What Every Christian Needs to Know About

JUDAISM

Exploring the Ever-Connected World of Christians *and* Jews

Rabbi Evan Moffic

Praise for *What Every Christian Needs to Know About Judaism*

"Rabbi Moffic creates a feast for the mind and heart, as he sets the table for a rich Passover experience. Historical events, biblical texts, and stories from Jewish communities through the centuries make for an engaging read, inspiring readers to explore the richness of the Passover in their own homes."
—Lynn H. Cohick, Professor of New Testament, Wheaton College

"People everywhere are seeking a better way to live. Many have a faith tradition we call home—but sometimes moving outside that tradition helps us see resources we never knew were there. Through his stories and insight, Rabbi Evan Moffic shines the light of Jewish wisdom in a way that helps all of us find our way."
—Christine Chakoian, Senior Pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest

"Rabbi Moffic is an engaging teacher who excels at communicating ancient truths for modern audiences. His insights into Hebrew scriptures and the Jewish heritage of the Christian faith will be a blessing to all who want to learn."
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"Evan Moffic is a rabbi, but he's also an extraordinary scholar and a teacher of the highest order. He can speak to us all, whatever our faith or culture. And he does it with grace, humor, and erudition. Such a guy."
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"Rabbi Moffic is one of the best young rabbis and scholars I have ever heard speak and teach about both Judaism and Christianity. His wit, his humor, and his deep knowledge about the Old Testament and early Christianity will give insight into Jesus' Jewish context, history, and character."
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—Scot McKnight, theologian, speaker, and best-selling author of *The Jesus Creed*

"Thank you, Rabbi Moffic! As a Christian and a Catholic priest, I am grateful for the intriguing look into the Jewish life of Jesus. As such, this book is a wonderful gift to Christians who seek to further the rich faith and culture out of which Jesus emerged."
—Father Tom Hurley, pastor, Old St. Patrick's Church, Chicago

What Every Christian Needs to Know About Judaism

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WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT JUDAISM

EXPLORING THE EVER-CONNECTED WORLD OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To all of the rabbis and teachers—Samuel Karff, Ronald Shapiro, Michael Sternfield, Greg Wolfe, Isaac Serotta, Stephen Pearce, David Gelfand, Michael Zedek, David Saperstein, and many more—who taught, inspired, and led me into this extraordinary calling

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Introduction

Imagine you step into a time machine and arrive in ancient Egypt. The year is 1500 BCE. You see the Nile River rolling through fertile fields. You see a city teeming with people. A few are men dressed in elaborate colorful tunics, sitting atop shining chariots. Others stand in booths in a market, hawking various foods and goods. In the distance you see a gleaming palace. There lives the pharaoh, the supreme ruler, revered by many as a god. The pharaoh's ancestors are entombed in magnificent rising pyramids you glimpse farther in the distance.

You decide to go and explore those pyramids. As you near them, you see hundreds of men at work. They are making bricks, transporting and stacking them. They are small and slender, marching in lines surrounding by stronger men with whips and horses. Their sad and haggard faces make you wince. When they finish working, you follow them. They walk a mile or so to their ramshackle homes. There they greet their wives and children. They

have a small meal, perhaps tell their children a story, and sleep when the night falls.

The next day they get up as the sun rises. Some walk back to the pyramids and begin making bricks and mortar again. Others walk toward the Nile and work in nearby fields. They continue working in the hot sun, pushed and heckled by the larger men with whips and horses. The men you're watching seem resigned to their fate. They are slaves in the most powerful nation in the world.

If you saw this scene and had no idea how history would unfold, what would you think? Which group do you think would survive over the 3,500 years? Would it be this small group of slaves, malnourished and powerless to challenge their captors? Or would it be the glorious Egyptian nation, with its wealth, fertile land, pyramids, and global empire?

If you had no knowledge of the future, you would choose the Egyptians. Of course they would survive. They have everything going for them. They are the superpower of the ancient Near East. You would think little of that small group of slaves. Their lot in life is one of death and decline. They will remain enslaved until they die, powerless to fight their overlords.

But history turned out much differently. The empire of ancient Egypt is no more. The last pharaoh died thousands of years ago. The pyramids remain, of course. The Nile River rolls on. And the descendants of that small group of slaves survive—not just as individuals, but as a people. The children of those slaves become the Jewish people. The text they claim as sacred has destroyed empires, built wealth, and transformed the world. Their message that every human being is created in the image of God gave us the idea of

human dignity and helped end slavery in the West and establish today's norms of human rights. Their religious beliefs gave rise, in turn, to two other major world religions.

