

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Part 1: Is God the Creator and Source of All Being—Including Evil?

Chapter 1: What Does it Mean to Say that God Created the World?

Chapter Summary:

In the biblical text (Genesis 1:26-2:3):

- God's act of Creation represented an ordering of chaotic impulses into a world with structure and purpose; the world was spoken into being.
- God surveyed this peaceable, orderly garden and declared it "very good."
- The observance of Shabbat is linked to this narrative: a cycle of activity and rest is part of the grand structure of the universe. Our ability to rest on the seventh day is linked to our own creation.

In the liturgical text:

- God has remained involved in Creation ever since it came into being.
- In this sense, Creation was not a one-time, concluded event.
- God continues to renew creation day by day.

In the rabbinic text:

- The angels opposed the creation of humanity, and God's decision to go ahead anyway has been a sore point in their relationship.
- In the rabbinic imagination, the Torah itself served as the blueprint for the creation of the world.
- In this conception, the Torah stands outside the flow of historical time.

In the medieval text:

- Bachya ibn Pakuda's three-point proof was designed to reconcile the biblical narratives with scientific proof.
- It also sought to establish that each thing in the world has its cause, in a chain of causes that goes all the way back to God.
- In this view, God precedes Creation as its first and only cause.

In the first of two modern texts:

- Arthur Green characterizes humanity as the end point of Creation.
- Humanity is the divine helper opposite God.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

In the second modern text:

- Lawrence Kushner suggests that the world could only be created once God had a blueprint. Thus, the Torah's creation preceded the Creation of the world.
- The Torah does not have to be literally true (in the historical sense) to be metaphorically true (in a theological sense).

Possible Meanings of the Seven-Day Creation Narrative:

- In Spinoza's conception, the Bible was not making a scientific argument when it spoke of a seven-day Creation; rather, the text's purpose was to motivate the masses to follow its laws.
- Another way of understanding the seven-day Creation story is to read the narrative in its historical context: the narrative suggests that God of the Israelites was the Creator of all being and did not fight other gods for this dominion; God had full control over the world in the process of Creation and was not struggling with other gods; and this Creation unfolded according to plan.
- A third approach to the Creation text is to read it as a metaphor.
- It is possible to combine elements of each of these strategies for understanding the meaning of Creation.

The Intended Role of Humanity:

- One possible answer: the world was created in order for the Torah to be given to God's people, so that they might observe it in the Land of Israel. Rashi suggests on this basis that the Torah could have omitted the book of Genesis and the first twelve chapters of Exodus.
- A second answer is to think in terms of stewardship. Arthur Waskow argues that the core concerns of our lives—food, money, sex, and rest—define our relationship to our Creator.
- A third possible answer arises from the Jewish mystical tradition: perhaps God was seeking a partner in Creation? Abraham Joshua Heschel argues that humanity is needed by God.

Discussion Questions:

1. Is the role of chance/coincidence in Creation real or imagined?
2. Why do we have awareness of ourselves as sentient beings, separate from the rest of Creation? Where does that consciousness come from?
3. Does Creation need to have a purpose in order for there to be meaning in our lives?

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Additional Texts to Consider:

A Biblical View: Psalm 8: 4-10 on Humanity in the Context of Creation

When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
the moon and stars you set in place,
what is man that You have been mindful of him,
mortal man that You have taken note of him,
that you have made him little less than divine,
and adorned him with glory and majesty;
You have made him master over your handiwork,
laying the world at his feet,
sheep and oxen, all of them,
and wild beasts, too;
the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea,
whatever travels the paths of the seas.
O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth!

Compare this text to the theological message of Genesis 1, as appears in section 1.1. How is this text similar/different with regard to its description of role of humanity?

A Rabbinic View: God Keeps Arguing with the Angels

R[abbi] Huna said in the name of R[abbi] Aibu; God created Adam with due deliberation. He first created the means of man's sustenance and only then did He create him. The ministering angel spoke up to the Holy One: "Master of universes, 'what is man that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that Thou thinkest of him?' [Ps. 8:5] This source of trouble—why should he be created?" "if what you hint in your question is to be followed," God replied, "'sheep and oxen, all of them' [Ps. 8:8] —why should they have been created? Why should 'the fowl of the air and the fish of the sea' [Ps. 8:9] have been created? I am like a king who has a tower full of good things, but no guests. What joy can the tower give the king who filled it?" At that, the ministering angels declared, "Master of universes, 'Lord, our Lord, how glorious is Thy name in all the earth' [Ps. 8:10]. Do what pleases You."¹

What are the differences and similarities in the relationship between God and the angels in this text and the Rabbinic text in 1.3? How is this argument different than the one raised 1.3?

¹ Bialik and Ravnitzky, *Book of Legends*, 13.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Chapter 2: How Does Evil Exist in a World with a Good God?

Chapter Summary:

A biblical view (Genesis 2:25-3:13):

- Sin is not considered inherent in the individual (as the Christian concept of Original Sin implies) but rather refers to a mistake a person has made and will hopefully correct.
- The narrative is a story of mortality, maturity, *and* morality: in the process of growing up, we learn to take responsibility for our actions, including the responsibility for the consequences of our sexual activity

The liturgical text:

- In contrast to the Christian notion of the Original Sin which tainted humanity, Judaism affirms the purity of the soul.
- A prayer in the morning service suggests that nothing in the human soul, at least in its natural state would ever prevent an individual from approaching God.

The rabbinic text:

- The ancient Rabbis asserted that we face a choice with regard to sin: we can choose good or we can choose evil.
- The Rabbis also chose to embrace—rather than spurn—the shadow side of our psyche.
- They acknowledged that some of our baser yearnings—such as our desire to be something in the world—help motivate our highest achievements.

The medieval text:

- Maimonides suggested that because Adam turned away from the contemplation of God to consider the lesser subjects of fine and bad, he became mortal.
- Our highest human calling must be the contemplation of God.
- We must regulate our appetites to stay focused on that goal.

The first modern text:

- Hermann Cohen argued that the Adam and Eve story was not written as proof that humanity is evil from birth.
- Rather, the Hebrew Bible's introduction of sin into an ancient myth is indicative of the moral development achieved by the text.
- Adam and Eve gain moral awareness of good and bad when they realize that they have disobeyed God.
- We, too, can gain moral maturity by recognizing that what God demands of us (the highest ideal of what is good) is possible.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

The second modern text:

- Harold Kushner suggested that it is best to let go of the theological construct that the misfortunes that befall us are sent by God.
- Ultimately, he argued that the best explanation for why a good God allows tragedies to happen might be that we have no neat explanation.
- In essence, God is not all-powerful, and thus we are not being punished when bad things happen to us.

The Question of Free Will:

- In the *aggadic* literature, we find an answer to this question in the form of a conversation between God and Cain that expands upon the biblical narrative.
- In the text, Cain attempts to blame God for his own sin. Ignoring Cain's accusation, God asks him directly, "What have *you* done?"
- Cain had the power of choice—as we all do—and he could have chosen to do good.

Why Does God Allow Evil to Exist?

- The attempt to answer the question of how God might be good yet still allow evil to exist is known as *theodicy*.
- We would like to say that God is good; God is all-powerful (omnipotent); and evil is real but these three assertions, taken together, do not work.

Discussion Questions:

1. Is humanity sinful by nature?
2. Can sin be overcome? If so, how?
3. Why does God allow us to be sinful?

Additional Texts to Consider:

A Biblical View: Psalm 104:10-15 Suggests that God's Benevolence Provides for Humanity

You make springs gush forth in torrents;
they make their way between the hills,
giving drink to all the wild beasts;
the wild asses slake their thirst.
The birds of the sky dwell beside them
and sing among the foliage.
You water the mountains from Your lofts;
the earth is sated from the fruit of Your work.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

You make the grass grow for the cattle,
and herbage for man's labor
that he may get food out of the earth—
wine that cheers the hearts of men
oil that makes the face shine,
and bread that sustains man's life.

In this text, God provides for humanity's needs through the natural world. How can this view be reconciled with the suggestion that having to work the land is a punishment for sin?

A Modern View: Abraham Joshua Heschel on Being Asked to Choose

Thinking about God begins when we do not know any more how to wonder, how to fear, how to be in awe. For wonder is not a state of esthetic enjoyment. Endless wonder is endless tension, a situation in which we are shocked at the inadequacy of our awe, at the weakness of our shock, as well as the state of being asked the ultimate question.

