the first things a Jew learns as a child, and the last words that he utters before he dies. On every Jewish doorpost, there is a mezuzah proclaiming these very same words. They are found again in the tefillin, bound daily next to the heart and mind. All these proclaim this most basic principle of Judaism.

Just as God is One, so is He unique. There is absolutely no power that can compare to Him. He is the one from whom all power emanates. This was one of the first things the Jewish people understood about God after the Exodus and they sang by the Red Sea, "Who is like You, O God, among the mighty? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praise, working wonders?" (Exodus 15:11).

PART B. THE ONLY TRUE EXISTENCE

We have mentioned the Shema in connection with God's unity as the only God; reading the same words, we can further understand that there is no true existence outside that of God's unity.

1. **Devarim 6:4 – Taking a deeper look at the Shema.**

Hear O Israel the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

שמע ישראל ה' א-להינו ה' אחד:

2. **Ramchal, Derech Hashem 1:1:6, Translated by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan – All things depend upon the perfect Oneness of God.**

Among the things that it is also necessary to know is that God must be absolutely one. It is impossible that there exist more than one being whose existence is intrinsically imperative. Only one Being can possibly exist with this necessarily perfect essence, and therefore the only reason all other things have the possibility of existence is that God wills them to exist. All other things

וממה שצריך שידע עוד, שהמצוי הזה ית"ש מוכרח שיהיה אחד ולא יותר. פירוש - שאי אפשר שימצאו מצויים רבים שמציאותם מוכרח מעצמו, אלא אחד בלבד צריך שימצא במציאות המוכרח והשלם הזה. ואם שימצאו נמצאים אחרים, לא ימצאו אלא מפני שהוא ימצאם ברצונו, ונמצאים כלם תלויים בו ולא מצויים מעצמם:

therefore depend on Him, and so do not have intrinsic existence.

3. **Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *The Faith of Maimonides*, pg. 36 – There is no “true being” other than God.**

What we have said of the concept of truth applies also to the concept of being. Maimonides quotes the verse of Scripture, “There is none else besides Him” – the plain meaning of which is that there is no divinity except God – to mean: “There is no true being besides Him that is like Him.” This is not the mere negation of any other divine being, but the negation of any true being besides God.

4. ***Ibid.*, p. 35-36 – God is the “Necessary Being.”**

[A]ssume that a man were to say: In this world as it is and as we know it, in which an electricity network is constructed and is in working order, if we press this switch we shall cause light to appear in this room... Here, the philosopher would ask a question which is never raised by those who are not philosophers: Perhaps the existence of the world itself is nothing but an accident, and it is possible for this world not to have existed at all?... In other words, can we conceive of such a thing whose very concept of essence cannot be detached from the concept of its existence or being?

That thing whose concept of essence cannot be separated from its concept of existence, is called, in philosophical discourse, *necessary being*. What Maimonides intended to state in the four *halachot* we have been discussing is that there is no necessary being except for God; that in the profoundest sense of these terms, the concept of being and the concept of truth apply to God alone.

Let us return to the fourth of these *halachot*, which sums it up in the following words: “And this is what the prophet says: ‘The Lord God is truth.’” We should point out here that according to the plain meaning of this Biblical verse, and in the context of the preceding verses, what Jeremiah was speaking of is the nothingness of idols, which have no existence, and that he was contrasting them to the existence of God.

But Maimonides discovered in these words not merely a negation of the existence of idols, but something much more profound, which he expressed in his comments on Jeremiah’s words: “He Himself is truth, and no other has truth like His truth.” That is to say: there is nothing in all existence which is truth in the sense in which God is truth.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

- ∞ When we say that God is One, we mean to say two points. Firstly, we say that there is no Creator other than Him, no Master other than Him, and no power other than Him.
- ∞ We also make a deeper statement. We say that *there is no existence but His existence*. The existence of a particular entity is only true insofar that it draws its existence from the true existence of God.