This book unpacks Jewish teachings and beliefs. It does so with an eye toward guiding Christians interested in deepening their understanding and appreciation of Judaism. Knowing more about Judaism brings Christians closer to Jesus because Jesus lived and died as a Jew and consistently quoted Jewish Scripture and stories. When Christians learn about Jewish tradition and history, they see the Bible and the life of Jesus from a new and enriching perspective. As scholar Paula Frederickson puts it, "Despite a long and often unhappy history, the story of Jews and of Christians remains intertwined. The bridge between the two is the historical figure of Jesus."[1] And that historical figure of Jesus becomes more accessible and instructive when we explore Jewish traditions and wisdom.

I write as a rabbi who leads a synagogue, devoting most of my time to leading Jewish worship, teaching classes on Jewish topics, and officiating at weddings, funerals, and other sacred rituals. But since I began my rabbinical studies, I have had another mission: building bridges and engaging with people of all faiths. Some of my passion for this work comes from my own history growing up in a community in Texas filled with devout Christians. I felt inspired by the devotion and sense of service I witnessed among my Christian friends and neighbors. I felt pushed to commit more deeply to my own faith and relationship with God. And, I was constantly explaining Judaism to my Christian friends.

As an adult, I have officiated at weddings of hundreds of interfaith couples. The conversations I had with them (and

often their extended families) explored the role of faith in their lives. The women and men I've performed marriages for had questions about God, holidays, raising children, the best ways to talk about God in their home, and so much more. In talking with interfaith families about such topics, my aim has not been to convert the Christian partner to Judaism. Rather, my aim is that everyone in the conversation—including myself—might find a closer relationship with God and a deeper understanding of the roots shared by Christians and Jews. And I hope that exploring the riches of the Jewish faith tradition can foster bonds focused not on the troubled history between Jews and Christians but rather on a future in which we share wisdom with one another.

Judaism and You

Our investigation of Judaism begins with the Jewish approach to God. What do Jews believe about God? Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? What do Jews say in prayer? We continue by looking at the sacred Jewish texts, holy days, and daily practices. We also explore what happens in a Jewish synagogue and home, and what Israel means today for Jews. We conclude by answering some of the pressing and timely questions people ask me about Jews and Judaism.

But this book is not just about Judaism and the Jewish people. It is about you. It highlights the morsels and insights of the great Jewish sages that can help you live a richer and more meaningful life. This book is not a description of Jewish life so much as it is an invitation to soak up the wisdom

and traditions of Judaism, whether you are Jewish or not. Indeed, throughout this book's explorations, we'll focus on what people of all faiths can learn from Jewish wisdom and practices. In this way, our explorations riff on and respond to God's words to Abraham in the Bible: "All the nations of the world shall be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3, author's translation). Some rabbis, over the ages, have interpreted that to mean Israel will bring blessings to the world or that nations that accept Jews will prosper. I think it might mean something simpler: that one needn't be Jewish to have one's life enriched by Jewish teaching, Jewish spiritual practice, and Jewish approaches to God and neighbor.

1

God

What is the sound of God's voice? Does it have a certain timber and vibration? Is it deep and powerful, perhaps like the voice of James Earl Jones? Is it light and lilting, like the voice of Reese Witherspoon, or throaty like Kathleen Turner? Well, to me the voice of God sounds like the voice of Rabbi Samuel Karff. He is the rabbi who led the congregation where I grew up and worshipped with my parents every week. As a child, I remember his sermons brimming with knowledge and wisdom. I both loved him and was in awe of him. His presence filled the sanctuary with dignity. And his voice made us dream, cry, and act.

Rabbi Karff came from a long line of distinguished rabbis. He also wrote scholarly books. He was universally respected in Houston by people of all faiths. He was the kind of person I still aspire to be.

One of Rabbi Karff's most compelling and memorable sermons came after a massive hurricane struck Houston in 1995—during which a bolt of lightning struck and set fire to the Karffs' home. Rabbi Karff and his wife, Joan, escaped, but his library and almost all of his other possessions were destroyed. Soon the newspaper featured the story of the Karffs' home's destruction. It raised the question of why—of all the homes in Houston—the hurricane would destroy that of one of the city's most beloved clergypeople.

In response this question, Rabbi Karff reminded us that he could not explain God's actions. He was as puzzled and

troubled as others were. But as a rabbi, he also served as a "defender of the faith." He wrote:

> Our response when people asked "Why us?" was "Why not us?" In the days following the fire, I alternated between the belief that God had some purpose beyond my power to fathom and the conclusion that this fire was not God's will but the price of living in a world in which nature follows its natural course. I did feel God's presence that night and during the days to come in our survival, in the strength we received to carry on, in the love of those who embraced and nurtured us, and in my faith that God would empower us to derive a blessing even from this ordeal.[1]

He did not know all of God's ways. But he knew God's presence.

The different feelings Rabbi Karff articulated capture different Jewish approaches to God. Some Jewish texts, interested in illustrating God's power, suggest that everything happens for a reason; other Jewish writers focus on God as a mystery we can never fully comprehend; still other Jewish sources offer a more deist interpretation that God set the world in motion and then stepped back to let human beings shape its fate. Jewish theologies differ on many points, but fundamental to them all is the idea that that no human being can understand everything about God. We are human beings, and God is God, and our knowledge is ultimately limited by this difference.

