

## INTRODUCTION

## Experiencing the Divine in Our Lives

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“CAN YOU SPEAK TO MY CHILD ABOUT GOD?” The concern showed on her face. She had no idea how to explain who, what, why, and how God is.

She is not alone. God is the other three-letter word that makes some parents cringe when they are asked about it. Actually, it sometimes feels like explaining sex is easier and more rehearsed in our minds than getting involved in a conversation about God. The truth is, many people feel uncomfortable having this conversation.

Why is it difficult to talk about God? Is God like a mathematical equation that we would be able to solve if only we could get the right definition? There are many ways to describe God. Judaism is a monotheistic religion founded on the principle that all the disparate gods are really One God. There is no god of the seas, or the sky, or even the underworld. Our biblical ancestors Abraham and Sarah found one God uniting the universe and united by the universe. Jewish tradition teaches that their tent was open on all four sides in order to receive wayfarers from any direction.<sup>1</sup> The image of the tent serves another purpose as well: it signifies that there are countless paths to come closer to this One God. Within our own tradition, many passageways lead us to an experience of the Divine—an experience that so many of us are longing for.

The title of this book, *Because My Soul Longs for You*, comes from an old Sabbath hymn, formally called *Shir HaKavod* (“Song of Glory”) and also known by its first two words, *Anim Z'mirot*. It is ascribed to Judah HeChasid of Regensburg (d. 1217). The entire song features a number of original verses and some language from the Bible. Our title

is taken from the first stanza, אֲנַעִים וְזִמִּירוֹת וְשִׁירִים אֶאֱרֹג, כִּי אֶלְיָךְ נַפְשִׁי תִקְרֹג (*Anim z'mirot v'shirim e-erog, ki eilecha nafshi ta-arog*, I seek pleasing melodies and thirst for songs because my soul longs for You), itself a reference to Psalm 42:2. The tradition is to open the Torah ark before reciting this prayer, a way of suggesting that God's spirit is summoned when it is sung.

It is human nature to long for God's presence in our lives. However, many of us do not know what to do with this longing. The subtitle of this book is *Integrating Theology into Our Lives*. There are many and diverse Jewish paths to experience and think about God, and we as Reform Jews have the privilege of having more than one path open to us. With a little bit of study and a lot of living, our soul's longing can be addressed. All we need is intention, some humility, and the honesty that open up before us a warm and redolent world.

*Shir HaKavod* includes these words:

And so I tell your glory, yet never have seen you;  
 Imagine you, find names for you, yet never have known you.  
 By hand of those who prophesied and throngs who worshipped you,  
 You gave imagination to the glory beyond view.<sup>2</sup>

Within these pages, we hope you will discover the One in the different forms described and experienced in the many and diverse paths by talented writers, rabbis, cantors, scholars, and seekers who allow and welcome God into their lives. In their wisdom, we hope you are inspired to allow and welcome God into your own life, too, while also drawing God out—in the path that is yours.

What words do we and the authors of this book use to describe our own paths to, experiences of, and ideas of the Divine? The word “God” is just a placeholder for an idea—the ineffable, the never-ending extension of our breath.<sup>3</sup> No one knows how to pronounce God's name, *YHVH*, let alone offer an exact definition. Those four Hebrew letters *yod, hei, vav, hei*, can all be read as consonants, which makes it difficult to pronounce the word in prayer. The letters sound like the way we breathe, so we say “God” or “*Adonai*” instead.

In chapter 3 of the Book of Exodus, we read about Moses's experience

of God in the form of the Burning Bush—a *theophany*, a “manifestation of the Divine.” Moses wants to have a name for this sacred encounter. There he is—reinventing himself after a life in Pharaoh’s palace, setting up a new home in Midian, marrying, and developing his resume as a shepherd—when he unexpectedly stumbles upon a shrub burning but not burning up. A divine voice calls out to him with a new mission to free the Israelites from Egypt. When Moses asks for a reference, God invokes this unpronounceable name: *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*, “I will be what I will be” (Exodus 3:14). What kind of name is this?

Moses’s experience provides a clue to getting closer to describing and, perhaps then, defining God. Those Hebrew letters in God’s self-proclaimed name can also be read as vowels: *eeh-aah-oooh-aah*. Consonants are closed sounds. Vowels are open ones. Watch what your mouth does when you pronounce a vowel. The sound is not confined. For us, this is the first step in describing and then defining God. The medium is the message. God is fluid; God is in a dynamic state. God is becoming known, becoming understood and explored. It is a wonderful component of our tradition that the consonant-based language of Hebrew provides us with a name for God that can be read as all vowels. To us, there must have been a cosmic intention to allow for the open sounds of possibility when describing and defining the Divine.

We can try to imagine what the ancients sensed about God. They must have felt the force in the universe manifesting in their world, primarily through nature. The powerful windstorms, the droughts, and the magnificence of rebirth each spring must have brought to them a sense of wonder, awe, and mystery—mixed with fear of the unknown and unknowable. They must have had their own questions about the ways their world functioned when they pondered life and death. Like Adam, the first human, who had all living things paraded in front of him to name and understand them (*B’reishit Rabbah* on Genesis 2:19), the ancients began to name God, too, in order to understand the nature of God’s presence in their lives. But naming and defining often create limitations and boundaries. Our ancestors used metaphors and images based on their human understanding. They equated the likeness of God to the likeness of human beings, which in turn mirrored a likeness of

God. It is no wonder that humans like pharaohs or emperors would then mistake themselves for gods throughout history.