The soul is endowed with a sense of indebtedness, and wonder, awe, and fear unlock that sense of indebtedness. Wonder is the state of our being asked.

In spite of our pride, in spite of our acquisitiveness, we are driven by an awareness that something is asked of us; that we are asked to wonder, to revere, to think and to live in a way that is compatible with the grandeur and mystery of living.

What gives birth to religion is not intellectual curiosity by the fact and experience of our being asked.

All that is left to us is a choice—to answer or to refuse to answer. Yet the more deeply we listen, the more we become stripped of the arrogance and callousness which alone would enable us to refuse. We carry a load of marvel, wishing to exchange it for the simplicity of knowing what to live for, a load which we can never lay down nor continue to carry not knowing where.²

In section 2.9, three possibilities for resolving the question of evil are suggested. How would you categorize Heschel's text above, in light of these three possibilities?

² Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 112-13.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Part 2: Does God Have a Personality—or Is God an Impersonal Force?

Chapter 3: Is God Like a Person?

Chapter Summary:

The biblical text (Exodus 33:18-34:7):

- Did Moses stand on a rock, sheltered by God's hand, and see God's back as God's presence passes by? Does God take a bodily form? It is difficult to say with precision.
- The biblical text could be read literally—as reporting a series of events taking place in time and space
- The biblical text could also be read metaphorically—perhaps as a series of dream-sequences in which the laws of nature do not apply.

The liturgical text:

- The liturgical text quoted the biblical text to support a shift in the content of worship; neither an embodied animal sacrifice nor an embodied God is necessary to achieve atonement.
- Obtaining forgiveness from God is not dependent upon experiencing God's bodily presence.
- Rather, God accepts our heartfelt prayers as a valid substitute for the sacrificial system.

A rabbinic view:

- While in many rabbinic texts God is described as acting like a human, the ancient Rabbis were not literalists, and such portrayals do not necessarily mean they thought of God as being human-like.
- Sometimes the Rabbis read texts contrary to their literal meaning if these made for fuller, richer understandings of God's relationship to the world.
- In their view, God does not live in the world the same way other beings do; rather the world exists *within* God.

The medieval text:

- Moses Maimonides argued that God does not have a body, God does not act like a person, and humans cannot describe God directly.
- Rather, whenever the Bible describes God as having a body, it is speaking metaphorically.
- When Moses saw God's back, for example, he learned how God relates to the world.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

The first modern text:

- Martin Buber maintained that the human encounter with God is one of pure presence, in the sense of feeling connected to the eternal, rather than the experience of coming into contact with a physical being.
- Humans engage in two kinds of relationships, I-You and I-It.
- To have an authentic I-You encounter, one needs to be fully present to the moment, and not see the other as an object to identify, describe, analyze, or use.
- Moses' encounter with God at Mount Sinai was an I-You experience involving a direct Revelation of God's attributes, but not requiring an embodied God.

The second modern text:

- Arthur Green avers that God is not some kind of being "out there" existing independently from us.
- The false conception of a separation between "self" and "Other" betrays the ultimate unitive truth: the faith that there is only One.
- To think of God as a person, or even as a "You" (or "Thou") on the other side of a relationship, is to abandon this mystical insight. We are all part of God.

Thinking of God as a Person:

- For many of us, it is much easier to address prayer to a person—or to a person-like Being—than to address prayer to a force or a cause (or any other of the multiple abstract ways Jews understand God).
- Michael Wyschogrod argued that God must necessarily be like a person, in that God must have a spatial presence with a personality and a proper name if humans are to be able to engage in a relationship with God.
- On the other hand, Maimonides suggested that humanity is able to understand God without having to encounter God as a person with a body and a personality.
- Alternatively, the American rabbi and theologian Mordecai Kaplan argued that God is not a person who can interact with gifted persons such as Moses; rather, the Jewish community serves in the role of deciding what God asks of us.

Imaging a Personal God vs. Imaging God as an Impersonal Force:

- How we think about God is entangled with problems of power and dominion.
- A personal God is often imagined as an authority, whether it be a ruler or a parent.
- By contrast, God understood as an impersonal force removes this aspect of power and dominion from the Divine, likening God to the processes of nature or the workings of a computer.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Discussion Questions:

1. Why might we need metaphors to make sense of the divine?
2. Which metaphor is most compelling to you: God as artist? God as parent? God as ruler? God as helper? God as computer? Something else?
3. Is the natural world a reflection of God?

Additional Texts to Consider:

A Medieval View: Corovero (sixteenth-century Safed) on God's Non-Duality

Do not attribute duality to God, Let God be solely God. If you suppose that *Ein Sof* [literally: “without end” which is a name for the unknowable aspect of God, the original source of Creation] emanates until a certain point, and from that point on is outside of it, you have dualized. God forbid! Realize, rather, that *Ein Sof* exists in each existent. Do not say: “This is a stone and not God.” God forbid! Rather, all existence is God, and the stone is a thing pervaded by Divinity...

When your intellect conceives of God...do not permit yourself to imagine that there is a God as depicted by you. For if you do this, you will have a finite and corporeal conception of God, God forbid. Instead, your mind should dwell only on the affirmation of God's existence, and then recoil. To do more than this is to allow the imagination to reflect on God as God is in Himself and such reflection is bound to result in imaginative limitations and corporeality. Put reins therefore on your intellect and do not allow it too great a freedom, but assert God's existence and deny your intellect the possibility of comprehending God.³

Compare this text to the rabbinic text in 3.3. Is the message here that (a) God is greater than the world, or (b) that the world is greater than God, or (c) that the world and God are one and the same?

A Modern View: Lawrence Kushner on God's Non-Duality

God—that is, the Oneness in which all being is dissolved and from which being continuously emerges—is called, in Hebrew, *Ein Sof*, literally the One “without end.” This is much more than simply the arithmetic concept of infinity. *Ein Sof* is neither numeric nor mathematical. It means, instead, without boundary, without definition, without any characteristics whatsoever. Indeed, to say anything about it at all violates the essential notion of the term. *Ein Sof* is the font, the source, the matrix, the substrate, the motherlode of being. It may also be being itself. It is to being what electricity is to the letters and words on a video computer monitor. And, as anyone who has not conscientiously backed up his or her work knows, turn off the power and the letters and words as if they had never been. For kabbalists, therefore, creation is not some event that

³ Horwitz, *A Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism Reader*, 105-6.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

happened in the past but a continuous and ever-present process. When we express our gratitude for the world, it is because it has literally been created anew each day, each moment.⁴

How is this conception of God different from what is presented in Wyschogrod's text in 3.8?

⁴ Horwitz, *A Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism Reader*, 180-9.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Chapter 4: Does God have a Gender?

Chapter Summary:

A biblical view (Isaiah 66:10-16):

- The biblical text contains both masculine and feminine God imagery.
- Saying that “men are necessarily warlike because they are men” or that “women are necessarily nurturing because they are women” is to take an essentialist position with regard to gender.
- Feminism has tended to reject essentialism.

The liturgical text:

- The *Avinu Malkeinu* (“Our Father, Our King”) prayer has allowed Jews to move away from essentialism by depicting God in masculine human terms as both a warrior *and* a nurturer.
- Nonetheless, its traditional language reinforces the perception that God is exclusively male.

The rabbinic text:

- The text disavowed using any kind of imagery for God, yet also subtly continued to reinforce a kind of patriarchal power.
- God is portrayed as the patriarchal head of household who wields the right and the power to kill its inhabitants if they misbehave.

The medieval text:

- This text expounded upon an idea of the tenth *Sefirah* (attribute of God) being the *Shekhinah*. A late development in Jewish mysticism had led to this conception of a divine feminine aspect of God.
- Immediately the idea became very popular, and a great number of earlier texts were reinterpreted in its light.
- The *Shekhinah* became the passive female waiting to be redeemed.

The first modern text:

- Judith Plaskow played an influential role in the creation of prayer books more in keeping with feminism’s egalitarian ideals.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

The second modern text:

- Rachel Adler pinpointed the difficulty inherent in updating Jewish liturgy. Because the liturgy, like Jewish theology, is so profoundly intertextual—each text commenting upon the texts that came before it over the generations—these foundations of the tradition must be maintained.
- Yet women’s experiences and concerns have largely not been part of this conglomeration of texts.
- Adler counsels building a more inclusive prayer book over time, upon the strata of the received texts.