As Rabbi Karff once said, "Life is not a puzzle to solve, but a mystery to embrace."[2] Accordingly, this chapter does

not give definitive answers about what Jews believe about God. Rather, it offers an overview of the different ways Jews have approached God and tried to make sense of a world in which God is sometimes keenly felt but often ignored or rejected.

Some might wonder why we need to ask questions about God in the first place. God, we might say, is simply the Ruler of the Universe. God is all-powerful, and that's that. Others might think that what's important about Judaism are our ethical teachings, and that "God" is a figment of the imagination. Indeed, many modern Jews draw just that conclusion. But for most Jews, for most of our history, God is like the air we breathe. Our ancestors didn't debate God's existence. They lived by it. They lived *toward* God—and they also struggled with God and wondered about God and loved God.

What Is God's Name?

The Hebrew Bible begins by giving us two names for God: Elohim and YHVH (יהוה). We include the Hebrew letters for the second name because the pronunciation is unknown. Some people have transliterated the Hebrew as Yahweh. But the Hebrew letters are all consonants. According to Jewish legend, the proper pronunciation was once known by the High Priest of Israel, but it was lost over the generations. When we encounter it in the Torah, we say Adonai, which means "My Lord." Some Jews also say HaShem, which means "The Name." We abbreviate it with the set of letters

YHVH, symbolizing the four Hebrew letters—*Yud*, *Hay*, *Vav*, *Hay*.

Elohim is used in chapter 1 of the first book of the Bible, known in Hebrew as Bereshit (which means "in the beginning") and in English as Genesis. YHVH is used in chapter 2. In subsequent chapters of the Torah the two names are used interchangeably. Other names also appear throughout the book. They include El Shaddai, Yah, and HaMakom. Each of these names has spiritual significance. But the two most important and frequent are YHVH and Elohim.

YHVH is God's proper name. It is like Evan or Rachel. It is used in the context of the particular relationship between God and the Jewish people. Elohim is the more universal name. It reflects our understanding of God as the creator of the universe and source of nature. We will look at each in turn.

YHVH (יהוה)

A proper name is a unique identifier. We are not always identified by our proper name. If your proper name is Lauren, for example, you might also be called "my cousin" or "my sister." But your proper name remains unique to you. יהוה is God's proper name. But as we have learned, the correct way to say it is unknown. No one knows the right way to pronounce יהוה because יהוה is simply a series of letters with no vowels. It's like the English letters CBRH. Without vowels, we do not know the right way to pronounce that series of letters. It could be cobra, cubrah, cah-bar-uh. Since no one

knows the proper pronunciation, we may be pronouncing it incorrectly. We all know it feels like an act of disrespect if someone mispronounces our name, even if it is an honest mistake. We do not want to disrespect God in that way, so Jews today do not try to pronounce this name. What do we do, then, when reading aloud a biblical passage with יהוה? Sometimes we say HaShem and sometimes we say Adonai.

Elohim

God's proper name—יהוה—is not the only name by which we know God. In fact, it's not the first name the Bible gives us. The first is Elohim. It is the third word of the Torah—*Beresheet Barah Elohim*, which means "In the beginning God created." Elohim is a troubling name for God because it seems like a plural noun. Most Hebrew words that end with *-im* are plural. It is like the *s* at the end of English words. But the Torah comes from one God. We don't say, "In the beginning, *gods* created the heaven and the earth." Jews recognize and worship one God, not many. So why does this name for God take on the Hebrew plural form?

In fact, while this name of God *appears* to be plural, it isn't. We know Elohim is a singular noun because the verb connected to it (create) appears in the singular form. The same is true throughout the story. The noun Elohim functions grammatically in the singular. But the use of a seemingly plural name still has a purpose. The God of the Bible—Elohim—contains all the earlier *ideas* of God people once espoused. For example, the ancient Greeks believed in a sea god, a love god, a fertility god, and so on. But the Israelites

believed the one God of the universe created all of the waters of the sea *and* the loving bond between human beings *and* the process by which we bring new life into the world and much more. In other words, the God whom readers of the Bible are about to meet is a God who encompasses all the attributes and actions previously associated with many gods. By seeming to use a plural noun, the Torah conveys this truth.

This clarification may seem unimportant. Who cares if a noun appears in the singular or plural form? It matters because the name symbolizes the creation of order in the universe out of chaos and competition. One of the first acts of Elohim is to bring order out of the *tohu v'vohu*, which is often translated as unformed and void. It is the Bible's way of describing the random forces of energy permeating the universe. God creates order out of that chaos. Similarly, the first name of God unites all the previous ideas of gods people once had. Order emerges out of disorder. An earth unformed and void became one with day and night, oceans and lands, fruits, vegetables, and human beings. God creates an ordered world.