SECTION IV: GOD HAS NO BODY OR FORM

One of the fundamental beliefs about God is that He does not possess a body, shape, or form. As we have already shown, God is “wholly other,” such that He does not bear comparison to anything that the human mind can imagine. It follows that He has no shape or form, for that would make Him comparable to images that are known to humanity. Furthermore, God is infinite, a concept that precludes shape and form, for all shapes and forms are bound by finite borders or definitions.

1. Deuteronomy 4:15 – After the great revelation at Sinai, God affirmed that “you saw no form.”

Consider this carefully: You saw no manner of form on the day that God spoke to you at Horeb (Sinai).

ונשמרתם מאד לנפשתיכם כי לא ראיתם כל תמונה
ביום דבר ידוד אליכם בחרב מתוך האש:

2. Shemot (Exodus) 33:20 – No human being can “see” God.

He said, “You cannot see My face, for no one may see Me, and live.”

ויאמר לא תוכל לראת את פני כי לא יראני האדם וחי:

Here we reach a major problem: the Torah itself frequently speaks of God as if He has a form, referring for instance to His “hand.” If we do not believe that God is physical, why then does the Torah itself speak of God in physical terms? Maimonides grappled with this issue:

3. Maimonides, Commentary to Mishnah, Sanhedrin Chap. 10, Third Principle – The Biblical use of anthropomorphisms (bodily descriptions) are just figures of speech.

Wherever in the Scriptures God is spoken of with the attributes of material bodies, like motion, standing, sitting, speaking, and so forth, **all these are figures of speech**, as the Sages said, “The Torah speaks in the language of men” (Berachot 31b).

וכל מה שבא בכתבי הקודש שמתארים אותו בתארי
הגופות כמו ההליכה והעמידה והשיבה והדיבור
וכיוצא בזה הכל דרך השאלה, וכן אמרו ז”ל (ברכות
לא:): דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם.

But Maimonides seems to leave us just as badly off. Why would God in His Torah speak in misleading terms? The reason is that if we only approach God as Wholly Other then we cannot have any connection with Him. In fact we cannot speak about Him at all.

4. Rav Shimshon Dovid Pincus, Nefesh Shimshon: Gates of Emunah, pp. 210-211 – Judaism does not attempt to describe or to understand God’s nature, for it is unknowable.

Judaism involves itself very little in the theological issues of understanding God’s nature. “For God is in Heaven and you are on the earth. Therefore your words should be few” (Kohelet/Ecclesiastes 5:1). We know very little about God. We believe that He exists, that He is “great and exceedingly praised, and His greatness is unfathomable.” However we do not spend our days and nights pondering over these issues...

Even Kabbalah, which seemingly examines and describes God’s nature, is completely different from theology. Kabbalah cannot be called the study of that which is Divine because it does not involve itself with God’s actual nature. It rather focuses on the ways by which God relates to the world, describing the occurrences of this world in terms of their source in the upper worlds and spheres.

When God decided to create us to relate to Him, He not only had to create man and the entire universe we know. He also had to generate limited manifestations of Himself that we can have some connection to. These are all the names and actions of God that are recorded in the Torah. They do not refer to God in His essence but, as the book *Nefesh HaChaim* discusses at length, they refer to God as He relates in various ways to our limited world.

5. **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *The Infinite Light*, p. 35 – The use of physical descriptions serves to indicate Divine attributes to us.**

We normally address God as we would address another person. It is therefore natural for the Torah to do so. Thus, when the Torah describes God's action, it may speak of God's hand. When it says that He sees us, it may speak of His eye. In saying that we are lower than He, it may say that we are under His feet. None of these expressions, however, is meant to imply that God has any body or form. They are merely spoken in allegory, relating to His power and action in the world.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV:

- ⌘ Although a fundamental belief concerning God is that He possesses no form, shape, or body, Scripture often refers to God with physical descriptions. The verse thus refers to God's feet, God's hands, God's countenance, nose, and so on. In a similar vein, the Torah speaks of God's anger, kindness, patience, vengeance, and so on, all of which are human attributes.
- ⌘ Concerning God, all of these elements, physical or emotional, are allegorical, and refer to ways in which God chooses to act with His creation: Scripture speaks in the language of people. Nevertheless, the allegories are precise, and man, created in the image of God, is thus able to "know" his Creator through his own person.