The third modern text:

- Marcia Falk updates the traditional and explicitly gendered Shabbat blessing for one’s children with a new blessing that ostensibly casts aside gender alignment.
- However, because Hebrew is a gendered language, the Hebrew version of her blessing appears twice, once as grammatically male and once as grammatically female.
- She also offers a nongendered blessing for God; her rewrite of the Barchu (“Bless”) prayer celebrates the creative aspects of God and emphasizes humanity’s need to bless.

Implications of Masculine Images of God:

- Is it really the case that masculine images of God make it seem like men are more important than women?
- The biblical scholar Tikva Frymer Kensky argues that in the biblical text men and women act in similar ways.
- It was Hellenistic ideas about women that color our perception of the text, refracted through the rabbinical interpretations.
- The narrative of a singular God that appears in the Bible need not reinforce patriarchal ideas.

Rethinking the Meaning of Traditional Texts with Male Imagery:

- The biblical narrative offers images of men and women that transcend our current and possibly conventional conceptions of gender.
- Creative, nonsexist interpretation of the Bible and the prayer book may be possible.
- On the other hand, change is profoundly difficult and particularly slow when religion is involved.

Discussion Questions:

1. Is God the source of gender?
2. Are there limits to ritual innovation? At what point does it break down?
3. What makes a ritual Jewish?

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Additional Texts to Consider:

A Modern View: Nehama Aschkenasy Rejects a Patriarchal Reading of the Bible

We may assume that all voices are united by their patriarchal tenor, coming as they are from male narrator(s) nurtured in a male-dominant culture and largely father-oriented religion. But just as these men differed in their attitudes to the role or validity of the monarchy, for example, is it not possible that they displayed a variety of attitudes regarding society and gender? It is easy to adopt the assumption that all texts regarding women serve the men's manifest ideology of the supremacy of the male and betray his subconscious fears of the power of the female. Only the most narrow reading, however, will not admit that some men and women in the Bible transcend gender stereotypes and surprise us. We should not exclude the possibility of male authors who have opinions regarding gender roles that depart from the norm.

Furthermore, the number of narratives that unexpectedly shift gears and focus on a female character, when the historical and theological purposes of the text do not warrant it, suggest the hand of a literary genius, a scribe who must serve the culture but whose artistic intuition sees in the female figure and her tale an attractive avenue to pursue, in spite of the irrelevance of this pursuit to the overall historiosophic purpose.⁵

Both Aschkenasy and Frymer-Kensky argue that the Bible is not as patriarchal as one might assume (see 4.9), but the trajectory of their argument is not the same. How do they differ in their assessment?

A Modern View: Marla Brettschneider's Queering of the Mikvah Ritual

Let us take for a moment to return to the specific idea of reclaiming the mikvah [the pool for ritual immersion] for queer Jews. A group of queer Jews may develop a mikvah ritual for a one-time experience, or repeat it cyclically. In the traditional version, a person going in to the mikvah is naked and checked carefully for any hairs or particles on the body that would come between the woman's body and the water. Women have often found this process humiliating. Transfolk generally cannot even use traditional *mikvos*. Queers and all women could use the mikvah as a time to reconnect to our bodies, our genders, our sexualities, and our skin coloring and racial heritage, turning what has often become the legalistic "checking" into a celebration.

Jewish queers often express the need to redefine the spaces and textures of what have hegemonically been designated as holy and profane. Although some might find this unappealing or too controversial, a group might purposely include wearing or dipping into the water something that would have commonly suggested impurity. Ritually dripping a drop of lubricant into the water would make the mikvah halachically (in Jewish law) unkosher (unsuitable for ritual use), but participants might see it as a way to enliven the "living waters" with a symbol of

⁵ Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window*, 19.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

queer (and hopefully safe) sex. For those who have lived through this age of AIDS, such a moment of purification which points directly to queer sex could be particularly empowering.⁶

Evaluate these suggestions in light of Adler's argument in section 4.6. How is this kind of ritual innovation consonant with Adler's view? How is it opposed?

⁶ Brettschneider, *Jewish Feminism and Intersectionality*, 97.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Chapter 5: What Does it Mean to Declare God is One?

Chapter Summary:

A biblical view (Deuteronomy 6:1-9):

- The ancient Rabbis considered the *Shema* to be so important, they prescribed its recitation twice daily. To further its twice-daily recitation, they included the *Shema* in the morning and evening liturgy.
- However, in the biblical text, the *Shema* does not seem to stand out as bearing this theologically distinctive meaning. The emphasis does not appear to have been on God's oneness.
- Rather, it served to remind the Israelites that only God could guarantee them land.
- The Israelites were expected to repeat this instruction—and to set up reminders everywhere they looked in order to remember to do so.
- The commandments would need to be taught to the next generation, so their observance would not lapse after the Israelites left the wilderness.

The liturgical text:

- The Rabbis who included the *Shema* in the morning and evening liturgy, applying the wording of the biblical text to the liturgical text, may have elevated this verse as a polemic against the nonmonotheistic faiths around them.
- They also interpolated material into the biblical text, so that its recitation did not merely repeat the text found in the Bible.
- The additional text reinforced the need to obey God's commandments.

The rabbinic text:

- The rabbinic text extols an image of the patriarch Jacob's sons breaking into recitation of the *Shema* as they surround him on his deathbed.
- This story served to imbue an old liturgical practice—the “Blessed is God's glorious kingdom” response portion of the *Shema*— with (assumed) biblical origins, and simultaneously to ground the practice in lived experience.
- It is offered as an invocation in the hope that it might be adopted as the foundation of all belief.

The medieval text:

- To Moses Maimonides, the highest form of prayer was the contemplation of God.
- Maimonides suggested that quiet time at the end of day should be designated for contemplation at the highest level.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

- One should spend this time thinking carefully about the nature of God, reviewing one's study in the mind's eye and making connections and inferences on the basis of what one knows.

The first modern text:

- Sholom Dovber Schneerson avers that when a Jew directs his attention to the recitation of the *Shema*, he should also be thinking about the nature of God in the context of Jewish mysticism.
- In Hasidic mysticism there are two worlds: the upper (heavenly realm) and lower (earthly realm).
- Human action in the earthly realm can affect the heavenly realm, healing rifts and repairing the upper world.
- Hence, the worshiper should focus on God's unity above and below.

The second modern text:

- Joseph Soloveitchik suggests that any mystical attentiveness to the *Shema* is misguided, because its recitation is not intended to invoke interaction with God.
- Jews recite the *Shema* not for God's sake, but for the worshiper's sake.
- The intended audience is the one who is making the statement, which is why the *Shema* opens with "Hear, O Israel"—it is not addressing God but Israel, each member of the whole collective.
- This recitation is not an encounter with God but a lesson left for us by a distant God "whose authority we acknowledge, yet into Whose presence we must not venture."

The third modern text:

- Zalman Schachter-Shalomi presents a series of role-playing exercises to help the worshiper experience the *Shema* as embodied prayer.
- Influenced by the Chabad/Lubavitch thought that only God is real—everything else is an illusion—he viewed the *Shema* as more than a prayer.
- It becomes the point at which it is possible to recognize the fundamental unity of God behind the illusion.

The Meaning of Bearing Witness to God's Oneness:

- God is singular, unique, extraordinarily unlike anyone or anything else.
- Transcending time and space, God is beyond our definitions, more than our imaginations allow.
- When we try to define God—to tame our God-concepts so they might be comprehensible—we tend to imagine things that are not God.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Praying as One (Community):

- In the author's experience, the process of prayer generates a kind of energy that can somehow be sensed.
- One could identify this sense of energy with a Jewish mystical concept: *shefa*, the endless outpouring of God, might be visualized as light or energy that cannot be measured or directly observed.
- To the author, when we invoke God's presence and become one in the recitation of the *Shema*, *shefa* brings our community into contact with the Divine.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does it mean to pray? What do you understand prayer to be?
2. What is the difference between stating a theological principle out loud and engaging in a prayer?
3. What is the role of community in prayer?