God and Science

By creating an ordered world out of chaotic darkness, God models one of our core human tasks: to create life and to sustain it. In other words, empowered by God—made in the image of God—we are to also create order from chaos. We create relationships out of individuals. We create families

out of relationships. We create societies out of families. We create nations and civilizations out of societies.

Our primary way of doing this is language. We form relationships and create meaning through the words we use. God teaches us how to do so. How does God create light? According to the Torah, God *said*, "Let there be light," and there was light (Genesis 1:3). God speaks the world into being. God's words created the light. How does God form relationships with Abraham and Moses and the other prophets? God speaks to and through them.

The tradition of Jewish mysticism known as the Kabbalah elaborates on this idea. Jewish mystics believed everybody and everything in the world is part of God. God was, is, and will be everything. That's because every creation in the world is simply a variation of the letters of God's name. It is mathematically possible because a set of letters has many potential permutations. Those letters can be repeated and put in different orders. According the Jewish mystics, every human being—every grain of sand—is a different permutation of the letters of God's name.

This idea may seem far-fetched. And the teaching, to be clear, does emerge from mysticism—metaphorical, poetic, spooled out on a register different from the register of reason and argument. But recently, I've been thinking about the ways that this mystical teaching about creation is, in fact, not just "mystical"—it's also surprisingly compatible with science. In the 1950s, scientists James Watson and Francis Crick discovered DNA as the backbone of creation. The cells of every living being are made up of strands of DNA. And what is DNA? It is a series of letters: ATCG. These letters form strands that replicate themselves to

create the blueprints of life. In other words, every creation is a series of letters. The world is created through words. Does that sound familiar? One of the twentieth century's great scientists—Francis Collins—was so intrigued by this connection between DNA and the creation of the world that he called DNA the "language of God."[3]

With this understanding, we might say creation—as described in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis—is the language of God assembled into sentences and paragraphs. The Bible itself is the book containing those paragraphs. It all begins with Elohim creating order out of chaos through the use of language.

The Burning Bush

Another name of God is revealed to Moses at the burning bush, a story recounted in Exodus 3. Moses, walking through the desert, hears a voice. (According to Jewish legend, the voice sounded like Moses's father.) That voice tells Moses he has to return to the Israelites in Egypt and secure their freedom from Pharaoh. Moses hesitates. And then he asks God, "What is your name?" God answers Moses, "*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*" (Exodus 3:14).

This extraordinary phrase still mystifies many readers; knowing its meaning is essential to appreciating a core Jewish belief. The meaning of the phrase *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* is "I will be what I will be." Many translations use the phrase "I am what I am." This translation, however, is not accurate—the Hebrew does not have a word corresponding to the English word *am*. No Hebrew word exists for the

present tense of "to be." For example, if you were to translate the English sentence "The girl is here" you would use only two Hebrew words—*girl* and *here*. If you were to say "The girl was here," or "The girl will be here," you would need three Hebrew words, the additional word corresponding to "was" or "will be." The same logic applies to the sentence "I am." You would only need one word for that sentence—the word *I*.

But when speaking from the burning bush in Exodus 3:14, God uses the future tense! The word *ehyeh* is the future tense of "to be." God's name is "I will be what I will be." God is dynamic. God works through history. What God will do cannot be known—God **will be** what God **will be**—because God does not stop speaking to and through us. God's commitments do not change. God's covenant with Israel remains forever, as does God's love of mercy, love, lament, and much more. But God's actions are ever new. God calls out to each of us in every generation. God is always present to each of us, regardless of when we are alive and how old we are. God guides us into the future.

I once struggled to explain this idea to a Bat Mitzvah student. She confronted me with a challenge that would, over the years, become familiar. "Rabbi," she said, "I really don't believe in God. I can't imagine there's an old man with a long beard in the sky deciding everything in the world. This temple is fine, and I like the songs. But I really honestly don't believe in some all-powerful God." I knew Brina loved summer camp, so I asked her how she feels when she is outside camping. Do you look around and feel the presence of something bigger than you? I asked. "Yes," she replied. "I

feel different. I feel calm. I love it. But I still don't believe in God."

I have to admit, when twelve-year-old Brina said all this to me, I felt like a failure as a rabbi. Was I not compelling and inspiring enough as a teacher? Why could I not convey the deep sense of faith I had and that I believe will shape Brina's life for the better? Had I failed the parents who entrusted me to deepen the faith of their children? But I've learned to embrace my congregants' questions and even their resistances—because they illustrate an openness to God's presence. The opposite of faith is not doubt. It is indifference. It is disinterest. And I've found that the most effective way to respond to questions is not dismissal, but engagement.

