

# GOD IN THE TALMUD

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Being asked to write about God in the Talmud is a bit like being invited to read one of those “Where’s Waldo?” books – not in the sense that God is small or insignificant, of course, but in the sense that God is on every page but most often not immediately visible.

On the one hand, the entire Talmudic enterprise rests on the foundation of God and God’s will for human beings as embodied in Torah; for the rabbis, the whole point of producing this work was as an exploration of how one was to live in service of God as directed by the Torah. On the other hand, when one is in the midst of a detailed, even picayune, discussion of whether two birds found in a dovecote on a holiday can be presumed to be the same ones that were there the day before the holiday, or whether a Jew is allowed to leave lost/abandoned food lying in the roadway, or whether a divorce document is valid if the husband tossed it to the wife and it landed exactly equidistant between them – then it can seem that God is only to be found only after intent scrutiny, not in the lines themselves but hiding between and around them. The task is further complicated by the fact that the Talmud is not really a single book with a single author, but rather a compilation of discussions undertaken by many rabbis in different places (primarily Roman Palestine and Sassanian Babylonian) and over a few hundred years. Add the contributions of the redactor(s) who shaped it all and you have over 2500 folios of material. There is not one picture of God in the Talmud, but many different images, many different views.

For the purposes of this essay, then, I want to suggest several different ways in which God’s presence sometimes becomes more overt in Talmudic literature, in the hope that God’s appearance there can help us know what we are looking for everywhere else. I will draw on three primary types of sources: rabbinic names for God, rabbinic sources about prayer to and praise of God, and rabbinic stories (aggadah) in which God features as an actor.

## RABBINIC NAMES FOR GOD

The rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud did not restrict themselves to referring to God by those names that they had inherited from biblical literature. Throughout rabbinic literature are a variety of epithets for God which are, so far as we know, linguistic innovations of the rabbis. These names and the ways in which they are used tell us something about the attributes and nature of God that the rabbis found significant to name and label.

### “HAMAKOM”

This name occurs already in early rabbinic literature from the time of the Mishnah, and is attributed to some of the earliest rabbinic figures. Literally translated, this term means “the Place,” and is most often rendered in English as “the Omnipresent.” Ephraim E. Urbach thus observed, “*Maqôm*...refers to the God who reveals Himself in whatever place He wishes; this epithet thus expresses God’s nearness.”<sup>1</sup> God, when named in this way, is close to human beings and accessible to them. The name “Omnipresent” emphasizes God with Whom we can have an intimate relationship: Israel is beloved before the Omnipresent like the love of a man and a woman (Yoma 54a). The epithet can also indicate God’s presence at a time of need, invoked for example to bring healing for illness (Shabbat 12b) or comfort for a loss (Berakhot 16b).

### “SHAMAYIM”

This term is also found in the early strata of rabbinic literature. “Shamayim” is the Hebrew word for the sky or the heavens. Since the idea that God resides particularly in the heavens is found already in biblical literature (for example, Deuteronomy 26:15; I Kings 8:30; Jonah 1:9), it was not a great leap for the rabbis to adapt the word “Heaven” to stand in as a name for God. “Heaven” draws attention to God’s transcendence, the need to approach God with reverence and awe. Not surprisingly, then, one common usage of this name is in the rabbinic phrase, “*yirat Shamayim*,” the fear of Heaven: Rabbi Hanina said, “All is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven (Berakhot 33b, Megillah 25a, Niddah 16b).” Urbach suggests that Shamayim and Makom are in fact complements of each other, the nearness of

<sup>1</sup> Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, Israel Abrahams, trans. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1975), 72.

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the latter countering the potential for remoteness of the former, the majesty of the former countering the potential for familiarity of the latter.<sup>2</sup>

## “HA-KADOSH BARUKH HU”

The Holy One, Blessed be He. Less frequently, one may encounter the Aramaic phrase “*Kudsha, B’rikh Hu*,” which has a slightly different meaning: “The Holiness, Blessed be He.” After the mishnaic period, this became one of the dominant names for God in rabbinic literature. The root *k, d, sh* in Hebrew includes the sense of something set apart, and thus this name invokes God’s nature as apart from and beyond the scope of the world, let alone human comprehension. This name also carries echoes of Isaiah’s famous vision, in which the heavenly seraphim praise God with the words (which we now use multiple places in our liturgy): “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory (Isaiah 6:3)”. In several places, a longer form, “The King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed be He,” appears (for example, Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Berakhot 28b, Shabbat 74b, Yoma 47a). Perhaps for these reasons, “Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu” is used as a title when speaking about God, and not as a form of direct address *to* God.

