

# 8

## God: Encountering the Holy

Israel literally means “to wrestle with God.” In this class, we’ll enter into the sacred struggle as we consider the many different paths that Jews take to connect with the Holy One.

# God Wrestling

And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him.

Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking."

But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

Said the other, "What is your name?"

He replied, "Jacob."

**Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Yisrael, for you have wrestled with God and man, and you have prevailed."**

Jacob asked, "Tell me your name."

But he said, "You must not ask my name!"

And he took leave of him there. So Jacob named the place *Pen-ee-el*, meaning, "I have encountered God face to face, yet my life has been preserved."

Genesis 32:24-30



Will Deutsch  
**Jacob Wrestling Angel**

Will Deutsch is a Los Angeles based artist. This illustration is part of his series, entitled "Notes from the Tribe," which attempts to encapsulate the modern Jewish experience in the Diaspora. The complete series can be viewed on his website, [notesfromthetribe.com](http://notesfromthetribe.com).

# Some Basic Jewish God Talk

Judaism does not have a commonly agreed upon creed. In fact, it sometimes feels like there are as many different unique theologies as there are Jews. Yet, there are some basics of “God talk” that do cross ideological lines, particularly the belief that:

**God is One**

**God is both transcendent**

(bigger than us)

**and imminent**

(involved with us)

---

## Monotheism

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד

*Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad*

LISTEN-UP GOD-WRESTLERS: YHVH is our God YHVH is One.

## Transcendent

*Adon olam asher malakh  
B'terem kol yetzir niv'ra  
L'et na'asa v'heftzo kol  
Azai melekh sh'mo nikra.*

The Eternal One ruled before  
the birth of every living thing.  
When God made all according to His will,  
Then God was known as King.

*V'aharei kikhlot hakol  
L'vado yimlokh nora  
V'hu haya v'hu hoveh  
V'hu y'hiyeh b'tifarah.*

When all is ended,  
God will reign alone in awesome majesty.  
God was, God is,  
and God will be, glorious for all eternity.

*V'hu echad, v'ain sheni  
L'hamshil lo l'hachbirah  
B'li reishit b'li tachlit  
V'lo ha'oz v'hamisra.*

Peerless and unique is God,  
with none at all to be compared.  
Beginningless and endless too,  
God's vast dominion is not shared.

## Imminent

*V'hu Eli v'hai go'ali  
V'tsur hevli b'et tsara  
V'hu nisi u'manos li  
M'nat kosi b'yom ekra.*

He is my God and my Redeemer,  
my refuge in times of struggle.  
God is my support and my shelter,  
The One who fills my cup when I call.

*B'yado afkid ruchy  
B'eit ishan v'a'ira  
V'im ruchy g'viyati  
Adonai li, v'lo ira.*

Into God's palm I place my spirit,  
when I wake and when I sleep.  
God is with me, body and soul,  
God is with me, I am not afraid.

## Adon Olam

(Shlomo ibn Gabirol, 1021-1058)

# 49 Names of God

INSTRUCTIONS: Read through the whole list and then go back and place...

A CHECK by 5 Names that you feel comfortable with/are meaningful to you.

AN X by 5 Names that you do not feel comfortable with/are not meaningful to you.