Additional Texts to Consider:

A Modern View: Ruth Langer on How Rabbinic Prayer Relates to Temple Worship

Any new system desiring to attract adherents must be designed in a careful dialectic between the old and the new, the accepted and the innovative. The rabbis did not have to wean anyone away from a previous mode of worship—the sacrificial system of the Torah and the Temple simply was suddenly unavailable—but they did need to develop their new form of worship in such a way that Jews would understand the necessity for participation. Therefore, they had to define their liturgical system in connection to and in opposition to the Temple, incorporating language and rituals with which the people already felt comfortable. Although there is no unambiguous evidence for widespread formal communal prayer on the rabbinic model before the destruction of the Temple, the concepts and rituals available to the rabbis almost certainly included the recitation of the *shema*, the ritual reading and exposition of Scripture, especially Torah, in the synagogue setting, and probably an expectation that appropriate prayer language would be in Hebrew, largely derivative of the language of the Bible, especially Psalms, and structured as a series of blessings.⁷

In 5.2 and 5.3, two possibilities for the origin of the “Baruch Shem Kavod” response are given. Which of these explanations seem more likely to you, when considered in light of Langer’s comments above, and why?

⁷Langer, *To Worship God Properly*, 5.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

A Rabbinic View: The Martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva

Our masters taught: Once the wicked Roman government issued a decree forbidding the Jews to study and practice the Torah. Pappus ben Judah came by and, upon finding R[abbi] Akiva publicly holding sessions in which he occupied himself with Torah, Pappus asked him: Akiva, are you not afraid of the government? R. Akiva replied: You, Pappus, who are said to be wise, are in fact a fool. I can explain what I am doing by means of a parable: A fox was walking on the river bank and, seeing fishes hastening here and there, asked them, “From whom are you fleeing?” They replied, “from the nets and traps set for us by men.” So the fox said to them, “How would you like to come up on dry land, so that you and I may live together the way my ancestors lived with yours?” They replied, “You—the one they call the cleverest of animals—are in fact a fool. If we are fearful in the place where we can stay alive, how much more fearful should we be in a place where we are sure to die!” So it is with us. If we are fearful when we sit and study the Torah, of which it is written, “for that is thy life and the length of thy days” (Deut. 30:20), how much more fearful ought we to be should we cease the study of words of Torah!

It is related that soon afterward R[abbi] Akiva was arrested and thrown in prison, and Pappus ben Judah was also arrested and put in prison next to him. R[abbi] Akiva asked: Pappus, who brought you here? He replied: Happy are you, R[abbi] Akiva, that you have been seized for occupying yourself with the Torah! Alas for Pappus, who has been seized for occupying himself with vain things!

When R[abbi] Akiva was taken out to be executed, it was the hour for the recital of the Shema, and the executioners were combing his flesh with iron combs, while he was lovingly making ready to accept upon himself the yoke of the kingship of heaven. His disciples asked: Our teacher, even to such a degree? He replied: All my days I have been troubled by this verse “with all thy soul” (Deut. 6:5), which I have interpreted as meaning “Even if He takes your soul.” But I said: When shall I have an occasion to fulfill the precept? Now that I have the occasion, shall I not fulfill it? He prolonged the Shema’s concluding word, *ehad* (“one”), until he expired as he finished pronouncing it. A divine voice went forth and proclaimed: Happy are you, Akiva, that your soul has departed with the word *ehad*! The ministering angels spoke out bluntly to the Holy One; such Torah, and such its reward? He should have been “of those that die by Thy hand, O Lord” (Ps. 17:14). God replied: “Their portion is in life” (ibid.). Just then, another divine voice went forth and proclaimed: Happy are you, R[abbi] Akiva, destined as you are for life in the world-to-come.⁸

A reference to the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva appears in section 5.7; the text above tells the story in full. How does Schachter-Shalomi make use of this narrative to add depth to the individual’s recitation of the Shema?

⁸ Bialik and Ravnitzky, *Book of Legends*, 238.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Does God Redeem—or Might God Not Redeem?

Chapter 6: Does God Intervene in Our Lives?

Chapter Summary:

A biblical view (I Samuel 1:4-20):

- Hannah, a barren woman, was tormented by her desire to bear a child. She prayed intently for a child at the temple at Shiloh, and God granted her wish.
- Hannah's story might be considered subversive in relation to the power wielded by the exclusively male priesthood. The narrative reinforces the idea that God might heed the prayer of a woman and not just the prayer of the male authorities, intimating that women have their own avenues for accessing God's care.
- Moreover, God's response empowers Hannah. Not only does she seek to change her lot; she discovers that she has the power to change it.

The liturgical text:

- a *Tkhines* (a Yiddish prayer articulating women's specific concerns) for a pregnant woman, cited the story of Hannah.
- Childbirth in the medieval period could be perilous for both woman and baby. And so a woman's heartfelt plea in the *Tkhines* was: *please, God, do not make this pregnancy a death sentence for me or for my child.*
- The text reinforced the possibility that God might heed a woman's prayer.

The rabbinic text:

- Drawn from the Talmud, this text upheld Hannah as the example to follow when praying, because God clearly favored her intense focus and passion.
- This story might also be read as an implicit criticism of the office of the priesthood. Eli's name conveys a sense of possessiveness—"God is mine, and mine alone."
- Eli is sitting idle at the doorway of the shrine, passing judgment on a woman who comes with a genuine need. This woman who pours out her heart is the one whom God heeds.

The medieval text;

- Bachya Ibn Pakuda argued that everything that occurs in the world does so because God so wills it.
- He quoted as his proof-text the psalm attributed to Hannah, which suggested that God eventually rewards the faithful.
- Any disadvantages they experience in the present world will be righted in the end.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

The first modern text:

- Abraham Joshua Heschel asserted that God's involvement in the world does not mean that God will save us from our most destructive impulses.
- Rather, we are expected to work in partnership with God in order to enact God's will on earth.

The second modern text:

- Mordecai Kaplan maintained that a supernatural God does not intervene in our lives in any way.
- He redefined God as our human will to improve ourselves and thereby enact our own personal salvation. We do so by making life choices, specifically choosing good over evil.
- When we enact goodness in our lives, we are living embodiments of God.
- Hannah's prayer would not have changed her situation. God, however, would have been present when she willed to do good—to enlist her newborn son into priestly service.

Does God Act on Behalf of the Jewish Community?

- This chapter has addressed the providence question solely on the plane of individual experience, but many events in Jewish history have been framed in terms of God's providence.
- God's apparent willingness to respond to suffering on the national scale, as retold each year at Passover, raises even more questions. Does God's providence extend to every generation or only certain ones? And if this narrative unfolds according to God's will, why does the Israelite's liberation require the Egyptian's suffering?
- In other words, does God's providence extend to the good *and* the bad?

Is the Creation of the State of Israel Evidence of Divine Providence?

- One could say that the creation of the State of Israel came down to a series of worldly events for which men and women were solely responsible.
- Other thinkers, such as Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, a spiritual leader who served as chief rabbi during the British Mandate, considered the efforts toward the creation of the state as evidence of the first flowering of messianic redemption.

Discussion Questions:

1. Does God heed prayer?
2. Is it possible to change your life-situation through prayer?
3. Does God determine the outcome of all events? What about free will?

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Additional Texts to Consider:

From the Liturgy: Rock of Israel

Who is like You, O God.
Among the gods that are worshipped?
Who is like You, majestic in holiness,
awesome in splendor, working wonders?

With new song, inspired,
at the shore of the Sea, the redeemed sang Your praise.
In unison they all offered thanks.
Acknowledging Your Sovereignty, they said:
“Adonai will reign forever!”

Rock of Israel, rise in support of Israel
and redeem Judah and Israel as You promised.
Our redeemer, *Adonai Tz'vaot* [God of multitudes] is Your Name.
Blessed are you, Adonai, who redeems Israel.⁹

Is this a request for personal redemption (along the lines Hannah's request in 6.1), or is this a request for national redemption (along the lines of what is discussed in 6.8)?

A Modern View: Mordecai Kaplan on the Reconstruction of the Concept of Israel (1934)

The reconstruction of Jewish life depends upon the ability of the Jews to evolve a humanist interpretation of the concept ‘Israel.’ That achievement is dependent on the ability to realize that a humanist interpretation is bound to constitute a *novum* in Jewish ideology. Jews should not expect much aid and comfort from the traditional ideology in their effort to formulate the status of the Jewish people as a natural or historical social formation...