## “RIBBONO SHEL OLAM”

This name means “Master of the World.” It is used to open a direct address to God, sometimes as a complement to Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu, as in the phrase: “So-and-So said before Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu, ‘Ribbono Shel Olam... (in Berakhot alone, see 4a, 9b, 20b, 31b, and 32b)”. Both human beings and the lesser divine beings (angels and the heavenly hosts) are said to use this title when speaking to God. The one addressing God in this way is usually making a request, expressing a concern, or pressing a claim; thus s/he begins by acknowledging God’s ultimate authority and expressing submission to it.

## “RAHMANA”

This name means “The Merciful One” in Aramaic. It appears extremely frequently in the Talmud. Intriguingly, this name is often associated with God in the role of Lawgiver; that is, it is frequently used in legal discussions to indicate a Divine command in Torah or to introduce a verse brought as a proof-text: “The Merciful One said/wrote... “Solomon Schechter thus suggested that this name “proves, by the way, how little in the mind of the Rabbis the Law was connected with hardness and chastisement. To them it was an effluence of God’s mercy and goodness.”<sup>3</sup> Calling God “Rahmana” may also be meant to prompt recognition of God’s ultimate concern and love for God’s creatures even when they appear to suffer: Rav Huna said in the name of Rav in the name of Rabbi Meir, and so too it was taught in the name of Rabbi Akiva, “A person should always be in the habit of saying that all that the Merciful One does, He does for good (Berakhot 60b).” Surprisingly, the Hebrew form, “Ha-Rahaman,” appears only once in the Talmud, when a rabbi prays that “Ha-Rahaman save us (i.e., me) from the Evil Inclination (Kiddushin 81b).”

## “SHEKHINAH”

“Shekhinah” appears at the end of this list because it actually exists in a place somewhere between a name and a concept. The word “Shekhinah” comes from the root *s, kh, n*, meaning to rest or dwell, and thus designates the manifestation of God’s spirit and presence in the world. “Shekhinah” points to God’s nearness to and intimacy with human beings at a given moment and/or in a given place. To have the Shekhinah rest directly on a particular person is to receive prophecy: Hillel the elder had eighty disciples; thirty of them were worthy like Moses our teacher to have the Shekhinah rest upon them (Sukkah 28a; see also Sotah 48b, Mo’ed Katan 25a). The places where the Shekhinah appears can be variable and multiple; it can be manifest in many places at once, just as the sun can shine on many places at once (Sanhedrin 39a; see also Bava Batra 25a). Moreover, although the Shekhinah once rested on the Temple (at least the first, if not also the second) in Jerusalem, God also causes His Shekhinah to rest in humble places like the burning thorn bush of Moses’ first prophetic experience, or on a low mountain like Sinai (Shabbat 67a and Sotah 5a, respectively<sup>4</sup>). The Shekhinah represents God’s closeness to human beings and the people of Israel in particular to the

<sup>2</sup> See *The Sages*, 71-2.

<sup>3</sup> Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology: Major Concepts of the Talmud* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961; originally published 1909), 34.

<sup>4</sup> These two sources are significant also in that they demonstrate the Shekhinah as an aspect of God and under God’s active control; in rabbinic literature the Shekhinah is not the quasi-independent entity and aspect of the godhead that it would come to be in some later strands of the Jewish tradition.

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extent of sharing in the pain of the suffering person (Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:5), watching over those who are ill (Shabbat 12b), and even accompanying the people into exile (Megillah 29a). On the other hand, rabbinic sources suggest that human beings, through their actions, can bring the Shekhinah near or drive it away: it is present when Jews study, pray, or sit together as a court (Berakhot 6a), while those who are arrogant or sin in secret “push against the feet of the Shekhinah (Berakhot 43b, Hagigah 16a, Kiddushin 31a).”

