Different Understandings of God

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Source Texts

Genesis 9:17

[8]And God said to Noah and to his sons with him, [9] "I now establish My covenant with you and your offspring to come, [10]and with every living thing that is with you -birds, cattle, and every wild beast as well -all that have come out of the ark, every living thing on earth. [11]I will maintain My covenant with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." [12]God further said, "This is the sign that I set for the covenant between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come. [13]I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. [14]When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, [15]I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living creature among all flesh, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. [16]When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures, all flesh that is on earth. [17]And God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between Me and all who live upon the earth.

Exodus 19:5-6

[5]" 'Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, [6]but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the Children of Israel."

Leviticus 19:1-2 (Holiness Code)

[1]The Eternal One spoke to Moses, saying: [2]Speak to the whole Israelite community, and say the them: You shall be holy, for I, the Eternal your God, am holy.

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Deuteronomy 7:6

[6]For you are a people consecrated to the Eternal your God: of all the peoples on earth the Eternal God chose you to be God's treasured people.

Maimonides's Thirteen Principles of Faith

1. God exists; God is perfect in every way, eternal and the cause of all that exists. All other beings depend upon God for their existence.
2. God has absolute and unparalleled unity.
3. God is incorporeal—without a body.
4. God existed prior to all else.
5. God should be the only object of worship and praise. One should not appeal to intermediaries, but should pray directly to God.
6. Prophets and prophecy exist.
7. Moses was the greatest prophet who ever lived. No prophet who lived or will live could comprehend God more than Moses.
8. The Torah is from heaven. The Torah we have today is the Torah that God gave to Moses at Sinai.
9. The Torah will never be abrogated, nothing will be added to it or subtracted from it; God will never give another Law.
10. God knows the actions of humans and is not neglectful of them.
11. God rewards those who obey the commands of the Torah and punishes those who violate its prohibitions.
12. The days of the Messiah will come.
13. The dead will be resurrected.

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On God

Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

As a teenager, I couldn't make much sense of the God-images that had been most frequently presented to me as a child. The God I learned about in religious school was anthropomorphic and omnipotent, and I just didn't see God operating as an almighty human being in the world. A further complication was that I, like so many, had been hung up on the literal meanings of the Jewish prayers. As I grew into young adulthood and began applying my critical thinking skills to the siddur, I grew uncomfortable with the notion of a God who intercedes to grant healing, bestow abundance, and free captives. There were just too many worthy people praying for those blessings and others but not receiving them. I concluded that I couldn't believe in a God who would listen to the penitent yearnings of some while rejecting the desperation of others. If I was going to be a believer, I needed a concept in which I could believe.

I found that concept during my college years, when I began to study the writings of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. I can still recall the specific teaching that reintroduced God to me in a way that I could understand:

> When in doubt, we raise questions. When in wonder, we do not even know how to ask a question.... Under the running sea of our theories and scientific explanations lies the aboriginal abyss of radical amazement. Radical amazement has a wider scope than any other act of man. While any act of perception or cognition has as its object a selected segment of reality, radical amazement refers to all of reality; not only to what we see, but also to the very act of seeing as well as to our own selves, to the selves that see and are amazed at their ability to see. (Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 13)

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When I first discovered these words, I remember feeling as though they practically proved God's existence. Suddenly, I sensed a horizon of knowledge that was wondrously beyond my view and my control as a human being. God wasn't some non-corporeal Santa Claus, deliberating over human requests. God was where the unknowable was known, and in relation with that God, my job was—and still is—to demonstrate both humility and gratitude in the face of a bounty of blessings I can hope neither to produce nor explain.

Source: Rabbi Kenneth Chasen, in *Lights in the Forest: Rabbis Respond to Twelve Essential Jewish Questions*, ed. Rabbi Paul Citrin (New York: CCAR Press, 2014), 3–4.