SECTION V. FORGING A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Throughout this class we have worked to clarify that God is Wholly Other. It should now be completely clear that the image we have from Michelangelo's famous picture on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel has more in common with Santa Claus or Zeus than it does with our understanding of God.

Even God as we grasp Him as the Creator of the entire universe does not approach His essence. He is infinite, totally removed from the world, transcendent. But, as we said in the last section, He has generated a somewhat limited manifestation of Himself that we can have some relationship to. That limitation of the infinite is the greatest miracle of all (and a major topic for the Kabbalah) and it allows us to connect with Him. Building a relationship with God is the entire purpose of the world He created, and of the entire Torah and its mitzvot that He gave to us.

The rest of this class will describe briefly some of the ways in which we can work to connect with God even while being cognizant that His essence completely transcends our understanding.

PART A. DISTANT YET CLOSE**1. Tehillim 145:18 – God is close to those who call Him.**

God is close to all those who call Him – to all those who call Him in truth.

קרוב ה' לכל קוראיו לכל אשר יקראוהו באמת:

2. Yeshayahu 57:15 – God is transcendent yet close.

For so says the High and Lofty One that inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

כי כה אמר רם ונשא שכן עד וקדוש שמו מרום וקדוש
אשכון ואת דכא ושפל רוח להחיות רוח שפלים
ולהחיות לב נדכאים:

3. Bereishit Rabbah 4:4 – There exists a dichotomy between God's detachment and His closeness.

When He wills it, "Behold I fill the heavens and earth," and when He wills it He spoke from between the two staves of the ark. Said Rabbi Chanina the son of Isi: there are times the entire universe cannot contain the glory of His Divinity and there are times He speaks to a man from amid the hairs of his head, as it says (Job 38), "and God answered Job from the hair."

כשהוא רוצה הלא את השמים ואת הארץ אני מלא
וכשהוא רוצה היה מדבר עם משה מבין שני בדי
הארון א"ר חנינא בר איסי פעמים שאין העולם ומלואו
מחזיקים כבוד אלהותו פעמים שהוא מדבר עם האדם
מבין שערות ראשו הה"ד (איוב לח) ויען ה' את איוב מן
הסערה וגו'

4. Rabbi Eliezer Berkowitz, The Concept of Holiness (Essential Essays on Judaism, p. 271) – God is both far and near.

On the strength of the passages we have examined, it is justified to say that "high and holy" is a paradoxical concept which yet is true of the God of the Bible. "High and holy" is the way God is related to His creation. As the infinite Being, as the Creator, He is inaccessible, He is far removed from everything created; as the Holy One, He is accessible, He is near, He is "in your midst." He is transcendent as well as imminent. The Rabbis of the Midrash (*Devarim Rabbah* 2:10) used to say of Him: *Rachok vekarov*, far and near. "I dwell high and holy" means: Even though I am so far removed by My absolute nature, I am nonetheless near through My actions. And because of that, as I dwell on high, I also dwell with the "contrite and humble spirit" and revive him.

God is at once transcendent, and in that capacity unknowable and beyond our existence. At the same time, He is immanent, existing within everything that we experience. That is, God is at the same time *in* the world and *beyond* it.

5. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Handbook of Jewish Thought, Volume 1, pg. 15 – Our limited understanding has difficulty grasping how God can be both immanent and transcendent.

Our understanding of God's relationship to the world is twofold, namely, that He is both immanent and transcendental. Thus, He both fills and encompasses all creation. This duality, however, is only due to our imperfect understanding of God, since He Himself is the most absolute Unity.

6. **Bereishit Rabba 68:9 – The world is *in* God, not the other way around.**

Rav Huna in the name of Rabbi Ami said: Why do we call God by the name *HaMakom* (The Place)? For He is the place of the world rather than His world being His place.