So I turned to a prayer called the Amidah, also known as the standing prayer because we traditionally stand up when saying it. The Amidah begins by acknowledging the "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Leah, and God of Rachel." These are the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs. I pointed out to Brina that the prayer could have just said "God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob," rather than "God of Abraham," "God of Isaac," and so forth. After all, the same God spoke to each of these figures. But each man and woman experienced God differently. Abraham had a personal relationship with God different from Sarah's. Rachel experienced God differently than Jacob. So the prayer says "God of Abraham," "God of Sarah," "God of Leah," because each of them experienced the same God in different ways.

"Brina," I said, "you have an experience of God. It may not be the same experience Abraham or Moses had. It may

not be the same experience your parents have. It may feel confusing sometimes. But relationships grow over time. And the fact that you are thinking and struggling with God means you have a relationship with God."

Is how you see God today the same way you saw God at age four? Perhaps some elements persist. I know they do for me. Often I feel the same sense of trust and reassurance of a guiding presence in the universe that I felt when I was a kid. But my experience of God has also changed as I have seen God's distance, God's whimsy, God's delight, God's justice, God's mercy. There is, in God, unchanging timelessness, and in my experience of God, there is change and growth. So, God is, and from the perspective of human beings, God will be what God will be.

God's Essence

For the ancient Israelites, God's essence was too vast to capture in words. No human description can encompass God. Every description of God is only an approximation. It is only a glimpse of God. That idea is conveyed by the Torah in Exodus when Moses asks to see God. God replies, "Here is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When I pass by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen" (Exodus 33:21-23, author's translation). In other words, no living human beings—even Moses—can ever see God fully. As a physical being we can never know God's essence.

But even as we cannot describe God's essence, we do know that there is only one God. Deuteronomy 6 contains a verse known by almost every Jewish person. It is also a verse Jesus quoted in the Gospels. Many rabbis call it "the watchword of our faith." It reads, "Hear, Oh Israel, the Lord (YHVH) is our God, the Lord (YHVH) is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4, author's translation). Dozens of books have been written unpacking this one verse. It is one of the simplest and clearest statements we have about God. God is one. There is not a sea god and a distinct and different fertility god and a distinct and different love god, as there were in ancient Greece. One God encompasses all those parts of nature and existence.

That assertion of monotheism shaped the future of Judaism and the birth of other religions. Yet, other parts of the Torah suggest multiple gods existed. Consider the Song of the Sea found in Exodus, where the Israelites ask, "Who is like you, Oh God (YHVH) among the gods who are worshipped?" (Exodus 15:11, author's translation). In other words, the Israelites seem to acknowledge the worship of other gods. Shouldn't they have said, "Who is like You among the *false* gods that are worshipped?" Biblical scholars describe the ancient Israelite views as "monolatry." That is, ancient Israelites acknowledged that other people worship other gods, but the Israelite God is the greatest and most all-encompassing God. The difference between monotheism and monolatry is that monotheism says there is only one God in the world. Monolatry acknowledges that other gods may exist, but one God encompasses and is more powerful than them all. Over time—perhaps by the beginning of

the Common Era—monotheism fully replaced monolatry among Jews.

As we can see in this discussion of monotheism and monolatry, the Hebrew Bible contains varied understandings of God. But one consistent theme is that God has emotions. Abraham Joshua Heschel, a leading twentieth-century philosopher, said the biblical God is a God of pathos. God gets angry. God gets jealous. God loves. Heschel distinguished the God of the Bible from what he called the Aristotelian God, the unmoved Mover, an impersonal force in the universe. The Israelite God is personal. We form a relationship with God. This relationship is captured by the word *brit*, which means "covenant." God invites us into that covenant, as we see the stories of the Bible.

Now, it is not a relationship of equals, as we saw with Moses only glimpsing God's back. As Rabbi Karff once told me, God is the senior partner. But our relationship with God is a real relationship, as we relate to God through language (prayer), deeds, and faithfulness. The Hebrew word often translated as "faith"—*emunah*—really means "faithfulness." A committed relationship is built by faithfulness to one another. We have faith that God's commandments and teachings are righteous and just. And God has faith that we will live by them. That faithfulness is often tested. But it persists through forgiveness and compassion. It is eternal. That is the idea conveyed in a verse from the biblical book Hosea. It is a verse recited at Jewish weddings and traditionally said during daily morning prayers: "I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know

the LORD (YHVH)" (Hosea 2:19-20 ESV). Our relationship with God is personal and eternal.

If we have a personal relationship with God, do we therefore believe God is a person? Does God have a body? Again, Jewish tradition contains different views. The Bible speaks of God's outstretched arm, God's face, and God's back. In the Book of Exodus, the Israelite elders sit at God's feet. Yet, one of Judaism's most revered rabbis, Moses Maimonides, said that to imagine God in bodily form is idolatrous because it limits God and seeks to make God fit our human perceptions. The Bible speaks of God in human form in order to help us, with our limited language and knowledge, to imagine and move toward God. God is beyond all description and understanding. All we can truly say is that God is perfect unity. God has no beginning or end, in time or in space. Maimonides argued that the biblical passages describing God's feet and arms are allegorical.

