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THE GOD OF THE JEWS AND THE JEWISH GOD
Jerome Gellman

The second entry for “Theism” in the Oxford English Dictionary is this: “A morbid condition characterized by headache, sleeplessness, and palpitation of the heart.” The dictionary goes on to add: “caused by excessive tea-drinking.”

Although Jews might have been drinking tea excessively since the 1600s, as a people they have suffered much longer in their history from loyalty to God and the Torah. Thus, Jewish theism cannot be attributed to tea-drinking. Rather, we should ascribe Jewish theism to a long and convoluted relationship between God and a people who experience themselves as God’s “Chosen People.” This relationship revolves around a divine duality, which I will represent by inventing two ways of referring to God: “Godₐ” and “Godᵧ.” “Godₐ” has its root in the Hebrew Bible’s referring to God as: “Elohim.” “Godᵧ” begins with biblical YHVH. In time, each of “Elohim” and “YHVH” gave rise to a cluster of features, associated concepts, images, and amplifications, which bear a family resemblance, respectively, to Elohim and YHVH of the Hebrew Bible. My “Godₐ” and “Godᵧ” will refer to God as characterized by these two clusters (including at a time when the distinction can no longer be tracked by the terms “Elohim” and “YHVH”).

Elohim and YHVH

The story of Judaic theism is the story of the two central ways in which the Jews have experienced God, growing out of two ways of referring to God in Jewish tradition: “Elohim” and “YHVH.” Around the history of these two ways of experiencing God revolves the history of major landmarks in the Jewish conception of God, starting from the Hebrew Bible to the rabbinic literature of Talmudic times, to Medieval Jewish philosophy, to the mystical Kabbalah, on to Spinoza, Hasidism, modern Jewish philosophy, neo-mysticism, and finally to post-Holocaust times. In what follows I present this complex duality of God in Judaism from a fairly traditional Jewish point of view. (I leave for others non-traditional ways of understanding the duality of YHVH and Elohim, and of understanding God.)
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The Hebrew Bible

Elohim

“Elohim” is a plural term, from “Eloha,” meaning “god.” The semantic import of “Eloha” takes us to the idea of power and the wielding of power. In the Ten Commandments, “Elohim” occurs referring not to God but to the “other gods” which the Israelites must not put “before” God. The gods are “Elohim” because they bear power and influence. The purpose of calling God by the plural, “Elohim,” is to stress the supreme degree of power and control God possesses. Ultimately, all powers are God’s. In the Jewish view, the plural term when referring to God does not imply a plurality within God.

While in many cases “Elohim,” when referring to God, and “YHVH” seem interchangeable in the Hebrew Bible, there is a tendency for “Elohim,” rather than “YHVH,” to occur when referring to God in cosmic or universal contexts, not confined to an Israelite context. Thus it is Elohim who creates the world in Genesis 1, and Elohim is the God of nature. And it is to Elohim that Jethro, the non-Israelite, offers his sacrifices when meeting Moses. (This contradicts some Bible scholars who believe that Jethro worshipped YHVH before meeting Moses. However, as Buber well argues (Buber 1958: 94–100), at least the biblical account of their meeting makes better sense, as I have written.) “Elohim” occurs often in the biblical Wisdom Literature, a literature belonging to a genre with a broad history in the ancient Near East. Rarely does “Elohim” appear in legal parts of the Torah or in the prophetic literature, both aimed at the local, covenantal relationship of God to the Israelite nation.

“Elohim” is not a proper name when used of God. But neither is it a mere description. Rather, it functions as a “title,” for the role that God occupies as the supreme power. Elohim functions like “President” functions in the United States government (Pike 1970: 28–36). It gives a title to the person to whom it refers while not naming that person. Just so, to call God “Elohim” is to refer to God by an honorary title, a title possessed by the Supreme Being.