The traditional conception of Israel contributed to the preservation of the Jewish people because it constituted an effective answer to the challenge of the Gentile world. That answer could be expressed only in the theurgic idiom of those days. Then Gentiles took for granted the biblical account of Israel's origin. They admitted that the history of the Jewish people was a phase of the career of God, a phase which was of utmost significance to humanity as a whole. To the Gentiles, Jewry as a who constituted a nation which God had created and fostered, and which retained its status as a nation despite its rejection of what the Gentiles regarded as the gospel meant for the Jews as well as for the rest of the world. So long as the Gentiles accepted that interpretation of history according to which the Jewish people in its collective capacity played an important role in the scheme of human salvation, it really did not matter by what specific designation the Jews were identified. The important fact is that as a distinct group the Jews possessed status.

⁹ Frishman, *Miskhan T'Filah*, 72.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

It is no longer possible for the Jews to maintain their collective life without relating it in some way to the political and civic structure of the contemporary social order from which all theurgic elements have been eliminated. That order is based on humanist and rational principles of government. The traditional conception of 'Israel,' therefore, as a people that transcends the natural laws of environment and social life, can be of but little assistance in helping the Jews to adjust to their status in terms of the political and social realities of the time.¹⁰

In section 6.9, the possibility of God's intervention in history on a national scale was addressed. How is this passage from Kaplan a rejection of theistic interpretations of Israel's history?

¹⁰ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 228-29.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Chapter 7: Does God Intervene in History?

Chapter Summary:

A biblical view (Genesis 50:15-21):

- The biblical text told the story of Joseph's forgiveness for his brothers' abuse of him.
- Joseph's theological interpretation of the events of his life allowed him to forgive.
- Meritorious though this may be, the interpretation also presents a theological problem. God, in effect, became the author of the suffering, creating hardships in order to bring about a greater good.

The liturgical text:

- "Eileh Ezkarah" ("These I Remember"), a medieval liturgical poem, suggested that an evil Roman ruler punished the Jews of his day for the crime of kidnapping Joseph, on the theory that justice had not yet been served.
- Its refrain—"We have sinned, our Rock; forgive us, our Creator"—may indicate an assumption that God had intervened in history; as much as the Romans were to blame for the persecutions, the Jews of the time also had to bear collective guilt for an event that took place in the biblical era.

The rabbinic text:

- The ancient Rabbis suggested that when faced with tragedy, one should search one's deeds and find where one has sinned.
- Such events are assuredly examples of God's retribution.
- Alternatively, God might have allowed the righteous to suffer to make them worthy of passing on the Torah to future generations.

The medieval text:

- The poet Meir ben Baruch seemed to be pointedly questioning God: What good is it to be Your chosen people, if this also includes the martyrdom of the Jewish sages and desecration of the holy texts? Why is it that Jews are persecuted and You do not intervene? Yet, by its closing lines, "Ask, O You Who Are Burned in Fire" reinforced the need to defend the Torah.
- In keeping with the martyrological poetry of the era, the poem served a dual purpose: remembering those who died and reinforcing the faith of those who lived.
- A surviving fast-day liturgical poem from the subsequent century similarly accentuated the need for the people to maintain their attachment to God and Torah.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

The first modern text:

- Hermann Cohen insisted that God was not responsible for the Jews' suffering.
- Non-believers were responsible, and the Jewish people nobly bore the brunt of the suffering in order to create a better world.
- Whereas the Christian view held that the Suffering Servant was Jesus on the cross, in actuality (according to Cohen) the Jewish people was the Suffering Servant.
- Their suffering was the awful by-product of faithfully upholding their mission to spread monotheism—to bring the nations of the world to the knowledge of God.

The first text in response to the Holocaust:

- Richard Rubenstein posited a “death-of-God” theological construct.
- This did not mean that God had withdrawn from the world; rather, in his view, the Holocaust had undermined the human concept of an all-powerful God who watches over us and metes out rewards and punishments.
- If God could redeem us, where was God when we needed redemption in response to the Holocaust? Clearly an interventionist, redeeming god-concept is no longer viable.

The second text in response to the Holocaust:

- Hans Jonas offered a new mythic structure for understanding God's relationship to the humans God had created.
- A key concept within his formulation was the idea of risk: God took a risk in creating the world so as not to know the outcome of events in advance, and so that intervention to change those outcomes would not be possible.
- Therefore, the actions of God's providence could not possibly have any effect.

The third text in response to the Holocaust:

- Irving Greenberg concluded that God took on the self-limiting role of withdrawing from humanity voluntarily.
- Since the divine goal is to achieve the fullness of human life and capacity, then partnership is essential—because freedom and dignity cannot be bestowed; they must be earned.
- Therefore, God self-limited and invited humans to become partners in perfecting the world.
- In effect, God chose to be a noninterventionist God. Yet God's choice also led to the people's martyrdom.
- Because of this, the era of imposition of responsibilities upon the people without their own choice to abide by the covenant is over. The Jewish people's covenant with God should be fully voluntary, for people cannot be asked to obligate their children to be martyrs.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Why was God Silent during the Holocaust?

- Michael Rosenak identifies “five theological orientations” relating to the question of divine silence during the Holocaust.
- This variety in possible responses “should help make it clear to us that ‘the lessons’ of the Holocaust are by no means self-understood or simply derivative from a grasp of the (historical) facts.”
- Second, it is possible that this diversity may become an entry-point into greater unity within Judaism.

Suffering and the Human-God Relationship:

- Joseph Soloveitchik did not believe that the Holocaust or any other heinous event required the Jewish people to rethink their relationship with God.
- For him, suffering appears in the dimension of fate (where it has no meaning) and the dimension of destiny (where it is structured in the language of Jewish law)
- Embracing destiny, Soloveitchik argued, the Jew does not need to ask metaphysical questions, and instead finds meaning in the performance of Jewish law.
- However, the author offered this critique: if we cause suffering in the course of our lawful behavior, and our lawful behavior is rooted in our theological commitment to Jewish law, then we have opened the door to giving theological meaning to the suffering of others—and in so doing their suffering becomes acceptable to us.

Discussion Questions:

1. Should the enormity of Holocaust change how we think about the basic structures of Judaism?
2. In your view, why do many of the post-Holocaust thinkers reject the idea of the transcendence of God?
3. Which of the responses to the Holocaust was most resonant for you, if any?

Additional Texts to Consider:

A Modern View: Emil Fackenheim’s 614th Commandment

But what if the Holocaust *is* unique? I first faced this question when, yielding to moral pressure to participate in a symposium on the subject in the spring of 1967, I had no other choice. And my first response was to formulate a “614th commandment,” to the effect that Jews are forbidden to give Hitler posthumous victories. I would have much preferred to respond in terms of the traditional 613 commandments. Still more I was averse to mentioning the new, accursed name of Hitler rather than simply making use of the old symbol of Amalek. Still, if the Holocaust *was* unique there was no choice. As it happened, but a short time later the Jewish people collectively shared this perception when faced with the threat of a second Holocaust in the weeks preceding

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

the Six-Day War, they were, after a long period of repression, at length forced to confront the fact of the first. Thus the “614th commandment” became the only statement of mine that ever became famous.¹¹

The evil of the Holocaust world (which is radical and far removed from banality) is philosophically intelligible after Auschwitz only in the exact sense in which it was already understood in Auschwitz—and Buchenwald, Lublin, and the Warsaw Ghetto—by the resisting victims themselves. When Pelagia Lewinska [a Holocaust survivor] “grasped the true meaning of Auschwitz” she “awakened from a dream” and “felt under orders to live.” No deeper or more ultimate grasp is possible for philosophical thought that comes, or ever will come after the event. This grasp—theirs no less than ours—is epistemologically ultimate.¹²

In section 7.8, Steven Katz critiques both Greenberg’s and Fackenheim’s thought. How is Fackenheim’s position here similar to that of Greenberg? How is it different?

A Modern View: Yehuda Bauer Speaks as a Historian Regarding the Holocaust

Why? I think that we have to be clear that a radical revolution had been planned, a mutiny against everything that had been before. It was not a new order of social classes, of religions or even of nations that was envisioned, but a completely new hierarchy — one constructed of so-called races — in which the invented master race did not only have the right but the duty to rule over the others and to enslave or murder all those it considered different from itself. This was a universalistic ideology: “Today Germany belongs to us, tomorrow the entire world,” as the Nazi song had it.