If the Hebrew Scriptures help us know God through metaphor, they also help us know about God through the choices and decisions God made. For example, God chose to give all people free will. Near the beginning of the Torah God says to Adam and Eve's son Cain, "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it" (Genesis 4:7). Cain can choose whether to do good or evil. Like all human beings, Cain has free will.

Does this human free will limit God's power? Not according to the Jewish sages. Various explanations seek to reconcile human free will with God's omnipotence. Some suggest free will is a useful illusion, and from our limited

human perspective, we have free will, but truly everything happens at the behest of God.

Another prominent explanation is that God intentionally limits God's own power in order to allow human beings to choose good or evil. A Jewish mystical text called the Zohar calls this process *tzimtzum*. It means "contraction." God voluntarily contracts from overt involvement human affairs in order to allow human beings to exert their freedom. This was not always the case. During the period of the Bible, God was active in history. God inflicted the plagues on Egypt. God split the Red Sea. Yet, as the biblical narrative progresses, God's active involvement decreases and human actions accelerate.

In this way, God is like a parent. In a child's early years, the parent does almost everything for the child: feeding, putting to sleep, carrying. But as children get older, parents let them do more on their own. Children learn to walk and talk, and ultimately, they grow and make all of their own decisions. Now, unlike a parent, God still has the power to intervene and change the course of our lives. But the burden first falls on us to turn to God. That is the responsibility inherent in free will.

We could probe many more aspects of Jewish theology, and throughout the book, as we explore Jewish history and holidays, we will uncover other ways Jews have understood God and God's role in the world. But as a rabbi, most of the questions I am asked center around the role God plays in our lives. In particular, people come to me with confusion and frustration when they experience pain or tragedy. Why, they ask (often more with their eyes and faces than their words), do bad things to happen to good people? Does God

allow these bad things to happen? If God can intervene, why does God not do so?

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

These are questions not just for Jews. People of all faiths struggle with them. And many profound answers have been offered. I have been enriched by conversations, for example, with Christian friends, who have shared with me their experiences of being comforted, when suffering, by recalling the sufferings of Jesus on the cross. And I think my Christian friends have also been moved by some of the answers that Jewish thinkers have offered, over the centuries, to the question, How should I think about suffering, in light of the claim that God is the genesis of all? I canvas several approaches below. But perhaps more important than any single one of the responses I canvas is the two-pronged insistence, which underpins each of these responses, that such weighty theological questions need to be pursued first with *humility*. We never know the absolute answer to God's will because *we are not God*; thus humility is a fundament of any pathway to God. The second is a sense of *faithful wrestling and struggle*, struggle befitting the heaviness and awesomeness of the task of trying to find meaning in a world filled with suffering and tragedy (in Hebrew the name *Israel* means "one who struggles with God").

With that two-pronged prelude, here are several traditional Jewish approaches to questions concerning the relationship of God and human suffering:

1. The Job Approach: The Job approach says God's ways are inscrutable. We can cry out and question, but we may never fully understand the way God works in the world.

This is the approach we find in the biblical Book of Job (named for its protagonist). When we meet Job, we see a righteous and prosperous man, blessed by God. But following a wager with a figure known as HaSatan, which in Hebrew means "the adversary," God strips Job of his family and his wealth. He is left destitute and suffering.

Job's friends tell him he must have done something to anger God. They urge him to confess. But Job is confident he has done nothing to anger God. So he continues to suffer.

And then finally Job cries out. He asks God why God has done this to him. God answers with a series of questions. The underlying message of these questions is that *God is God. And Job is not*. The questions Job asks are not questions for which he will ever have the answer. God's ways are ultimately unknowable to human beings. In the end, Job regains his prosperity and creates another family. But his questions remain unanswered.

Job is a difficult book because a person could read it and conclude God is capricious or even wicked. Why let a righteous man suffer on account of a wager with the adversary? But the Jewish sages look to Job as an example of persisting in life and faith amid the reality of suffering. We do not know why we suffer. To pretend there always is a clear explanation—as Job's friends do—is to lack humility. Rather, we do our best to live and remain committed to God when God's ways can never be fully understood and explained.

2. The Jeremiah Approach: Jeremiah is the biblical prophet who warned of the destruction of Judea by the Babylonians in the sixth century BCE and then accompanied the Israelites into exile when the Babylonians conquered them. Along with other prophets, Jeremiah said God was using the Babylonians to punish the Israelites for their lack of faithfulness and to urge them to return to their sacred ways. But Jeremiah went even further: he said God *accompanied* the Israelites into exile. Before Jeremiah, the destruction of a people meant the loss of their god. That's how empires were built. One group would conquer another. The conquered group would assimilate into the religion and culture of their victor. But Jeremiah says the God of Israel stays with the people even in exile. The Israelites, in turn, remain loyal to God, working toward their return to the land and ultimate redemption.