YHVH

The term YHVH belongs to an entirely different category. It is a (indeed, the) proper name of God. In Exodus 3:13, at the burning bush, Moses asks God for his name. God gives “YHVH” as God’s name. For Jewish tradition, “YHVH” would be a rigid designator tracing its referential history back to the encounter by Moses with God at the burning bush, piggybacking from there onto the referential chain of “Elohim.”

Therefore, it makes perfect sense to say, as does Psalms 100:3: “Know that God is God,” when what was said was: “Know that YHVH is Elohim,” meaning that the being whose name is “YHVH” possesses the title “Elohim.” Just so, supposing a person named “President” became President of the United States, it would be informative to say: “President-person is President-office.” The Septuagint translated “YHVH” as “kyrios,” “Lord.” The basis of this translation was that since in Judaism “YHVH” was not to be pronounced as written, it was read as “adonai,” which means “My Lord.” The King James Bible continued this, translating “Elohim” as “God” and “YHVH” as “the Lord.” It would be closer to the truth, though, to translate “YHVH” as “God,” as a name, and “Elohim” as a title, “the Lord.”

At the burning bush (Exodus 3:14) God explains the name “YHVH” with the words, “eheyeh asher eheyeh” and “eheyeh.” Traditionally, these words have a dynamic meaning,
which is best translated as “I will be what I will be” and “I will be,” rather than a static meaning of “I am what I am” and “I am” (see Parke-Taylor 1975). At the burning bush, YHVH does not introduce himself as the creator of the world, but as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as protector and lover of their descendants.

The import of the name “YHVH” is well put by Jewish Bible scholar, Umberto Cassuto, who writes:

It is I who am with my creatures in their hour of trouble and need . . . to help them and save them. And . . . always and just as I am with you, so am I with all the children of Israel who are enslaved, and with everyone who is in need of My help, both now and in the future.

(Cassuto 1967: 38)

YHVH is more human-like than Elohim, close and intimate. YHVH makes himself manifest. The appearances of YHVH tend to be localized and tangible, whereas Elohim tends to remain invisible and everywhere (Kugel 2007: 107). It is only “YHVH-Elohim” who walks in the garden of Genesis 2, while just “Elohim” of Genesis 1 remains a majestic power throughout the cosmos. Eve declares that YHVH helped her in having a son, Cain (Genesis 4:1). It is YHVH who calls to Abraham to journey to Canaan. And typically it is YHVH, not Elohim, who speaks to Moses and the prophets. It is YHVH who declares in Exodus 19:4 that He carried the Israelite nation on eagles’ wings. YHVH, at Exodus 25:8, tells the Israelites to build a tabernacle so that YHVH may dwell among them. The Israelites are said to be the children of YHVH (Deuteronomy 14:10), not of Elohim. And it is YHVH who in Psalms 91:15, promises that God will participate in the very suffering of the Israelite nation. It is YHVH that the children of Israel are commanded to love with all their heart (Deuteronomy 6:5). All of Jewish prayer is directed to YHVH.

On the other side, YHVH can be mysterious, hidden, inscrutable. The same “I will be” who promises faithfulness fails to say just what YHVH will be, covering God with a cloud of unknowing. It is YHVH who shows only His back to Moses and not His face, for no one can see YHVH’s face and live (Exodus 33:23). YHVH can be “a devouring fire.” Since “YHVH” is the very name of God, it not only connotes familiarity but aims at God’s very essence. And so, God’s name can be pronounced only on very holy, solemn occasions. The rabbis taught that the name of God cannot be read as it is written, but was to be read as “adonai,” “my Lord.” (Notice the paradox here of holding YHVH afar by refusing to utter the name, yet replacing the name with “my Lord.”) Jewish blessings begin by addressing YHVH as “thou,” quickly changing to third person, as though overcome with a sense of brazenness at having spoken directly to the presence that is also hidden.