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Women and Contemporary Revelation

Ellen M. Umansky

In Hebrew, there is no single word for revelation. Rather, revelation is described as both *matan Torah* (the giving of Torah) and *kabbalat Torah* (the receiving of Torah). Revelation occurs when these two intersect and the voice of God is heard, directly or indirectly. Drawing on Deuteronomy 30:12 (in which Moses states that the Torah is "not in the heavens that you should say: 'Who among us can go up can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it for us . . . ' "), later rabbinic sages asserted that the will of God, as represented in the Torah, was no longer in Heaven but is entrusted to human interpreters (BT *Bava M 'tzia* 59b). In the rabbinic context this meant that the community could discern God's voice by wrestling with the text, that is, by intensely engaging with Torah. Thus, Torah study replaced prophecy as the source of revelation.

Even when women were exempt (or excluded) from Torah study, the Rabbis did not exclude women as bearers of revelation. They acknowledged that in ancient Israel, God spoke to female prophets as well as male prophets, who consequently served as divine messengers. Indeed, whereas the Bible identifies by name only four female prophets (see at Deuteronomy 13:2), the Rabbis expand this list considerably. According to one source, seven women were prophets. Acknowledging Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), and Huldah (II Kings 22:14), but ignoring Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14), rabbinic sages add Sarah (Genesis 11–25), Hannah (I Samuel 1–2), Abigail (I Samuel 25), and Esther (BT *M'gillah* 14a). The Midrash also emphasizes the prophetic qualities of all four matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah; *Breishit Rabbah* 67.9; 72.6) and

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maintains that "just as sixty myriads of male prophets arose for Israel, so there arose for them sixty myriads of female prophets" *(Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 4.11).

Who hears the divine voice? The rabbinic sages did not understand one's relationship to God as connected primarily to gender, but rather, as Barry Holtz notes, to "talent, inclination and strength" *(Finding Our Way*, 1990, p. 102). For example, one midrash enjoins its readers, "Come and see how the voice [of God] went forth [at Sinai]— coming to each Israelite according to his individual strength—to the old, according to their strength; to the young according to their strength; to the children according to their strength; to the infants according to their strength; *and to the women according to their strength*" *(Shmot Rabbah* 5.9, emphasis added).

New and challenging scholarly theories in the 19th century about the historical formation of the Bible led Reform Jews, and later Conservative and Reconstructionist Jews, to rethink the concept of divine revelation and to reevaluate women's religious roles. This created new opportunities for women to see themselves as bearers of revelation. Reform Judaism's notion of progressive revelation particularly encouraged women and men to recognize the many ways in which one could hear God's voice. In a sermon delivered in 1918, Lily Montagu, founder of the Liberal Jewish movement in England and of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, maintained that "we [Liberal Jews] are no longer worried by the claims of tradition when these clash with our conception of truth. We have boldly enunciated our belief in progressive revelation, and this faith has quickened our hope for the future and intensified our reverence for the past" ("Kinship With God," in Ellen M. Umansky, ed., *Lily H. Montagu*, 1985, p. 113).

In line with this new understanding, Reform Judaism made religious education equally available to girls and boys, and the ceremony of confirmation, which initially replaced bar mitzvah, marked the end of one's formal Jewish studies. Unlike the celebration of one's becoming a bar or bat mitzvah, which is usually held on or soon after one's 13th birthday, confirmation is held on Shavuot, the holiday traditionally marking the revelation at Sinai. Confirmation was at first an individual or small group ceremony, with girls confirmed at a temple in Berlin as early as 1817. In the U.S., confirmation became a group or class celebration, taking place at the end of 10th grade. Becoming a confirmand on Shavuot serves as a reminder of the centrality of the Torah (whether equated with God's moral teachings or including ritual observance as well); it also reenacts symbolically for each person the receiving of the Torah and living in covenantal relationship with God. By the 20th century, the notion of continuing revelation—the idea

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that God continues to speak to each and every generation—was largely accepted. Indeed, for many if not most Jews today, the concept of Torah has expanded to mean Jewish learning or learning in general.