How was it possible for a people of culture who lived in the midst of Europe and who had developed one of the greatest civilizations ever, to subscribe to such an ideology, to instigate a war of annihilation because of it, and to stick to it until the bitter end? Terror was not the only reason, Ladies and Gentlemen. There was a consensus based on a promise of a wonderful utopia — a utopia of an idyllic community of people governing the world, devoid of friction, without political parties, without democracy, one that would be served by slaves. To achieve such a goal, it was necessary to revolt against everything that had been before: middle-class and Judeo-Christian morality, individual freedom, humanitarianism — the whole package of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. National Socialism was, in fact, the most radical of revolutions that had ever taken place — a mutiny against that which was, until then, thought of as humane.¹³

Is it necessary to frame the Holocaust in theological terms, or are historical interpretations a more useful starting-point for understanding what happened?

¹¹ Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, 9-10.

¹² Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, 248.

¹³ Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 263-64.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Chapter 8: What is the Relationship between God and Israel?

Chapter Summary:

The biblical view (Genesis 23:3-16, 31:43-54, 15:7-18):

- The covenant between God and Israel borrowed from the formal structure of legal agreements made between human beings in biblical times.
- These agreements recorded who was included in the contract, identified witnesses, detailed what each party would do, specified consequences if the contract was broken, and defined a shared ritual.
- This structure would come to serve as a framework by which to explain the relationship between God and Israel.
- The people Israel would be faithful to God, as evidenced by observance of the commandments, and God in turn would protect and preserve Israel.

The liturgical text:

- Among the covenantal commandments the people of Israel were required to observe was keeping Shabbat.
- Shabbat will start at a certain time regardless of whether or not the time is set aside as holy; yet humanity is needed to sanctify the time set aside for Shabbat by lighting Shabbat candles and reciting the blessing over wine.
- In other words, God created the structure of Shabbat, yet God relies on humanity to make a place for holiness in time.
- In short, the covenant between God and the people requires regular action by the Jews in the form of observance of the commandments.

The rabbinic text:

- The rabbinic text asks God to reward fidelity.
- The people of Israel are exemplary; they have devoted their sons and daughters to keeping the covenant. Why, then, are they being treated so brutally by the Roman authorities? Where is God's tender mercy in return?
- In essence, if the Jews are asked to engage in difficult and dangerous work to keep the covenant, then God ought to be responsible for protecting and caring for them in return.

The medieval text:

- Judah Halevi's masterwork of Jewish philosophy, the *Kuzari*, is structured as a conversation between the king of the Khazars and the four people he summons, one after another, to speak with him: a philosopher, a Christian, a Muslim, and a Jew (more specifically, a rabbi).
- On the basis of his conversations, the king decides to convert to Judaism.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

- In this text, the rabbi argues that God knows what is best for the people better than humanity, and has seen to it that the beloved people have the structure they need for proper observance.
- The covenant given to the Jewish people is evidence of God's love for them.

The first modern text:

- For Joseph Soloveitchik, the covenant represented the highest possible understanding of the world.
- A halakhic ideal had come to the Jewish people from God through the Revelation to Moses as interpreted by the Rabbis, and each concrete situation in the present world was to be evaluated against this ideal.
- Since the *halakhah* came directly from God, by necessity it had to line up with the real world; if the law seemed to fall short, it was because humanity had failed to discern the divine will.
- As recipients of this divine gift of law, Jews have both a responsibility and an opportunity to enact God's will on earth.
- Once the covenant at Mount Sinai bestowed upon the Israelites the unique knowledge of God's ideal, they—and we—became obligated to enact that ideal, as closely as possible, through observance of that covenant.

The second modern text:

- For Eugene Borowitz, the commandments are not the divine instruction of how to respond to our daily reality; rather, they are “the single best source of guidance as to how [Jews] ought to live.”
- Rather than revealed law, the commandments are useful counsel.
- Rather than building a communal consensus regarding practice, Borowitz suggested that each person “personally establish the validity of every halakhic and communal prescription”—thus deciding independently as to what appropriate Jewish practice might look like.
- In this understanding, the covenant becomes threefold: between the Jew and God, between the Jew and fellow Jews, and between the Jew and him or herself.

The third modern text:

- Michael Fishbane characterizes the transcendence of God as exceeding human consciousness—great and awesome, larger than we can imagine, more powerful than we can say, and beyond language—and links it to the immanence of God—the knowledge of God that is so intimate and close to our hearts, God is as near to us as breathing, and experienced in nature as well.
- As we become conscious of our experiences, we become aware of the intersection of divine transcendence (in the sense of majesty) and of divine immanence (in the sense of love).

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

The fourth modern text:

- Donniel Hartman argued that religion can develop an “autoimmune disease” in which the very things that allow a religion to do good in the world (such as enforcing an ethical system or articulating the meaning of our lives) can also attack the foundations of the religion itself, so as to produce negative behaviors (such as ignoring the pain of others or engaging in violence).
- Hartman’s critique rests on a valorization of balance: too much laxity in observance may create chaos and too much dogmatism may pervert religious values.
- He presents three antidotes: humility to recognize that one’s interpretation of the tradition is not the only possible answer; gratitude in response to those who would raise their voices in protest against unethical religious behavior; and resolution to repair the religious tradition through the careful work of education.
- The covenant, therefore, must be a dynamic concept, one that allows God and Israel to adjust their understanding over time, so as to bring the world closer to the perfection of Eden.

The Meaning of Enacting the Covenant:

- It means, at the very least, that there is some sort of framework for the relationship. The covenant specifies what is demanded and what will occur in return.
- In a sense, it defines the nature of reality itself: is the world tractable in response to our efforts? Is God obligated to us in any meaningful sense?
- The covenant is an expression of *moral coherence*: the idea that the universe is not completely random, an agglomeration of events without meaning or justice.
- A covenant represents the reassurance that the world does have a larger structure, a framework of meaning.

Covenant as Metaphor:

- When the covenant is understood as a metaphor—which is often the case when the commandments are seen to come from a source other than God, such as the tradition, or human insight—it is generally viewed as malleable.
- Furthermore, if the covenant is a metaphor, the meaning of that metaphor may shift over time.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does it mean to be in relationship with God?
2. Is the Ancient Near Eastern idea of a covenant still relevant in our time?
3. Why do covenants or other agreements require a ritual for their enactment? How does the ritual help the covenant become real?

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Additional Texts to Consider:

A Modern View: Michael Fishbane on Mythic Language in the Bible

Just as there is a mythic dimension to the presentation of God's great deeds in time, so does the Bible resort to myth when it comes to portraying the divine personality. While this dimension is not in principle different from the accounts of the lives of the gods in Mesopotamia or Greece, the distinctive feature of the monotheistic myth of ancient Israel is that its God is a unity of traits found separately among the "other gods," and (in its view) is of a higher order of magnitude... In the Hebrew Bible the divine person makes a covenant with his people and punishes the offenders; while the human person fears the consequences of sin and wonders whether divine mercy may assuage stern judgment. Is this divine care and involvement not part of the mythic pulse of Scripture? "In anger, remember mercy," cries the prophet, and receives a terrifying vision of God's advent in return (Habakkuk 3:2). It thus takes a certain theological solipsism to contend that the angry dooms of God are mere metaphor in the Bible, while the punishments of Shamash or Nergal are myth elsewhere. Indeed, in chapter 28 of the book of Deuteronomy one section of the curses is exactly the same as another found in an Assyrian vassal treaty, with only changes of divine nomenclature marking the difference.¹⁴

If the covenant language is actually mythic in structure, does that change our understanding of how it functions?