## WHAT CAN WE SAY TO AND ABOUT GOD IN PRAYER?

In a variety of places – most notably in the tractate Berakhot (“Blessings”) but also scattered throughout the Talmud – the rabbis consider human communication with God through prayer. By addressing such questions as what do we pray for, how do we address God, what may not be said about God, they reveal important clues about how they understood the nature of God, God’s role in our lives, and the Divine-human relationship.

From the earliest layers of rabbinic writings, God is recognized as the author of all that happens in the world and to people. Mishnah Berakhot, for example, lists many blessings that should be said when one enjoys various foods, observes a variety of out-of-the-ordinary natural phenomena, encounters a special place, or experiences good fortune. Failure to make a blessing is a kind of theft from God.

But God is author of all, not only the good. This understanding is expressed, for example, in Mishnah Berakhot 9:2 and 5:

“For bad news (one blesses) “Blessed is the Judge of the truth”  
“A person is required to bless for the bad just as one blesses for the good...”

Based on this principle, the rabbis are able to explain yet another mishnah (Berakhot 5:3 and a near exact parallel in Megillah 4:9): “One who says (while leading prayer)...“May Your Name be remembered for good”...we silence him. Why is this so? The Talmud answers (Berakhot 33b; Megillah 25a): It implies “for good,” but not for bad, yet it is taught: “One must bless for the bad...” As Rava further elaborates (and other rabbis attempt to prove from scripture) in response to Mishnah Berakhot 9:5, blessing for the bad just as one blesses for the good means that one must accept the bad from God with the same wholeheartedness as when receiving good fortune.

Elsewhere, the rabbis suggest that prayer (although the term would not be created for many centuries yet) is a quixotic activity. God is vast and powerful beyond human comprehension, and thus despite our obligation to offer praise and prayer to God, God is also beyond human abilities of expression. One way the rabbis address this dilemma is by drawing on biblical models and precedents. In Deuteronomy 10:17, Moses described God as “the great, mighty, and awesome God” – *ha’el ha-gadol ha-gibor v’hanora*; the rabbis incorporated this phrasing into the opening paragraph of every Amidah prayer. Two parallel passages, Berakhot 33b and Megillah 25a, relate that when a certain man led prayer in the presence of Rabbi Hanina, he praised God as “the great, mighty, and awesome, and glorious, and majestic, and revered, and powerful, and strong, and praiseworthy, and honored God.”<sup>5</sup> The rabbi, however, rebuked him: “Have you finished with all the praises of your Master?” Could we ever finish such praises once begun? And if we did any less, would not our incomplete praise of God be a kind of insult? The Talmud proposes a parable: if one were to praise a king for his great stores of silver, would one not be insulting him by ignoring his even greater treasures in gold? Only because we have the example set for us by Moses can we escape this bind, reciting his three praises of God and no more.

In Yoma 69b, however, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi states that although this phrase originated with Moses, it was the members of the Great Assembly who fixed it as part of Jewish prayer. Or rather, they restored it – being close readers

<sup>5</sup> We are following the longer version of the passage, from Berakhot.

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of the Bible, they consider a passage in Jeremiah, where the prophet refers to God as “the great, mighty [but not awesome] God”, and another in Daniel, where the attribute of might is missing.

The rabbis imagine the thought processes of the two prophets and in doing so, consider how God can remain mighty and awesome even in circumstances where it might appear otherwise. In the course of the discussion, the rabbis struggle to understand how an all-powerful God can allow harm to come to God’s people. If God’s power is not manifest in the world, does this mean that it has been defeated? The rabbis attempt to explain that God’s power can be evident in other ways, in God’s very restraint, for example. We must, the rabbis teach, praise God and seek to experience God as “the great, mighty, and awesome God.” And yet, at the same time they know that sometimes we do not experience God that way, and to say so can even be a kind of lie, which is itself an affront to God. Our prayer, they realize and admit, lives in tension and paradox.

## GOD IN TALMUDIC AGGADAH

When the rabbis of the Talmud tell stories about God, or about encounters between the Divine and human realms – involving biblical characters or themselves – what sort of stories do they tell? How do they depict God and the relationship between God and humans, between God and Israel? How do those stories relate to and illuminate other things the rabbis had to say about the nature of God or the human-Divine relationship?