In his 1955 book *God in Search of Man*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel asked, "How did Israel know that what their eye and ear perceived in the desert of Sinai was not a phantom? Was it truly a moment of revelation, or was such a perception only an illusion? "*What* we see, he concluded, "may be an illusion; *that* we see can never be questioned (p. 196). Speaking before members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1986, Reform rabbi Laura Geller similarly emphasized the importance of lived experience. Describing revelation as a moment of connection with God, she, like Heschel, emphasized the transformative nature of this moment. Yet moving beyond what he identified as Torah, she came to realize that although she had not noticed, God is always present. She asserted:

> I wasn't looking, or perhaps I was looking in the wrong places. . . . I needed to listen to the gentle whisper, the still small voice, the Presence one encounters by diving deep and surfacing. . . . I suddenly realized that my experience is Jewish experience. There is a Torah of our lives as well as the Torah that was written down. Both need to be listened to and wrestled with: both unfold through interactive commentary *(Four Centuries of Jewish Womens Spirituality: A Sourcebook*, 1992, pp. 244–45).

Like Geller, Judith Plaskow advocates expanding our understanding of Torah to include not just the first five books of the Hebrew Bible and traditional Jewish learning, "but women's words, teachings, and actions hitherto unseen. Plaskow asserts that Jewish feminists must "reclaim Torah as our own in order to make visible the "presence, experience, and deeds of women erased in traditional sources, telling the "stories of women's encounters with God and captur[ing] the texture of their religious experience." She also insists upon reconstructing history to include women's history, not by changing the past, but by altering the shape of Jewish memory (*Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, 1990, p. 28).

Rachel Adler has identified such efforts as "engendering Judaism." She also calls for models of thinking about and practicing Judaism in a way that enables both women and men to "recreate and renew together as equals" (*Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*, 1998, p. xiv). In so doing, Adler draws heavily on narrative as a tool of critique and vision, while advocating among liberal or progressive Jews the re-appropriation of halachah (the traditional authoritative legal tradition) as a source of meaning, rather than one of power. This

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means, among other things, retaining those laws that remain grounded in the practice of the progressive Jewish community while adding new laws, grounded in new stories, that reflect new communal practices.

In "We All Stood Together," poet Merle Feld reenvisions both women and men at Mt. Sinai, ready to receive the words of God. In her creative remembering, her brother kept a journal of what he saw and heard while she, always holding a baby, was never able to write anything down. Consequently, she came to forget the particulars of this revelatory moment, until she was left with nothing but the feeling that something important had occurred. At the poem's conclusion, she writes that if Jews could somehow remember that moment at Sinai as it was experienced by men *and women*, that sacred moment could be recreated (see *Yitro*, Voices, p. 425).

In this *Commentary*, the section called Contemporary Reflection contains responses by women who, in a variety of ways, explore the continuing meanings of the revelation of Torah. Written by Jewish professionals from a variety of fields, these pieces represent new, individual wrestlings with the biblical text. Explicitly or implicitly revealing an awareness of both biblical and post-biblical interpretations, the brief essays reflect a contemporary, often feminist, perspective. They not only focus on women's roles and concerns, but also attempt to draw on women's lived experiences (what Geller describes as "the Torah of our lives") in order to create to recreate Jewish memory (as articulated by Plaskow and Feld) and, in the process, engender Judaism (as suggested by Adler).