A Modern View: Arthur Green on Faith

For me God is not an intellectual proposition but rather the ground of life itself. It is the name I give to the reality I encounter in the kind of moment I have been describing, on that feels more authentic and deeply perceptive of truth than any other. I believe with complete faith that every human being is capable of such experience, and that these moments place us in contact with the elusive inner essence of being that I call "God." It is out of such moments that religion is born, our human response to the dizzying depths of an encounter we cannot—and yet so need to—name. I returned to tradition, the one of my ancestors and my early attempts at faith, because it gave me a language with which to name that inner "place." I find myself less convinced by the dogmatic truth claims of tradition than powerfully attracted to the richness of its language, both in word and in symbolic gesture. Through the profound echo chamber of countless generations, tradition offers a way to respond, to channel the love and awe that rise up within us at such times, and to give a name to the holy mystery by which our lives are bounded.¹⁵

Because I take this call seriously, when I read the old rabbinic dicta that say "God looked at the righteous" or "Israel arose in God's mind" and "For their sake God created the world," I surprisingly find myself to be among the affirmers. Of course I don't read these words literally, thinking of a Roman emperor or a Near Eastern potentate who calls in his advisers and asks, "Should I create humans?" but I do agree that there is a purpose to human existence, and that is what these statements really mean. Reading these ancient words for our day we also understand

¹⁴ Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination*, 93

¹⁵ Green, *Hasidism for Tomorrow*, 108-9.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

that “Israel” as generally understood is far too narrow and chauvinistic a term in this context and that even “the righteous” sounds rather smug and elitist. I by no means think that God created the world for the sake of the Jews or the pious Jews or anything like that. I need to universalize the “Israel” of this sentence (and so many others!) to include all those who struggle with God, referring back to the original etymology of that name. “The righteous” here has to include all those who do the work of stretching toward the One, by whatever means and methods they employ.¹⁶

How is Green’s understanding of the covenant metaphoric and how is it concrete?

¹⁶ Green, *Hasidism for Tomorrow*, 131.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Chapter 9: Is It a Binding Covenant?

Chapter Summary:

A biblical view (Exodus 19:7-17):

- The Israelites in the Sinai desert prepared themselves for encountering God and experiencing the Revelation of the Torah.
- This moment of Revelation includes the idea that the Israelites will not be like all the other peoples, each with their own pantheon of gods.
- They will be “set apart” in the sense that they will have a special relationship with the Creator of heaven and earth.
- Essentially, the Israelites will take on a legal obligation, one that binds the future generations as well: to act according to Jewish law.

The liturgical text:

- The text thanks God for having chosen the people Israel to receive the commandments, and requests that God grant the worshipers the capacity to understand them.
- The Torah itself is evidence of God’s love. The laws are a gift, providing the structure by which the people can live life in accordance with God’s will.
- Since the people are to reciprocate God’s love by observing the laws, the prayer entreats God to help the worshipers comprehend them so they may be observed faithfully.
- Furthermore, the binding covenant is also a pathway to salvation. Some mystical prayers express the hope that by performing the commandments uniformly and with intentionality, Jews may bring to pass the redemption of the world.

The rabbinic text:

- In contrast to the prayer above, the rabbinic text suggested that the Israelites had to be coerced into accepting the yoke of the commandments.
- Each generation thereafter has faced a similar compulsion, so to speak.
- The mountain of the history of the Jews has been held over each Jew’s head: would you accept the Torah or be buried here?

The medieval text:

- Bachya Ibn Pakuda argued that while certain ethical responsibilities transcend one’s specific religious community.
- God demonstrated special love for the Jewish people by revealing the system of laws and precepts to the Jews.
- Ibn Pakuda grounded the requirement for observance of these laws in the recognition that they are a gift of love. The people’s obedience is to flow from a sense of gratitude.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

The first modern text:

- Franz Rosenzweig disavowed the idea that the commandments were part of a binding covenant, the product of a direct revelation from God.
- Rosenzweig did not speak of the content of Judaism as a system of law and observance. Rather, he addressed the larger, more universal question as to the nature of God, explaining how God could be manifest in multiple religious traditions at once.
- In the case of Creation, God's love seized everything all at once, causing the world to come into being.
- Revelation, on the other hand, was selective, seizing only a single people—the Jews—rather than all things at all times.

The second modern text:

- David Novak argued that two of the covenants described in the Bible, the Noahide and the Sinaitic, are particularly important, because they constitute the ground on which all other covenant agreements are rooted.
- Consequently, these two types of covenant are perpetually binding.
- Originally, all peoples were expected to follow the seven Noahide commandments, but in and of themselves these were not enough.
- To move from ideas of basic decency toward the creation of “a kingdom of priests,” a more detailed covenant was needed.
- Therefore God singled out a people—Abraham and his descendants—for a greater commitment that would be binding for all time.
- Even if the other peoples of the world do not follow these laws now, the way to their universalization is modeled by the Abrahamic covenant.
- The pull of the binding covenant is God's demand upon the Jews to create the context for universal human rights.

Is the Covenant Binding if the Bible was Not Revealed by God?

- Even before the time of the Enlightenment, a number of secular philosophical arguments have been made against the authority of the Bible and its claim of a binding covenant.
- Immanuel Kant argued that Revelation itself cannot be a source of binding authority, because it is experienced as a historical event.
- David Novak argued for universal ethics grounded in the provisions of the biblical text.
- Hermann Cohen also contended that a religiously derived system of ethics is needed to define moral rules and behaviors.

Existing Peacefully in a Pluralistic World:

- It is useful and helpful to find ways to read our traditions so that we can exist peacefully in a pluralistic world.
- Furthermore, we have a responsibility to find and communicate “theological shorthand” positions.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

- They allow us to support genuine tolerance, as well as engage with the deeper thought of other religious traditions.

Discussion Questions:

1. Are there precepts that simply must be followed by all peoples, or are legal structures entirely relative?
2. Should pluralism be encouraged within the Jewish community?
3. How might we foster deeper theological conversations between people of different faiths?

Additional Texts to Consider:

A Rabbinic View: The Law Requires the People of Israel to Be Different

R[abbi] Levi said: All Israel's activities are different from the corresponding activities of the peoples of the earth—in their plowing, in their sowing, in their harvesting, in their gathering the sheaves, in their threshing, [in furnishing liberally from] their threshing floors and their winepresses, in the cutting of their hair, in their counting and reckoning of time. In their plowing: “Thou shalt not plow with an ox and ass together” (Deut. 22:10). In their sowing: “Thou shalt not sow thy vineyard with two kinds of seed” (Deut. 22:9). In their harvesting: “Neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest” (Lev. 19:9). In their gathering of the sheaves: “When thou reapest...in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go back to fetch it” (Deut. 24:19). In their threshing: “Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn” (Deut. 25:4). In [furnishing liberally from] their threshing floors and their winepresses: “Though shalt furnish [the Hebrew servant] liberally...out of thy threshing floor, and out of thy winepress” (Deut. 15:14). In the cutting of their hair, as is said, “Ye shall not round off the side growth on your head, nor destroy the side growth of your beard” (Lev. 19:27). And finally in their counting and reckoning of time, for the nations of the earth count years by the sun, but Israel count by the moon, as is said, ‘this, [the determination of time by the] moon, is to be yours’ (Exod. 12:2).¹⁷

What are the advantages and disadvantages of distinctiveness in religious practice?

A Modern View: Moses Mendelssohn on the Revealed Law

According to Judaism miracles and extraordinary signs cannot furnish proof for or against the eternal truths of reason. Hence we are instructed by Scripture itself not to listen to a prophet if he teaches or advises things which are contrary to established truths, even if he confirms his mission by miracles. Indeed, we are bidden to condemn the wonder-worker to death, if he seeks to entice us into idolatry. For miracles can only verify testimonies, support authority, confirm the reliability of witnesses and of those who transmit traditions. But there is no testimony or

¹⁷ Bialik and Ravnitzky, *Book of Legends*, 336.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

authority that can overthrow an established truth of reason, or put a doubtful notion beyond doubt or question.

Although that divine book which we have received from Moses is essentially a lawbook, and so contains ordinances, rules of conduct and regulations, it also includes, as is well known, an inexhaustible store of rational truths and religious doctrines, which are so closely bound up with the laws as to constitute with them a single entity. All laws refer to, or are based upon, the eternal truths of reason, or they recall those truths, or arouse us to reflect on them, so that our Rabbis rightly said: ‘The laws and the doctrines are related to each other as the body to the soul.’¹⁸

How does Mendelssohn’s position relate to those in sections 9.8? Would he agree with the argument presented in section 9.9?

¹⁸ Mendelssohn, “Judaism as Revealed Legislation,” Alexander, *Textual Sources for the Study of Judaism*, 144.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Chapter 10: How Should the Revealed Law Be Understood?