ר"ה בשם ר' אמי אמר מפני מה מכנין שמו של הקב"ה וקוראין אותו מקום שהוא מקומו של עולם ואין עולמו מקומו.

7. **Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner, Nefesh HaChaim 3:1 – God sustains all existence.**

The most straightforward understanding (of God being called *HaMakom*) is that just as a place supports and holds the thing that is placed inside it, so too does God support and sustain all the worlds and creations.

ולפי פשוטו ר"ל כמו שהמקום הוא סובל ומחזיק איזה דבר וחפץ המונח עליו. כן בדמיון זה הבורא אדון כל ית"ש הוא המקום האמיתי הסובל ומקיים העולמות והבריות כלם.

PART B. THE SHECHINAH

The will of God is to dwell, as it were, among mankind, within this world. It is our duty to form ourselves into worthy vessels for the Divine Presence, the *Shechinah*, to dwell within. During the times of the Holy Temple, the dwelling of the *Shechinah* among Israel was revealed in the daily miracles that took place there. Even in times of exile, however, the *Shechinah* is present among Israel, waiting for the time of renewed revelation.

1. **Shemot 25:8 – The *Shechinah* dwells among Israel.**

And you shall make Me a Temple, and I will dwell among them.

ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם.

2. **Talmud Bavli, Megillah 29a – The presence of the *Shechinah* dwells among Israel even in times of exile.**

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says: Come and see how beloved Israel are before God – that every place to which they were exiled, the *Shechinah* was with them. They were exiled to Egypt, the *Shechinah* was with them ... they were exiled to Babylon, the *Shechinah* was with them ... and even when they are destined to be redeemed, the *Shechinah* will be with them, as it is written, "The Lord, your God, will return and will bring back your captivity." It does not say that "He will return [your captivity]," but rather, "He will return" – to teach you that God returns with them from the exiles.

בוא וראה כמה חביבין ישראל לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא שבכל מקום שגלו שכינה עמהן גלו למצרים שכינה עמהן שנאמר הנגלה נגליתי לבית אביך בהיותם במצרים וגו' גלו לבבל שכינה עמהן שנאמר למענכם שלחתי בבלה ואף כשהן עתידין ליגאל שכינה עמהן שנאמר ושב ה' אלהיך את שבותך והשיב לא נאמר אלא ושב מלמד שהקדוש ברוך הוא שב עמהן מבין הגלויות.

3. **Talmud Bavli, Berachot 6a – There is a constant presence of the *Shechinah* among us.**

From where do we know that ten who pray, the *Shechinah* is among them? As it says,

ומנין לעשרה שמתפללין ששכינה עמהם שנאמר אלהים נצב בעדת אל ומנין לשלשה שיושבין בדין

“God stands among His congregation.” And from where do we know that three who sit in judgment, the Shechinah is among them? For it says, “Among the judges He will judge.” And from where do we know that two who are immersed in the study of Torah, the Shechinah is among them ... and even a person who sits alone and studies the Torah, the Shechinah is with him? For it is written, “Every place where you will mention My name, I will come to you and bless you.”

ששכינה עמהם שנאמר בקרב אלהים ישפוט ומנין לשנים שיושבים ועוסקין בתורה ששכינה עמהם שנאמר אז נדברו יראי ה' איש אל רעהו ויקשב ה' וגו' מאי ולחושבי שמו אמר רב אשי חשב אדם לעשות מצוה ונאנס ולא עשאה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו עשאה ומנין שאפילו אחד שיושב ועוסק בתורה ששכינה עמו שנאמר בכל המקום אשר אזכיר את שמי אבוא אליך וברכתך.

PART C: EMULATING GOD

An important element in God's closeness to us is our ability to emulate His ways. By so doing, we connect to God. Since we cannot truly comprehend the essence of God, the Torah relates his attributes as the source and blueprint for how man should emulate Him.

1. **Shemot 34:6-7 – The Thirteen Attributes of God's Mercy.**

The Lord, the Lord, God, Compassionate and Gracious, Slow to Anger, and Abundant in Kindness and Truth; Preserver of Kindness for thousands of generations. Forgiver of Iniquity, Willful Sin, and Error, and Who Cleanses ...