And so, while each act of definition and naming was made in an attempt to understand God, it moved God further away from a possible personal, intimate, spiritual, and evolving experience of God. We lost that direct sense of mystery, wonder, and fear.

Let's retrace our steps, not to oversimplify God's complexity, but to regain the capacity to sense God's presence in our lives. Might it not be possible that in earlier times, our ancestors felt God's presence but lacked the skills to study God? Is it possible that more recently, we have become skilled at studying God but may have lost the ability to sense and experience God's presence in our lives?

Maybe the challenge all along has been that we work too hard to speak *about* God instead of *experiencing* God.

Philosophers and theologians have diligently created constructs through which to understand the Divine. These constructs are carefully distinguished from one another. Process Theology, Religious Humanism, Deism, Limited Theism, Predicate Theology, and God as Encounter are among the many philosophical and theological constructs that make up the names and definitions of who, what, and how God is.

These are important ideas, but we have missed an essential step.

Abraham Joshua Heschel distinguishes between theology and an idea he called "Depth Theology": "Theology is the content of believing and depth theology calls upon our experience out of which arises belief, some of which defy definition." He recognizes that "theology declares, depth theology evokes. Theology demands believing and obedience; depth theology hopes for responding and appreciation."<sup>4</sup> The Psalmists, long ago, did not espouse a particular theology to reach God. They simply addressed God and allowed the longings of their hearts to emerge. Heschel called this "the birthpangs of theology"—our own experiences revealing God to us at all times.

Before we can name or define God, we need to encounter and experience God in our lives.

Many teachers have engaged in an exercise in which they ask their students, "Who here believes in God?" No one raises a hand. And then,

the next question is posed: “How many of you have experienced God?” Everyone raises a hand. How can that be possible?

We can talk a lot about food, but only when we taste it do we understand its texture, flavor, and the enjoyment it gives us. The same is true about God. Only when we experience God in our own lives—when we experience that same kind of mystery, beauty, and challenge the ancients experienced as well—do we begin to think and talk about God and our own theology. We begin to integrate theological ideas and conversations into our lives.

We created this book as a demonstration of “Integrated Theology,” to show how our personal and embodied experiences can lead to the integration of many different kinds of theologies and theological metaphors into one unified whole. Exploring the chapters, readers will discover a story revealed, a story of the human experience of God: by gazing at the stars (part 1); by diving into our Jewish and human traditions (part 2); by being in relationship with others (part 3); by experiencing the Divine with and within our own bodies (part 4); and finally, by deeply listening to an experience of God within (part 5). Our readers will be able to ask themselves how each author came to experience and understand the sacred and its meaning for their lives and beliefs. How can sharing poetry, justice work, the experience of sickness and health, and the myriad of other ways to experience God presented in this book become bridges across the breach of our souls’ longing?

Integrating theology into our lives means being open to the possibility that our own experiences of God might develop, deepen, and change over the course of our lives. We do not need to marry ourselves to a single theology. As a result of our ever-changing experiences of God, we integrate different theologies into our own; we are creating what we call our own Integrated Theology. Our Integrated Theologies gather some of the theological ideas garnered, developed, and postulated over the centuries. All of them are available to us all the time—in all their beauty and tastes.

Our lives take many turns down a circuitous route. We are multifaceted. If we are made in God’s image, then God must be diverse and

multifaceted, too. The created is only a reflection of the Creator, and we, human to the core, are filled with varied experiences that evolve over a lifetime.

In the Reform Movement, the development of the prayer book *Mishkan T'filah* reflects a Depth Theology experience of prayer. Rabbi Elyse Frishman, its editor, understood that we do not need to choose one particular way of naming or defining God; neither do we need to build a service around that one idea. As a result, her design of the prayer book allowed for a two-page paradigm, with multiple prayers, readings, and poems on the left page accompanying the traditional prayers on the right page. This resulted in a polyphonic theology and expression of the Divine, inviting readers and prayer leaders to reflect on their own Integrated Theologies. An Integrated Theology juxtaposes and places different theological ideas in relationship. Each theology can stand alone, but together—“integrated” into each other—they offer a stronger, deeper, and more complex understanding of God.<sup>5</sup>

We hope this book serves its purpose, not by defining God or offering another series of theological insights, but by inspiring all of us to integrate experiences of the sacred into our lives and thoughts. The possibilities are open like the sounds of the vowels that make up God’s name offered to Moses in Midian by the bush on fire that did not burn up. What beckons each of us is the moment in which we live to feel and to experience God integrated in our lives.

No one has all the answers. But every one of us is asked the questions. So, let our very lives be one possible answer. For here is the best thing of all: Our souls long for God. And God may long for us as well.

#### NOTES

1. Rabbeinu Yonah on Pirkei Avot 1:5.
2. Translation by Joel Rosenberg, in *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim* (Wyncote, PA: Reconstructionist Press, 1994), 452.
3. Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival* (New York: CCAR Press, 2018).
4. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Schocken Books, 1959), 117–18.
5. “Preparing for the New Machzor and the High Holidays,” special issue, *CCAR Journal*, Summer 2013.