So the God of the Jewish Bible has a duality—Elohim and YHVH. In general (with clear exceptions), Elohim is the God of the cosmos, the God who rules all. YHVH, is close, present to the Israelites, promising and bringing redemption, but also mysterious in nature. Yet, Elohim and YHVH are the very same, one and only God. The difference between Elohim and YHVH is not exactly that between transcendence and immanence. Both are living realities, at once both transcendent and immanent. At times YHVH must descend from on high (see, for example, Genesis 11:5 and Numbers 11:25), and it is with Elohim that Noah walks, right here on earth (Genesis 6:9). Both are God in heaven and God on earth, God above and God below, God involved and God separated from God’s creatures.
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The Attributes of God

While there are many passages in the Hebrew Bible praising God’s vast knowledge, the Hebrew Bible does not depict YHVH as having infallible knowledge of the future, especially regarding future human choices.

For example, at the *okedah*, although it is Elohim who tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, it is an angel of YHVH who declares to Abraham: “Do not raise your hand against the lad, for now I know that you fear Elohim” (Genesis 22:12). At Genesis 6:6 it is YHVH who regrets having created humanity, and at 1 Samuel 15:35 it is YHVH who regrets ever having made Saul king of Israel. They have disappointed YHVH’s expectations for the future. And it is YHVH who speaks of what “perhaps” will be in the future (for example, Ezekiel 12:1–3; Jeremiah 26:2–3; see Fretheim 1984: Chapter 4). And YHVH changes His mind from time to time in light of new circumstances (for instance in Jeremiah 18). These and similar verses might serve as a scriptural basis for the view of “open theism” that God has only probabilistic knowledge of the future and might be surprised by future events (Wierenga 2011; for open theism see Pinnock, Rice, Sanders, Hasker, and Basinger 1994).

Likewise, although God has vast power, there is no explicit attribution of perfect power, omnipotence, to God in the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis 18:14, YHVH assures Abraham that Sarah is not too old to have a son, and does say, “Is anything beyond the power of YHVH?” But this is most plausibly saying only that God is “almighty,” having power over all things in the world, rather than omnipotent, having the power to do just “anything” (see Geach 2009). And YHVH, again bearing the more human-like face of God, appears not to be omnipresent (see Gericke 2005: 677–99). There is no doubt, however, that the God of the Hebrew Bible is the most perfect being in existence and of a different order of greatness than that of any other existant.

Talmudic Times

In Talmudic times, the rabbis extended the clusters surrounding, respectively, Elohim and YHVH, to what I call “GodE” and “GodY.” With the rabbis, Elohim and YHVH came to be identified with two different attributes:


(*Genesis Rabbah* 33:8)

Elohim is the God of “justice,” in two senses. Elohim is the *ruler* who has decreed order in the world, so that the stars and all heavenly bodies stay on their course and the lower world proceeds on fixed laws. And Elohim is the *judge* who judges the actions of humanity according to strict laws. The *name* of God, “YHVH,” connoting a degree of intimacy, designated the God of mercy. The title of God, “Elohim,” connoting an official position, designated the ruler who fixed order and who sat on the seat of justice.

The Talmudic era was one of destruction and exile, of a sense of God’s estrangement from God’s people. In the Talmudic period, in a move of consolation, the rabbis affirmed that merciful YHVH overshadowed Elohim. God’s justice regularly yielded to God’s mercy. Elohim created the world in Genesis 1 but in Genesis 2–3 this quickly becomes “YHVH-Elohim.” Said the rabbis: Elohim saw that the world could not endure only with justice, and so Elohim was forced to mix mercy with justice, hence, “YHVH-Elohim.”
And for the rabbis, God, who is so close and so loving, becomes so close as to emerge not only as God of the Jews, but as “the Jewish God,” the God who is Jewish. He is, as it were, one of the tribe, what Frank Moore Cross calls a “divine kinsman” (Cross 1998). For the rabbis, God is “re’acha,” a “fellow-person,” a kinsman to the Jews (see Midrash Tanchuma, Exodus, Yitro, 5, 1972/73: 313), and Midrash Rabbah, Exodus 6:1 and 27:1 and Leviticus 8:6), “re’acha,” being the term usually translated as “neighbor” in “Love thy neighbor.” Thus does God, become one of us.