ה' ה' קל רחום וחנון ארך אפים ורב חסד ואמת. נצר חסד לאלפים נשא עון ופשע וחטאה ונקה ...

2. **Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a – Following God means acting like Him.**

Regarding the verse, “After the Lord, your God, you shall follow” – is it possible to follow the Holy Presence? After all, it is written “For the Lord, your God, is a consuming fire?” Rather, [the meaning is] to follow His attributes. Just as He dresses the naked, also you should dress the naked. Just as He visited the sick, so you should visit the sick. Just as He consoled the mourners, so you should console mourners. Just as He buried the dead, so you should bury the dead.

מאי דכתיב אחרי ה' א-להיכם תלכו וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה והלא כבר נאמר כי ה' אלהיך אש אוכלה הוא אלא להלך אחר מדותיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא מה הוא מלביש ערומים כו' אף אתה הלבש ערומים הקדוש ברוך הוא ביקר חולים כו' אף אתה בקר חולים הקדוש ברוך הוא ניחם אבלים כו' אף אתה ניחם אבלים הקדוש ברוך הוא קבר מתים כו' אף אתה קבור מתים.

3. **Ramchal, Derech Hashem 1:2:1, Translated by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan – Emulating God gives us the ability to cleave to Divine perfection.**

God's purpose in creation was to bestow of His good to another. God alone is true perfection, free of all deficiency, and there is no perfection comparable to Him. Any imaginable perfection, with the exception of God's, is therefore not true perfection. Other things may be said to have perfection, but it is only relative to something

הנה התכלית בבריאה היה להיטיב מטובו ית' לזולתו. והנה תראה, כי הוא לבדו ית' ש השלימות האמיתית המשולל מכל החסרונות, ואין שלימות אחר כמוהו כלל. ונמצא שכל שלימות שידומה חוץ משלימותו ית', הנה איננו שלימות אמיתית...

less perfect. Absolute perfection, however, is only that of God...

[E]ven though created things cannot emulate God's perfection in their own right, the fact that they can be attached to Him allows them to partake of it, since they can be considered part of God's perfection as a result of their association with Him. They can thus derive pleasure from that true good to the greatest degree possible for them. The purpose of all that was created was therefore to bring into existence a creature who could derive pleasure from God's own good, in a way that would be possible for it.

הנה מצד התדבקם בו, יגיע להם באותו השיעור שאפשר ליתאר בשלימות ההוא ית', מצד היותם מתדבקים בו ית"ש, וימצאו נהנים בטובה האמיתית ההיא, בערך שאפשר להם ליהנות בה. ונמצא היות כונתו ית"ש בבריאה שברא, לברוא מי שיהיה נהנה בטובו ית' באותו הדרך שאפשר שיהנה בו:

4. **Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Michtav M'Eliyahu Vol. IV, p. 49-50 – Although there is a limit to our intellectual understanding of God, there is no limit as to how refined our character traits can become.**

Regarding the limits of that which the mind is able to grasp, the Sages said, "Do not investigate that which is beyond [the ability of the mind]" (Chagigah 13a). Rabbeinu Chananel explains: "There is no need to contemplate these matters, for one who contemplates them becomes confused." Not only should one not do it, but it is impossible to investigate that which is beyond the mind – and one who thinks he can do so, becomes confused.

However, a person's character traits have no upper limit. There is no limit to the spiritual ascent [possible in the perfection of one's character traits], especially in the trait of loving-kindness, through which we resemble God. As the Sages tell us: "Cleave to His character traits: bestow kindness, bury the dead, visit the sick, as God did" (Rashi, Devarim 13:5, based on Sotah 14a) ...

There is no limit or boundary to this form of cleaving [to God], for there is no limit to the opportunities for purifying one's character – in the realm of being truthful, doing kindness, and dedicating oneself [to Him] through love.