Chapter Summary:

A biblical view (Deuteronomy 30:11-20):

- The revealed law involves a choice: one may choose to heed the commandments or ignore them.
- But this choice is also presented as profoundly consequential: it is the choice between life and death.
- Therefore, it becomes imperative that these commandments are comprehensible, interpretable (by the magistrates), and translatable into a legal system.
- This system, in fact, will become the organizing principle upon which communal Jewish life is founded.

The liturgical text:

- In one moment at the end of the Torah service, the text of the Torah scroll is directly linked to the experience of Revelation at Mount Sinai.
- The ritual in which the Torah is held aloft (“This is the Torah”) renders the abstract theological concept (“Moses received Revelation from God”) into a concrete object: *this object here* is the Torah that Moses received from the mouth of God.
- The Torah becomes a placeholder for God within the community.
- Although the Torah is not worshiped directly—for that would be idolatry—it is given a role of honor, as the representative of God’s love for the Jewish people.

The rabbinical text:

- The ancient Rabbis faced the challenge of how to adapt a received tradition, particularly one with the force of Revelation behind it, while at the same time conserving its content.
- They decided that a heavenly voice no longer decided matters of law; the task of interpreting the Torah was now in their hands, to be adjudicated by their own majority rule.
- As proof they told the story of Rabbi Eliezer, who it seemed had heaven on his side of a dispute, though the majority of sages disagreed with his assessment.
- It was determined that even if his (or any) ruling was in keeping with the purest and most ideal form of *halakhah*, as evidenced by a voice from heaven, the final judgment would not be made on that basis.
- Even if the majority was mistaken, the majority’s decision on how to interpret the *halakhah* would prevail.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

The medieval text:

- Saadia Gaon argued that Revelation was necessary for humankind, and that the prophetic text helps fill in gaps in our knowledge so that we may discern God's will.
- For Saadia, Revelation is not merely a dictation of rules to follow blindly without understanding.
- Rather, Revelation fills in what reason alone cannot ascertain, providing the information we would not be able to deduce without it.

The first modern text:

- Milton Steinberg paraphrased the Babylonian Talmud narrative to emphasize how reason takes precedence over Revelation.
- In his view, the story could be interpreted as a defense of reason "against the very hosts of Heaven," by which he meant one should not abandon a reasoned position, even if challenged by a voice from heaven, until a better-reasoned argument can in fact be presented.

The second modern text:

- Abraham Joshua Heschel asserted that we should not interpret the Hebrew Bible as recording the word of God as a form of dictation, taken down by Moses atop Mount Sinai.
- The Torah's Revelation can only be understood metaphorically, for how could the infinite be expressed in a finite text?
- We would best conceive of the text as an artistic rendering of an encounter that cannot be fully articulated.
- And if so, if the biblical text is an *explanation of the text* of Revelation rather than direct Revelation itself, then the Bible should not be used as a source text for fundamentalist thinking.
- If the text is *indicative* rather than literal, then there is room to interpret it according to the needs of the present, through the halakhic process of interpretation, in a spirit of humility.

Accounting for the Rise of Literalism:

- The scholar of Jewish intellectual history Leora Batnitzky explains in *How Judaism Became a Religion* that ultra-Orthodox literalism arose as a response to the nascent Reform movement of nineteenth-century Germany.
- Reform, in turn, was a response to the Enlightenment and Emancipation of the Jews.

Reimagining a Foundational Document:

- While the Torah itself cannot be amended, its interpretation is an ongoing project.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

- The Rabbis recognized that Moses would not comprehend the Torah as it was read in their era.
- Not only had they reinterpreted various aspects of the written text; the process of interpretation had also become more complex over time.
- Moreover, the Rabbis did not see these changes as at all haphazard, but rather as part of a larger project of study, discussion, and education in communal setting.
- The original Revelation itself had provided the authority for these interpretations, for the very process of adaptation itself was “a law given unto Moses at Sinai.”

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways do foundational documents (such as Torah, or the US Constitution) create stability within a polity?
2. How might it be possible to revise a foundational document without undermining its authority? Or is that task impossible?
3. Is deciding not to change also a change in its own right?

Additional Texts to Consider:

A Modern View: Eliezer Berkovits on the Oven of Akhnai

It would seem to us that this story has twofold significance. First of all, there is an insistence on the human share and responsibility in the interpretation and administration of the revealed word of God. Since the Torah had been given to human beings, it could not be otherwise. It was inconceivable that every time a question arose or a problem presented itself, one should have to contact the heavenly authority for a decision. God himself, in the act of revelation, handed the deciding authority to man.

Of no less importance is the second aspect of this story. Whose opinion was the correct one: that of R. Eliezer or that of the majority of the sages? In an absolute sense, R. Eliezer was, of course, right. The very heavens agreed with him. However, the affairs of men cannot be guided by absolute objectivity, only by human objectivity. What God desires of the Jewish people is that it live by his word in accordance with its own understanding. In theoretical discussions man strives to delve into the ultimate depth of the truth, but when he decides he has reached it, it is still only his own human insight that affirms that indeed he has found it. When it is necessary to make decisions about human conduct and behavior, one can do so only on the basis of pragmatic principles; for example, “follow the view of the majority” The result is not objective truth but pragmatic validity. For this reason, the majority of the rabbis was right and the great R. Eliezer, supported by a heavenly voice of absolute truth, was wrong.

How does this interpretation of the Talmudic story differ from the Steinberg’s interpretation in 10.5? How is it similar?

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

A Modern View: David Hartman on our Relationship to Halakha (Jewish Law):

It is extremely important that we create a space within our theology, and within our communities, for the legitimate (though not exclusive) positive understanding of halakha [the system of Jewish law] as a selective educational system, and not only as a legal system. For modern Jews who seek access to the lived experience of Jewish community, it is not merely a “tactical” mistake to present halakha in terms of principles of authority, obligations, and the sinful consequences of failure to uphold all of the mitzvot. It is a failure of the religious imagination and ultimately a failure of the Jewish community. The legalistic weight of halakha should be lifted completely and without theological compunction. Legalism and authoritarianism are not the best ways to educate a person to begin a way of life, and the overemphasis upon absolute authority claims and legalistic minutiae...belies halakha’s essence and does a grave disservice to the profound potential it holds for today’s diverse Jewish population. Halakha, derived from the Hebrew root that means “walking,” should be framed as a religious path, a process of ever-evolving spiritual sensitivity. Though traditionally halakha has predominantly been represented as a legal-normative system requiring total commitment, we need not necessarily relate to it that way.

To be clear, asserting that halakha can be framed legitimately as an educational system is not necessarily synonymous with giving up on it as a disciplined system of authoritative laws. Halakha can function differently for different types of individuals and communities, meeting people at varying stages of their spiritual interest, experience, passion, and commitment.¹⁹

How is Hartman’s argument a rejection of Hirsch’s view in 10.8? Is Hartman’s position similar to/different from the argument presented in 10.9?

¹⁹ Hartman, *The God Who Hates Lies*, 51.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Bibliography

- Aschkenasy, Nehama. *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998.
- Bauer, Yehuda. *Rethinking the Holocaust*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001.
- Berkovits, Eliezer. *Not in Heaven: The Nature and Function of Jewish Law*. Jerusalem and New York: Shalem Press, 2015.
- Bialik, Hayim Nahman and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds. *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah, Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*. William G. Braude, transl. New York: Schocken Books, 1992.
- Brettschenider, Marla. *Jewish Feminism and Intersectionality*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016.
- Fackenheim, Emil L. *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Fishbane, Michael. *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Frishman, Elyse, ed. *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur Complete: Shabbat, Weekdays, and Festivals, Transliterated*. New York: CCAR Press, 2007.
- Green, Arthur. *Hasidism for Tomorrow*. Hava Tirosh-Samuels and Aaron W. Hughes, eds. Lieden and Boston: Brill, 2015.
- Hartman, David. *The God Who Hates Lies: Confronting and Rethinking Jewish Tradition*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2014.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993.
- Horwitz, Daniel M. *A Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism Reader*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2016.
- Kaplan, Mordecai M. *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2010.
- Langer, Ruth. *To Worship God Properly: Tensions between Liturgical Custom and Halakhah in Judaism*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2015.

Study Guide for *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* by Rabbi Kari H. Tuling

Mendelssohn, Moses. "Judaism as Revealed Legislation," *Textual Sources for the Study of Judaism*. Philip S. Alexander, ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984; 143-46.