Building on the Hebrew Bible’s image of God the Father, an ubiquitous image of God in rabbinic literature is of God the king who is also father of the Jewish people. There are hundreds of texts in the rabbinic literature comparing God’s relationship to the Jews to that of a king toward his people or son and daughter. The Israelites were to have a king only from one of them (Deuteronomy 17:15). Just so is God one of them. While a king may be all justice and strictness, as father the king is merciful to the child. In the parables of God the king-father, the king is normally merciful, with the character of GodY, rather than GodE.

Here is a good example of a parable about the king-father of the Jews, a comment on Hosea 11:8–9. There YHVH angrily laments the sinfulness of His people, then suddenly the lament breaks off with this: “My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger.” On these verses we find:

Said Rabbi Eliezer: It is like a king who became angry at his son, and who had in his hand a sword. The king swore he would pass the sword on his son because the latter angered him. But later the king said, If I do so, my son will no longer live. But also, he could not nullify the royal decree. What did the king do? He placed the sword into its scabbard and thus passed the sword on his son’s head.

Said Rabbi Hanina: It is like a king who became angry with his son. He had in front of him a large stone and swore that he would throw it on him. But later the king said: If I throw it at him he will no longer live. What did the king do? He crushed the stone and made it into small pebbles and threw them on his son one at a time. It turned out that he neither hurt his son nor nullified his royal decree.

(Midrash Tehillim 1)

Just so, because of God the king-father's mercy the Jews are being punished with exile, and not being destroyed!

God the Observant Jew

The God who is Jewish observes the commandments incumbent upon Jewish men (see Patton 2009: Chapter 8). At Mt Sinai, YHVH appears cloaked in a tallit, the prayer shawl of the Jews, and acting as a synagogue prayer leader instructs Moses in the order of prayer (Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 17b). YHVH wears the prayer appurtenances, tefillin, worn traditionally by Jewish men, and appears to Moses wearing them. In the Jews' tefillin it is written: “Hear O Israel, YHVH is our Eloha, YHVH is one.” In an expression of God’s closeness, regarding God’s tefillin we find this rabbinic teaching:
Said R. Nahman b. Isaac to R. Hiyya b. Abin: What is written in the tefillin of the Master of the Universe?—He replied to him: Who can be compared to Your people Israel, a unique nation upon the earth.

(Chr. 17:21)

As a good Jewish man, God studies the Torah for the first third of every day (Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 3b). When God buries Moses, God, like a Jewish person, must be purified from the defilement of the dead body. But whereas mortal Jews become purified in water, as befitting God, God becomes purified in fire (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 39a). When God's Temple is destroyed God undertakes the mourning customs of a Jewish king (Lamentations Rabbah 1:1). And as a good Jew, God also prays! God prays that God's mercy should overcome God's justice (Babylonian Talmud Berachot 7a). And God asks others to pray for Him as well (Babylonian Talmud Berachot 7a).

After creation, God continues to observe the Jewish Sabbath, every week, by resting. So the question arises: how could God bring rain and winds on the Sabbath if he is supposed to be resting? And Rabbi Akiva responds that God does so within the boundaries of Jewish law (Genesis Rabbah 11)! God also visits the sick and celebrates Jewish marriages. And finally, when the people go into exile or suffer, God goes with them, in exile, suffering as a Jew, together with the Jews.

Whether the passages teaching that God observes the Torah laws are taken “literally” or metaphorically, they not only humanize God but Judaize God as well.

Since God the Father, YHVH, was Jewish, it should not surprise that in a new religion that arose among Jews, the Son of God the Father was Jewish as well. And since God the Father observes what God commanded to others, it should be no great surprise that in a new religion that arose from Judaism, God observes a commandment He once gave to another father. Thus, God sacrifices God’s own son, however doing so now to perfection, so that this time the son actually dies.