על השגת השכל אמרו "במופלא ממך בל תדרוש וכו' " (חגיגה יג.), ועיין שם בפירוש רבנו חננאל שכתב "ואין צריך להסתכל בהן, שהמסתכל בהן בא בטירוף הדעת", היינו שלא רק שאסור, אלא שאי אפשר לחקור במופלא לשכל, כי המדמה להסתכל מעבר לגבול השכל דעתו מיטרפת.

אבל למידות האדם אין גבול; היינו שאין גבול לאפשרות העלייה במעלות רוחניות, ובפרט במדת החסד, שבה מתדמים אליו ית', כאמרם ז"ל "הידבק במדותיו – גמול חסדים, קבור מתים, בקר חולים, כמו שעשה הקב"ה" (רש"י דברים יג, ה) ...

ולדבקות זו אין גבול ושיעור, כי אין גבול לאפשרות העלייה בטהרת המדות, באמת ובחסד ובמסירות נפש באהבה.

See further, the Morasha shiur *Being Like God*.

PART D: LOVE AND FEAR

Love and fear are the two most elemental character traits with which we serve God. Our love of God impels us to positive action in His service, and our fear urges us to beware of doing anything contrary to His will.

1. Maimonides, Laws of the Fundamentals of Torah 2:1, 2 – Reaching love and fear of God.

It is a mitzvah to love and fear this awesome God, as it says “You shall love the Lord your God” (Devarim/Deuteronomy 6:5), and “You shall fear the Lord, your God” (Ibid. 6:13). And what is the path to loving Him and fearing Him? At the time a man contemplates His wondrous and great creations, and sees in them His wisdom which has no comparison and no limit – immediately he loves and praises and glorifies and longs to know this great God, like King David said, “My soul thirsts for the living God” (Tehillim/Psalms 42:3). And when he considers those same things immediately he jumps back and fears and knows that he is a small and lowly creation with an insignificant understanding before the One whose understanding is perfect:

מצוה לאהבו וליראה הימנו, שנאמר “ואהבת, את ה' אלוהיך” (דברים ו, ה), ונאמר “את ה' אלוהיך תירא” (דברים ו, ג): והיאך היא הדרך לאהבתו ויראתו, בשעה שיתבונן האדם במעשיו וברואיו הנפלאים הגדולים, ויראה מהן חכמתו שאין לה ערך ולא קץ – מיד הוא אוהב ומשבח ומפאר ומתאוה ומתאוה גדולה לידע ה' הגדול, כמו שאמר דוד “צמאה נפשי לאלוהים, לאל חי” (תהילים מב, ג): וכשמחשב בדברים האלו עצמן מיד הוא נרתע לאחוריו וירא ויפחד ויודע שהוא בריה קטנה שפלה אפלה עומד בדעת קלה מעוטה לפני תמים דעות:

2. Ramban (Nachmanides), Letter of Instruction to Son – Considering where you are going and where you came from builds a healthy fear of God.

And through humility you will achieve fear because you will always consider “from where did you come, to where will you go?” (Pirkei Avot/Ethics of the Fathers 3:1). That you are a maggot and a worm in your life and even more so in your death. “And before whom will you stand in judgment?” Before the glorious King, for it says, “Behold all the heavens cannot contain You, and certainly not the hearts of man” (Divrei HaYamim/Chronicles II, 6), and, “Behold I fill the heavens and the earth, says God” (Jeremiah 23). And when you think about these, you will fear your Creator and guard yourself from sin. And with these characteristics you will rejoice in your portion.