Jacob Neusner has written that “It was in the Talmud of Babylonia in particular that God is represented as a fully exposed personality, like man.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the rabbis do not shy away from anthropomorphized images of God, depicting in their stories a God Who experiences similar emotions and engages in similar activities as do human beings. This does not mean, of course, that God is comparable to the ordinary human being. On the one hand, God is the model of the most powerful of humans, the king who rules over his people and is responsible for their welfare, both in maintaining justice and in providing for their needs. On the other, since the rabbis believed that the human ideal is to be like God, then God must provide the model for them and their forms of Jewish practice. These two elements of God’s activities can be seen in a source in Avodah Zarah (3b) which describes God’s daily schedule: one quarter of the day for Torah study, one quarter to sit in judgment of the world, one quarter for providing sustenance to all creatures of the world, and the final quarter of the day for playing with the Leviathan.

God, like the rabbis, also prays. What prayer does God pray (and to Whom, one might ask, if one dared)? Berakhot 7a gives the following answer:

“Rav Zutra bar Tuvia said in the name of Rav: “May it be My will that My mercies overpower My anger, and that My mercies be revealed over My attribute of justice, and that I should act towards My children with the attribute of mercy, and receive them beyond the measure of strict justice.”

Not only does God pray (to God’s own self), but when God revealed Godself to Moses after the sin of the golden calf (Exodus 33:12 – 34:9), Rabbi Yohanan says (Rosh Hashanah 17b) that God did so “robed...like a community prayer leader.” Moreover, Rabbi Abin bar Rav claims in the name of Rabbi Yitzhak that the Bible hints God dons tefillin just as the (male) Jew was expected to do; inside God’s tefillin, other rabbis elaborate, are verses of Scripture praising the uniqueness of Israel, just as our tefillin contain verses proclaiming the Unity of God (Berakhot 6a).

Not surprisingly then, as already seen in the first source in this section, the rabbis imagine (Bava Metzia 86a) that God also engages in the quintessential rabbinic activity: studying Torah in the Heavenly *beit midrash*, the Study Hall on high.

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Neusner, **The Foundations of the Theology of Judaism**, Volume 1: God (Northvale, New Jersey, London: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1991), 137.

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“They disputed in the heavenly study hall: If a white spot [in the skin; this is a potential sign of skin disease in Leviticus 13] appeared before a white hair, the person is impure. If the white hair appeared before the white spot, the person is pure. If there is a doubt [as to which appeared first] – the Holy One, Blessed be He, says the person is pure, and all of the [rest of the members of] the heavenly study hall say the person is impure.”

In order to decide the matter, the parties to the debate decide to summon Rabbah bar Nahmani, a rabbinic expert in this area of law. The Angel of Death is unable to touch the rabbi while he studies, however, until a distraction is created, and fearing that he is being pursued by royal troops, Rabbah prays to die rather than fall into their hands. One deeply intriguing, even disturbing, element in this story is the idea that God can be out-voted in the heavenly study hall in a discussion of the interpretation Torah that God authored! God, like the human sage, willingly commits Godself to the process of debate and consensus building that rabbis use to create Jewish law and practice. God even submits, as it were, to the decisions made in the human study hall.

But the story of Rabbah bar Nahmani has another troubling element to it. It indicates a darker side of God’s workings in the world, as the rabbi must die – God facilitates his death – so that he can help resolve the dispute in the heavenly study hall. This theme particularly comes to the fore in another story about God and Torah (Menahot 29b), in this case the giving of the Torah to Moses:

“Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: At the time when Moses ascended to heaven, he found the Holy One, Blessed be He sitting and making crowns for the letters [of the Torah]. He said to Him, “Master of the Universe, what is delaying You?” He said to him, “At the end of many generations there will be a particular man named Akiva ben Yosef, who will explicate from each stroke (of the letters) mounds upon mounds of laws.” He said before Him, “Master of the Universe, show him to me!” He said to him, “Turn around.” He [Moses] turned around. He went and sat at the back of 18 rows [in Rabbi Akiva’s lecture] and did not know what they were saying...He came back before the Holy One, Blessed be He, and said before Him, “Master of the Universe, You have a person such as this, and you give Torah by *my* hand?” He said to him, “Be silent – such is My plan.” He said before Him, “Master of the Universe, You have shown me his Torah, show me his reward!” He said, “Turn around.” He turned around; he saw that they [the Romans] were weighing out his flesh in scales. He said before Him, “Master of the Universe, this is Torah, and this is its reward?!” He said to him, “Be silent – such is My plan.”