A QUESTION MARK by 5 Names that surprised you/you don't understand/you want to discuss.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1. Adonai — My Lord   | <input type="checkbox"/> 27. Ro'einu — Our Shepherd                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Eloheinu — Our God   | <input type="checkbox"/> 28. El Emunah — Reliable One                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Kadosh Baruch Hu — Holy Blessed One                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> 29. Ahuv — Beloved                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Avinu — Our Father   | <input type="checkbox"/> 30. Adonai Tzeva'ot — Master of Armies           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5. HaGadol — Great One  | <input type="checkbox"/> 31. Ruach Ha'Olam — Spirit of the World          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6. El Nora — Terrifying One   | <input type="checkbox"/> 32. Avinu She'ba'shamayim — Our Father in Heaven |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 7. El Elyon — Highest God   | <input type="checkbox"/> 33. Anochi — I Am                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 8. Eli — My God   | <input type="checkbox"/> 34. Melech Malchei HaMelachim — King of Kings    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 9. Yedid Nefesh — Soulmate  | <input type="checkbox"/> 35. HaMakor — The Source                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 10. Melech — King   | <input type="checkbox"/> 36. Tzur Yisrael — Rock of Israel                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 11. Tzuri — My Rock   | <input type="checkbox"/> 37. Rachmana — Compassionate One                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 12. YHVH — Was/Is/Will Be   | <input type="checkbox"/> 38. Oseh HaShalom — Maker of Peace               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 13. Atik Yomi — The Ancient One   | <input type="checkbox"/> 39. Shekhina — The Presence                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 14. Mekor HaChayim — Source of Life                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> 40. Avinu Malkeynu — Our Father and Ruler        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 15. HaBorei — The Creator   | <input type="checkbox"/> 41. El Nistar — The Hidden One                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 16. HaShem — The Name   | <input type="checkbox"/> 42. Elohai Avoteinu — God of Our Ancestors       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 17. HaGoel — The Savior   | <input type="checkbox"/> 43. Echad — Oneness                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 18. HaMakom — The Omnipresent   | <input type="checkbox"/> 44. Moreinu — Our Teacher                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 19. Av HaRachamim — Merciful Father                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> 45. Nishmat Kol Chai — The Breath of All Life    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 20. Ein Sof — The Infinite  | <input type="checkbox"/> 46. Shalom — Peace                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 21. Refa'einu — Our Healer  | <input type="checkbox"/> 47. Ayin — Nothingness                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 22. Dayan HaOlam — Eternal Judge  | <input type="checkbox"/> 48. Ribono Shel Olam — Master of the Universe    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 23. Ma'ayan Chayenu — Wellspring of Life                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> 49. Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh — I Will Be What I Will Be |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 24. Ish Milchama — The Man of War   |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 25. Ehyeh — Becoming  |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 26. Mi She'amar V'haya HaOlam — The One<br>Who Spoke the World into Being |   |

## Share and compare with a hevruta partner:

What do your lists have in common? What is different?

What trends do you notice?

What does your list suggest about your personal theology?

---

**Rabbi Yossi bar Hanina said:** God's speech came to each individual according to their capacity. Do not be surprised at this: When the manna descended for Israel, it tasted differently to everyone.

To the infants it tasted like their mothers' milk, as it says: "It tasted like rich cream [Num. 11:8]."

To the young it tasted differently, as it says: "Bread and oil and honey [Ezekiel 16:19]."

To the elders it tasted differently, as it says: "The taste of it was like wafers made with honey [Ex. 16:31]."

In the same way as the manna tasted in each person's mouth according to their uniqueness, so each individual heard God's speech according to their uniqueness.

Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 12:25



# Close Encounters at Sinai:

## Transcendent and Imminent

The Bible is a vast collection of literature, written down at different times, by different authors, with different points of view. In these two texts, Moses and Elijah both go to Sinai and have profound experiences of God. However, the God they encounter at Sinai is portrayed very differently.

### Exodus 19, “Fire on the Mountain”

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai. Having journeyed from Rephidim, they entered the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain, and Moses went up to God.

On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder and lightning and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the shofar, and all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses led

the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain.

Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for God had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The blare of the shofar grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder. Adonai came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and Adonai called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up.



#### How is God portrayed in this text?

### I Kings 19, “Still Small Voice”

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.”

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day’s journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he

might die. “I have had enough, God,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that



food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of Adonai.

He came to a cave there, where he spent the night, and the word of Adonai came to him, saying to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” And Elijah answered, “I have been zealous, truly zealous, for Adonai of hosts, for the children of Israel have abandoned your covenant; they have destroyed your altars, and your prophets they have killed by the sword. I am the only one left, and now they seek my life so they can take it away.”

God said: “Go out and stand on the mountain before Adonai.” Behold! Adonai went by, and a huge, strong wind broke the mountains to pieces and shattered the rocks before Adonai, but Adonai was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake, but Adonai was not in the earthquake. After the wind came a fire, but Adonai was not in the fire. And after the fire came a still, small voice.

When Elijah heard, he wrapped his face in his robe and went out and stood at the entrance to the cave, and a voice came to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”



**How is God portrayed in this text?**

**Which portrayal of God more closely represents your personal theology? Why?**

# 100-Word Theologies

## Rabbi Menachem Creditor

Congregation Netivot Shalom, Berkeley, CA

God is the collective potential of the human imagination. Every good thing every person has ever yearned for and will ever yearn for is what I mean by the word “God.” My God doesn’t send cancer or hurricanes or people to hurt others. When a person dies, a fragment of divine potential is lost. When I ask God to embrace my lost loved one, I cry to my community that every life matters. “I love you” means that I am not alone and that I am here so that you need not be either. That, for me, is God.

## Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg

Director of Education, “Ask Big Questions” for Hillel International

My theology is: I don’t know. I’ve had powerful experiences of transcendence that, as I interpret them, substantiate my sense of the divine as the vast interconnectedness of all being, and maybe more than that. But am I right? I’ll never be sure. We must engage theology with humility and an awareness that things may be messy and complex as we try to make sense of ultimate reality from a deeply subjective place. Our understandings reflect the imperfect filters through which we view the world. I’m always suspicious of those who claim certainty, or that they have all the answers.

## Rabbi Adam Kligfeld

Temple Beth Am, Los Angeles, CA

I believe in God. More than I believe that God commands, I believe that God has a commanding voice, heard through our texts, our nation’s narrative, and through humanity’s shared consciousness. The voice commands us universally, to care for earth and her inhabitants. The voice commands us particularly, to care for Torah and build a worthy Jewish life. Living with mitzvot, attuned to Godliness, is not slavishness. It is loving devotion. We fail at it almost as much as we succeed. We stay committed because the bond is that dear. I believe that God was at Sinai. But more importantly, I know that we were at Sinai. And we listened.

## Rabbi Deborah Silver

Adat Ari El, Valley Village, CA

I continuously fall in and out of relationship with God (a word I dislike for being too small). When I feel most alienated, I often find I’ve been using unhelpful metaphors — Hero, King, Father. Sometimes changing them helps — Mystery, Compassion, Warrior — but even they can fall short. As my interfaith hevruta taught me, ‘The living God has moved on.’ The Name can never be pronounced. I try to ask, ‘Where is God in this?’ There have been some moments when I have seen or felt or trusted. And I can live off the energy of those for a long time.

## Rabbi Brad Hirschfield

President, CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership

I believe that God is close, caring, loving, commanding, and involved. I believe that God listens, responds, and has a plan. I also believe that God is infinite and therefore ultimately unknowable, indecipherable, and deniable. I believe in both the God to whom I turn for help in moments of pain and in gratitude in moments of joy, and in the logical absurdity and offensiveness of that God saving me while leaving others to suffer. I believe in both the God my head tells me about and that my heart feels. Their mutual exclusivity being no problem in the face of God's infinitude. I believe that we are in God's image, and that the God we believe in, or deny, is in ours. I believe in the power of both, which are truly one.

## Rabbi Elie Spitz

Congregation B'nai Israel, Tustin, CA

Dear God, Our relationship is more grounded in emotion and intuition than analytic thought. I call on You to express my yearnings, my fears, my gratitude. And with such words, I feel closer to You, because I believe that You care and listen. I pray to You each day as an act of discipline, a way to make time for our relationship and to express my identity as a religious Jew. There is little, if anything, that I can say about You. For You are Other. And yet, I do believe that you are the Consciousness embedded in all that exists, uniting and guiding.



---

**Try Writing Your Own 100-Word Theology:**

## Reflection on Chapter 8



**To me, God is:**

**To me, God isn't:**

**When I think about God, these are some of my questions:**

# Additional Readings

## Books

---

- Neil Gillman, *The Way Into Encountering God in Judaism*  
An accessible overview of the major Jewish understandings of God as described in the Bible and Talmud, as well as by generations of Jewish philosophers and theologians.
- Elliot Dorff, *Knowing God*  
A rationalist rabbi shares his personal quest for spiritual connection and understanding. A wise and enlightening book.
- Bradley Shavit Artson, *God of Becoming and Relationship*  
A moving introduction to process theology, an approach to God characterized by dynamism, inter-connectedness, and ultimately a God that even skeptics can believe in.
- Rifat Sonsino & Daniel Syme, *Finding God: Selected Responses*  
A simple-to-read introduction to the thought of many of the most important Jewish theologians, from Maimonides and Spinoza to Buber and Heschel. A great introduction to the vast diversity of Jewish belief.
- Harold Schulweis, *For Those Who Can't Believe*  
The greatest pulpit rabbi of his generation tackles the challenge of faith with honesty, openness, and penetrating insight.
- Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*  
A slim, heartfelt, and intensely personal volume. This book is about finding a way to understand God when one's world has just fallen apart.