ובעבור הענוה, תעלה על לבך מדת היראה, כי תתן אל לבך תמיד (אבות פרק ג) מאין באת, ולאן אתה הולך, ושאתה רמה ותולעה בחייד ואף כי במותך, ולפני מי אתה עתיד לתן דין וחשבון, לפני מלך הכבוד, שנאמר (דברי הימים ב ו), “הנה השמים ושמי השמים לא יכלכלוך אף כי לבות בני אדם”. ונאמר (ירמיהו כג), “הלא את השמים ואת הארץ אני מלא נאם ה'”. וכאשר תחשוב את כל אלה, תירא מבוראך ותשמר מן החטא. ובמדות האלה תהיה שמח בחלקך:

3. Rabbi Nechemiah Coopersmith, Transcendence and Oneness (from Aish.com) – Encounters with the Divine are inspiring.

Our moments of spirituality are encounters with:

- Unity
- Perfection
- Eternity
- Oneness
- Absolute Power

Truth

These are all aspects of God, the Infinite source of creation. When we cut through our finite, transient realm and connect to a higher source, we experience our greatest moments of spiritual pleasure. These moments are powerful because we grasp aspects of the infinite dimension within this world, and transcend.

These awesome moments lift us above the pettiness of the world. For that one moment, the aches and pains of life just don't matter. We're connected to something far greater and far more pleasurable. This puts everything into perspective. And the sensation is humbling.

Children walk around in this constant state of eyes-wide-open wonder. Everything is fresh. A walk around the block with my two-year-old son can be like going on a safari. "Look! A bird!! And check out these ants!"

Have we become jaded to the pervasive wonders of God's world? To increase the dosage of awe and joy in daily life, transform the mundane into something more spiritual. Open your eyes and see God's ever-present fingerprints.

PART E. TORAH AND MITZVOT

Though it is important to work directly on our fear and love of God, it must be understood that *all* of our Torah study and fulfillment of the mitzvot serve to connect us with God in ways that are beyond our conscious awareness and understanding. All the mitzvot, each in their own way, enable us to develop a personal relationship with the Divine.

In order to appreciate this fact, we must first internalize a fundamental principle in Judaism:

1. **Rabbi Akiva Tatz, *Worldmask*, pp. 13-14 – The world reflects the Torah, not the other way around.**

Torah and the world parallel each other exactly. Torah is the spiritual core; the world is its physical expression. Although this idea is quite well known, at its heart is an element which is often entirely unknown or seriously misunderstood. Let us delve into the relationship between Torah and the world as deeply as possible in order to discover some of the true wonder which it contains.

The nature of the parallel between Torah and physical reality is that Torah is the cause and the world is the result. It is not enough to understand that there is a correspondence between every detail of the physical universe and the Torah; it is essential to realize that each detail of the world exists because the Torah says so. In fact, every fine nuance of each detail exists exactly as it does in the world only because the Torah itself contains each of those details within details.

The analogy most commonly used to portray this relationship is that of a blueprint – the Torah is the blueprint of the world; just as an architect first draws up plans and the builder then follows those plans when building the physical structure, God first brought the Torah into being and then created the world using the Torah as its plan: "*Istakel b'Oraisa u'bara alma* – He looked into the Torah and created the world."

But there is another depth here: the Torah is not simply a plan in the sense of an architect's drawings; it is a plan in the sense of genes which themselves actually carry out the construction of the organism which results from the code carried in those genes. Certainly, the genetic code corresponds to the physical features which the organism possesses, but it would be a serious mistake to imagine that

this correspondence is *descriptive*, that the genes somehow reflect in coded form the physical reality; the genes do not describe, they do not reflect – they are the *reason* that the body looks as it does, they are the instructions and the mechanisms which construct the physical. In fact, the body is a reflection of the genes!

The Torah is the genetic material of the world. The words of Torah are God's words; but God's word was not simply spoken by Him at the time of the Creation (and then recorded in the Torah later) while He created the world by some unrelated means; His word *was the means, the mechanism of creation*. Each word spoken by God in creating the world crystallized into the object it described; this is the secret of the two meanings of the word "*davar*" – an "object", and "word"; an object in the world is God's word concretized.

2. **Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene, *Set in Stone*, p. 31 – Each mitzvah we fulfill intrinsically connects us with God.**

Judaism is not as much a religion as it is a relationship. It is only through mitzvah observance that man can build a deep, enduring, and meaningful relationship with God ...

That a mitzvah is the very process of forging the bond [with God] is contained within the very word מצוה, "commandment," closely related to the word צויתא, meaning a connection or a binding.