Often this story is invoked for what it says about Torah and the role of human beings in its development and transmission. But equally intriguing is the portrait of God found here. On the one hand, this is an image of God as intimately involved in the making and running of the world, down to the level of very small details. God will place extra pen strokes in the calligraphy of Torah letters, in anticipation of an individual rabbi who will live many years in the future. But there is also a darker aspect to God’s involvement in the world. God’s plans and activities, as depicted in this story, are often beyond human comprehension, and may even appear to us as capricious or unfair. God does what God does – chooses to whom Torah will be transmitted, allows a great Torah scholar to suffer a martyr’s death – for reasons that even Moses, the greatest of all prophets, is not able or allowed to understand. In many places, the rabbis claim that good is rewarded and evil punished, but by telling stories like this one, they demonstrate that they also know that the empirical evidence of the world can suggest otherwise. As in our blessings over the bad as well as the good, we must only accept that God is the Author of all that comes to us in this world, that things happen for God’s purposes even if incomprehensible to us.

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And yet the rabbis were also certain that God is not inured to the suffering that comes of those decrees. One of the blessings described in Mishnah Berakhot 9:2 is said upon experiencing natural phenomena such as “shooting stars, and *zava’ot*, and thunder, and winds, and lightening...: ‘Blessed is the One whose strength and might fill the world.’” The Talmud thus asks (Berakhot 59a): What are these “*zava’ot*”? The question is answered by means of a story:

“Rav Katina said, ‘an earthquake’ [*guha*]. Rav Katina was going on the road. When he came to the entrance to the house of a bone necromancer, an earthquake struck. He said, ‘Does this bone necromancer know what this earthquake is?’ He [the necromancer] raised his voice to him: ‘Katina, Katina, why wouldn’t I know? At the time when the Holy One, Blessed be He, remembers his children who are living in trouble among the peoples of the world, two tears fall into the Great Sea, and His voice is heard from one end of the world to the other – and this is an earthquake.’”

Rav Katina dismisses the necromancer as a bearer of falsehoods, but the storyteller hints that he very well may be correct: “the fact that he [Rav Katina] did not agree with him was so that all the people should not be led astray after him.” Moreover, the passage continues with Rav Katina and several other rabbis each offering their own anthropomorphic explanations of Divine actions – hand clapping, sighing, foot stamping – that create the shaking of the earth.

Elsewhere in Berakhot (3b) there are similar images of God mourning for the destruction God has brought on the children of Israel. In these examples, God’s mourning is not a rare occurrence, like the Divine tears that the necromancer claims cause earthquakes, but a regular, nightly event. The rabbis console themselves with the thought that so long as God’s people suffer, even if at God’s hand, God continually despairs for them.<sup>7</sup>

## CONCLUSION

These sources make up only a small sample of the many Talmudic passages that speak of God, God’s nature, and the Divine-human relationship. But even from this sample, we can see the complexity and, even, contradictions within rabbinic thinking about this vast topic.

The rabbis attempt to balance images of God as both close and transcendent; God is Omnipresent and God is Heavenly, God’s Shekhinah is present among us, but God is above and over us as the Holy One and the Master of the Universe. God has absolute control over the workings of the world, and yet God submits to the process of communal debate and interpretation of the Torah. And even as we praise God for not only the good that God provides for us, but also in acceptance (if not comprehension) of the bad that befalls us, God mourns the sufferings of God’s people.

<sup>7</sup> See Michael Fishbane, “‘The Holy One Sits and Roars’: Mythopoesis and the Midrashic Imagination,” in *The Midrashic Imagination: Exegesis, Thought, and History*, Michael Fishbane, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 60-77.