Many of the topics explored in these reflections are identical to those found in other sections of this *Commentary*, including notions of covenant, peoplehood, religious leadership, free will, social justice, purity, pollution, sacrifice, forgiveness, and mercy. Yet instead of reading the text within a postbiblical or early rabbinic context, these reflections offer readings that are clearly in the present and have implications for the future. Some underscore the contemporary relevance of the Torah's teachings, like Noa Kushner's reflection on *parashat P'kudei* and God's earthly presence, and Alice Shalvi's on *parashat KiTavo* and the Israelites' settling in the land of Israel. Others, like Suzanne Singer's reflection on the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in *parashat Bo*, suggest reading against the text— creating counter-narratives that provoke new theological questions and problems. Many of the pieces move beyond the text altogether, using words, phrases, or concepts within a particular *parashah* as a means of exploring issues and ideas that are of particular interest to contemporary readers, including women. Judith Plaskow,

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for example, draws on the priestly evaluation of sexual behavior in *parashat Acharei Mot* to discuss the persistence of homophobia, as well as sexual and family violence in today's society; in my reflection on *parashat Hazinu*, I reject the text's imagery of God as Rock and Warrior, and instead offer new images that, in my view, better convey the love and justice of God. Writing more personally, Zoe Klein, in her reflection on *parashat Ki Tisa*, draws upon similarities to her husband's proposing marriage to her at Mount Sinai and God's continual revelation to Israel there, using one to view the other as moments of "eternal, loving joining," while Blu Greenberg explores the impact of sudden loss, as she grapples with *parashat Sh'mini*.

The importance of the Contemporary Reflection sections of this *Commentary* is that they enable us to hear women's voices that reckon with divine revelation. The reflections in this *Commentary* represent different attitudes toward the Torah and the many ways in which its teachings can be appropriated into our lives. While some authors defend its teachings, others challenge them. Yet each essay shows the significance of Torah as a record of God's revelation to Israel: it is a repository of Jewish memory, however incomplete, from which we, as individuals and as members of contemporary Jewish communities, can attempt to hear and understand the voice of God.

Source: Ellen M. Umansky, "Women and Contemporary Revelation," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: URJ Press, 2008; Reform Judaism Publishing/CCAR Press, 2015), lvi–lix.

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On God

Rabbi Paul Kipnes

God is not a being; God is a verb. Jewish tradition understands God's four-letter name as a meaningful combination of three verbs: *hei-vav-hei*, or *hoveh*, signifying the present tense and meaning "is"; *hei-yod-hei*, or *hayah*, meaning "was"; and *yodhei-yod-hei*, or *yih'yeh*, meaning "will be." God is that which was, is, and will be forevermore. As we sing in the prayer *Adon Olam*, God is the sum total of existence. The issue is not whether we believe in God. It does not matter. Because God just Is–Was–Will Be. The question, instead, should be whether we are willing to open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts to the continuously sacred flow of Existence.

God is found everywhere in every moment. That's why the ancient Rabbis knew God as *HaMakom*, "The Place," meaning God is in every place, everywhere. God is here, over there, up there (pointing skyward), down there (pointing earthward), in there (pointing inside you and me). Wherever we can stop focusing on ourselves and our own material needs and open our eyes to the reality and beauty surrounding us, we might find God. The kabbalists knew God as *Ein Sof*, "No End," because God is everywhere, the Essence that is without end. Moses found God on a mountaintop, and so can we. Miriam encountered God at the shores of the sea, and so can we. The Levites—originally ritual singer/musicians—heard God in the sweet multi-instrument musicals they played and sang, and so can we. And the prophet Elijah experienced God in the still small voice within that spoke to him, and so can we.

My relationship with God is always in flux. Sometimes I feel closer to the Holy One; sometimes farther away. There have been times when I have felt estranged

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from God. During my "rationalist" phase, God was an idea, an ideal. During my "non-rationalist" period, the Source of Life was in each relationship, à la philosopher Martin Buber's "I-Thou." Sometimes the Maker of Peace is in my meditative breath. Other times the Almighty is the recipient of my anger. Yes, I have yelled at God, but that's okay; God can take it. How I view God changes year by year, and sometimes day by day. Nonetheless, God's reality has been and remains a constant in my life.

Source: Rabbi Paul Kipnes, in *Lights in the Forest: Rabbis Respond to Twelve Essential Jewish Questions*, ed. Rabbi Paul Citrin (New York: CCAR Press, 2014), 13–14.

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