3. **Rav Shimshon David Pincus, *Nefesh Shimshon, Gates of Emunah*, pp. 244- 249 – The Torah and each of its commandments makes it possible to connect to God.**

By giving us the Torah, [God] transmitted to us His full wisdom, and He even gave us Himself along with it, so to speak.

What are we supposed to do with all this Torah we have received? Why do we need it at all? The answer is: so that with our own senses we may grasp the Divine greatness, dimension, and depth that is contained within the Torah. This idea is shockingly profound... And someone who learns Torah is learning the Torah of God, so to speak. In truth, this is what he is learning.

It is all contained within, just compressed. When something of large quantity is compacted, the resulting substance contains all the original content but in a compressed form. Nothing is missing, but it is miniaturized. When someone swallows a concentrated pill, it has the same effect as if he ingested the original, uncompressed substance...

In the future we will be able to handle things in their large, uncompressed state... All this will be ours!

We study using our human intellect and understanding, using our human eyes and ears. We render legal judgments, we eat matzah, we dwell in a sukkah, we eat meat and fish on Shabbos. We perform physical activities, and within this system familiar to human beings, we grasp hold of God, so to speak. This is Torah.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION VI:

- ⌘ At once, God is both distant and close. Although God is transcendent in nature, He is accessible in relationship. Indeed, His desire is to make His Presence dwell among Israel.
- ⌘ God remains unchanged – He was transcendent and elevated before He created the world, and He remains so after the creation. We, however, are given the opportunity to draw close to God, to emulate His ways and to find joy and comfort in His Presence.
- ⌘ We develop our relationship with God on an emotional level through love and fear of Him.
- ⌘ We can connect to God not only by becoming more like Him through character development but also through learning His Torah and keeping His commandments.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHAT IS THE JEWISH CONCEPTION OF GOD?

Our primary definition of God is as the Creator of all things, not only of visible things, but even of all things spiritual – of everything that exists. All things, even the smallest, are creations of God; all were fashioned with Divine intelligence, and with purpose and destiny.

God is omnipotent, the Master of all things that happen in the world. Nothing is beyond His capability.

God has no physical form or any dimension that we can possibly fathom. God is infinite and eternal. He preceded the creation of the world. Indeed, He is not *in* the creation; the creation is in Him.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT “GOD IS ONE”?

When we say that God is One, we mean to say two points. Firstly, we say that there is no Creator other than Him, no Master other than Him, and no power other than Him. We also make a deeper statement. We say that *there is no existence but His existence*. The existence of a particular entity is only true insofar that it draws its existence from the true existence of God.

“God is One” means that everything that happens in the entire creation is an expression of His will. Everything we experience, the myriads of conflicting forces in our universe, reflects one Unity, a Oneness that knows no parallel. Pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow all have one Source. The good things that happen to bad people and the bad things that happen to good people all have one Origin.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT GOD? HOW CAN WE GET TO KNOW HIM BETTER?

God is Wholly Other. He is unlike anything we know, and transcends anything we can even imagine. The nature of His existence is unknowable and undefined.

However, where the mind ends, the heart begins. As such, we can have an intuitive appreciation of God. We can arrive at this in a number of ways: through contemplating His creation, appreciating His kindnesses, mimicking His virtues, studying His wisdom in the Torah, and keeping His mitzvot.

HOW SHOULD THE PHYSICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF GOD IN SCRIPTURE AND TALMUDIC SOURCES BE UNDERSTOOD?

Although a fundamental belief concerning God is that He possesses no form, shape, or body, Scripture often refers to God with physical descriptions. The verse thus refers to God’s feet, God’s hands, God’s countenance, nose, and so on. In a similar vein, the Torah speaks of God’s anger, kindness, patience, vengeance, and so on, all of which are human attributes.

Concerning God, all of these elements, physical or emotional, are allegorical, and refer to ways in which God chooses to act with His creation: Scripture speaks in the language of people. Nevertheless, the allegories are precise, and man, created in the image of God, is thus able to “know” his Creator through his own person.