The broader implication of Jeremiah's prophesying is that God walks with us through tragedy and struggle. God is ever-present. During the Holocaust, a great rabbi named Kalonymus Shapira was imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto. Other prisoners looked to him for guidance, and he led a small synagogue that met in secret. The men and women in his community constantly asked him how God could have let them become prisoners to the Nazis with women and children dying every day.

Rabbi Shapira's responses evolved, which can be traced in the diary he kept. The diary survived because as the war progressed and more of the prisoners in the ghetto were taken to death camps, the rabbi realized he would probably not survive the war. So, he placed the diary in a canister

and buried it. Rabbi Shapira was murdered in 1943. A construction worker found his diary in 1945.[4]

Initially Rabbi Shapira described the war and imprisonment as a test of faith. He urged his followers to remain strong. Yet, as word of the death camps seeped into the ghetto, his writing took on a different tone. He told his followers that God was crying alongside them. He said God's tears were so powerful that if one of them were to escape from heaven to earth, it would destroy the entire world. Rabbi Shapira was echoing the Book of Jeremiah's discussion of God's tears: "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears I would weep day and night for the slain of my people" (Jeremiah 9:1).

This imagery is powerful. Without denying God's omnipotence, Jeremiah's evocation of God's weeping focuses on qualities other than omnipotence: solidarity, intimacy, God made vulnerable because of God's love for God's people. When God's beloved suffer, God suffers alongside them. As Jeremiah puts it, God weeps "for the slain of my people."

3. The Maimonides Approach: Maimonides was the leading rabbi of the Middle Ages. Living in Spain and Egypt, he wrote numerous books still studied by scholars, including *The Guide to the Perplexed*. Among Jewish theologians, he is most famous for saying that we cannot say much about God because God is so much vaster than we are. We simply do not truly understand God's power and purposes. All we can do is seek to live by God's laws. In addressing the reality of human suffering, Maimonides, who also worked as a physician, integrated into his accounts of suffering his observations of human behavior and the natural world.

He theorized three categories of suffering. First, suffering flows from the fact that we are physical beings living in a physical world: to exist as physical beings means we are at risk of suffering exactly because we are part of the natural world. For example, the surface of the earth rests on tectonic plates. This structure makes life possible. At the same time, when those plates shift, earthquakes and tsunamis result. The same conditions that make life possible also make death and suffering inevitable.

The second kind of suffering comes from human behavior. We hurt and cause pain in others. We murder, steal, lie, and cheat. Human evil is not an indictment against God. It is a problem for human beings. We have free will, and that freedom permits us to cause suffering for another. Thus, asking why God didn't stop the Holocaust is a meaningless question. It is like asking why the sun doesn't shine at night. God cannot stop human beings from using the freedom we have. The Holocaust is not something God could have stopped because human beings inflicted it on one another, and God does not interfere with human freedom. Part of God's power is God's restraint and enabling of human freedom.

The third kind of suffering is that which we inflict on ourselves. Maimonides says this suffering is the most frequent by far. We hurt our health by smoking. We increase our blood pressure by working in a stressful job. We fail to trust our own desires and intuitions or we trust our desires too much. Ultimately, our own actions often cause us to suffer.

Maimonides thus credited suffering not to God, but to the natural world and to humanity itself. When suffering comes,

as it inevitably will, he said we should take that suffering to God. One of the ways we bring that suffering to God is through prayer, as we will see in chapter 7.

4. The Lurianic Approach: Isaac Luria was a seventeenth-century leader in the Jewish mystical tradition. (His writings were a key inspiration to Rabbi Shapira.) The Jewish mystics searched for and focused on hidden messages and meanings within the texts of the Bible and early rabbinic writings. But they also strictly followed traditional Jewish practices. In other words, they were not a group set apart from the broader community; rather, they were often the most learned and active members of the Jewish community. In order to study Jewish mystical texts, one was supposed to have mastered the Bible and the Talmud, be married with children, and be over age forty. These requirements sought to ensure that a person who studied these powerful texts was grounded enough in family and community so as not to get lost in or overwhelmed by them.

Luria lived in the city of Sfat in Northern Israel. Sfat had become a haven for Jews who had been expelled from Spain during the fifteenth century. Before the expulsion, Spain had been a center for Jewish mystical teachings. Thus, Sfat became known for its openness to Jewish mystical tradition. The mystics in Sfat had deeply personal reasons to reflect on questions of theodicy because they lived in the shadow of the Spanish inquisition. While some of their ancestors had escaped, others had been murdered or forcibly converted. In reflecting on God's role in the world and the persistent suffering of the Jewish people, they developed a theological concept called *tzimtzum*. As we noted earlier, the Hebrew word means "contraction," and the teaching of *tzimtzum* is

that when God created the world, God contracted from it. If God had not contracted, God's presence would fill the world and leave no space for human beings. God's presence and power were so vast that human beings could live only if God partially withdrew and made space for them. The suffering we see and experience is a result of this withdrawal. It is the requisite cost of human existence. But when human beings follow God's teachings and perform acts of kindness and devotion, they expand the world and make more space for God, thereby proportionately reducing the godless space that causes suffering

5. The Kaplan Approach: Mordecai Kaplan was a prominent modern Jewish theologian who died at age 102 in 1984. Born into a traditional Jewish family in Romania, he immigrated with his parents to America at age eight. His life spanned the monumental events of Jewish life, including the mass immigration of the late nineteenth century, the Holocaust, and the establishment of the state of Israel. Amid all of these events, Kaplan's view of God changed, and because he wrote more than twenty books, his thinking shaped many others. Kaplan totally rejects the idea of a supernatural God. Instead, he describes God as "the sum of all the animating organizing forces and relationships which are forever making a cosmos out of chaos."[5] To believe in God is, he writes, "to reckon with life's creative forces, tendencies and potentialities as forming an organic unity, and as giving meaning to life by virtue of that unity." To believe in God is to believe our life and actions serve a larger purpose. What that purpose is depends on who and where we are.

Kaplan says God is not responsible for human suffering, nor is God capable of directly relieving suffering. God is limited because God is a force, not a being with the ability to intervene in history or support someone in need. The God of the Bible is metaphor for the powerful forces that led to creative growth and civilization. But while God cannot intervene directly, God does give us the tools and strength to respond to suffering. God cannot explain or solve the loss, pain, and tragedies we face in life. Rather, God is the name we give to the forces of goodness, love, and creativity we draw from in responding to them.

One of Kaplan's most articulate and influential disciples is Rabbi Harold Kushner. He wrote several books, including the celebrated *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner's son Aaron died at age fourteen from a rare disease called progeria, which manifests as rapid aging. Kushner's book reflected on the way he—as a man who had devoted himself to God and faith—dealt with the senseless loss of his son. Kushner wrote that God did not intervene as a supernatural force. Rather, God dwelt in friends who reached out to him, the community who supported him, the rituals that guided him back into life, and the love of others that reminded him that life is worth living. As Kushner put it, "God sends us strength and determination of which we did not believe ourselves capable, so that we can deal with, or live with, problems that no one can make go away."[6]

Kushner also emphasizes that we are not control of what happens, but we do control how we respond—and we ought to respond to the sufferings of the world by trying to mend the ills of the world and abide by God's commandments as

closely as possible. Action is the answer to the question of how we respond when bad things happen to good people.

I first read Kushner twenty years ago, and one of his teachings that has always stuck with me is his observation that the Hebrew language has two words for *why*: *maduah* and *lama*. *Maduah* means "from what cause?" Let's say the lights went out. If we asked, "*Maduah* did the lights go out?" the answer could be, "Someone flipped the switch." *Lama* is different. *Lama* combines two Hebrew words *l'*, meaning "to," and *mah*, meaning "what." *Lama* means "to what end?" So to ask, "*Lama* did our lights go out?" the answer could be, "To allow us to appreciate the darkness. Perhaps to bring us closer to one another, to create a shared and memorable experience we could get through together." *Lama* orients us to the future; it seeks out the *meaning* of the event in question.

When tragedy strikes—when a loved one is diagnosed with cancer, when a car wreck disables a friend—and we turn to God, we gain no comfort when we ask *maduah*, what caused God to do this. That's imagining a God in which we don't believe. That's seeing God as one who flips a light switch and someone dies. Instead we ask God *lama*, why, to what end? What is the meaning of the terrible event—and how can I and my community actively seek and concoct that meaning? How can we shape what happened? We can decide that the purpose of a tragedy is to make us miserable or to punish us for something we did. Or we can decide the purpose is to call out the best within us. There is no objective right answer. The true answer is the one we give with our lives.

Where is God in all this? God's presence is found in our

choice. When we choose to bring comfort to the mourning, when we choose to love, when we choose to lift up the poor and do the right thing when the wrong thing is easier and cheaper, God becomes real. God's hands become our hands, and our loves become the loves of God.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have gotten just a taste of Jewish thinking about God. The ideas we've reviewed in the last few pages suggest the range of beliefs within the Jewish community. Judaism has never wholly embraced a systematic theology, in part because Judaism began as a family—the children of Abraham—rather than a set of beliefs and practices. Just as a family embraces and includes members with different points of view, so has the Jewish community lived together with different conceptions of God. Recall Rabbi Karff's wisdom: "Life is not a puzzle to solve but a mystery to embrace."[7]

But for all their differences, each of the Jewish conceptions of God is responsive to the same set of sacred texts—the voluble and varied sacred Scriptures that animate Jewish prayer and theologies. We turn to that canon of texts in the next chapter.