Medieval Jewish Philosophy

Saadia ben Joseph

When Jewish philosophy arose in the world, God$_Y$ yielded much of the ground back to God$_E$. The shift is pronounced already at the start, with Saadia ben Joseph (882–942), the first systematic Jewish philosopher. Although Saadia makes allusion to the rabbinic distinction between YHVH as merciful and Elohim as judge, his philosophy roundly favors God$_E$ over God$_Y$. God is known by reason. The God of reason is reached via philosophical arguments for the creation of the world and by God’s rational justice as revealed in the laws of the Torah. Thus does God$_E$ take center stage from God$_Y$. Saadia proves God’s existence with four proofs of creation, and proves that creation was ex nihilo. (Interestingly, the ontological argument never surfaces in Jewish sources. Instead, cosmo logical arguments, with design arguments dominate.) And Saadia proves the truth of Torah from the rationality of laws in the Torah.

Thus the God for Saadia is the God who creates the world and is the source of the just and proper laws given to the Jews, in short a God after God$_E$. True, for Saadia, tradition, going all the way back to the Sinai revelation, is a source of knowledge. But it is only a derivative source of knowledge, consequent upon rational argumentation as to its truth.
The God of Saadia is a God of reason and justice, fixing order in the world and in the affairs of humanity. In short, the God of Saadia is God$_E$.

Maimonides

The eclipse of God$_Y$ by God$_E$ comes to rich fruition in Maimonides (1135–1204). Although Philo (20 BCE–50 CE) anticipated some of this, and Abraham ibn Daud (c.1110–80) expresses some of the same ideas, it was Maimonides whose forceful and most articulate formulations had a strong effect on Jewish philosophy. In his legal work, *Mishneh Torah*, when recording the commandment to believe in God, although he mentions YHVH, he tilts strongly toward the God of Genesis 1, God$_E$, the God of creation:

> The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of all wisdoms is to know that there exists a first existent, and it brings to exist all [other] existents . . . This existent is the God [Eloha] of the world, the sovereign of the entire land; and it moves the sphere with a force that has no end. . . . And knowledge of this is a positive commandment, as it says, “I am YHVH your Elohim.”

(Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 1:1, my translation and my emphasis)

Maimonides does not cast God here as the redeemer from Egypt or as the giver of the Torah. And when Maimonides advises how to achieve love and fear of God, he does not turn to the God of revelation or to the God of salvation, but once again to the God of creation:

> What is the way to the love and fear of [God]? When a person contemplates His great, wondrous creations and creatures and when he sees in them His infinite wisdom, he will at once love, praise, and adulate, and have great desire to know the Great Name . . . and he will be deterred and will be afraid.

(Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 2:2, my translation)

Maimonides goes on, in the same legal work, to spend several chapters outlining the wonders of creation so as to arouse the reader’s love and fear of God.

Matching Maimonides’ focus on God$_E$ is his naturalizing of prophecy in *Guide of the Perplexed* and his thus neutralizing intimacy with the God of revelation, God$_Y$. The prophet, according to Maimonides, reaches prophecy by perfecting the self, thereby connecting naturally to the Active Intellect from which the prophet receives his prophetic wisdom. At most (Maimonides scholars are divided about this), God might intervene to withhold prophecy, but does not grant prophetic status. The personal, active relationship between God and the prophet disappears. As a result, the chosen-ness of the Jewish people, as signifying an intimacy between God and the people, also disappears.

Maimonides rarely refers to the Jews as the “chosen people.” For him the Jews are simply the people of Moses, the prophet who knew God’s mind, as it were (Kellner 1991, 1995: Chapter 2). It is not preposterous to propose that for Maimonides, had Moses been a Hittite, then the Hittites would have been the recipients of his legislation, not the Israelites.
Furthermore, in his Guide of the Perplexed, Maimonides ignores the dynamic construal of the name “YHVH” for the sake of a static interpretation of God’s self-identification as “absolute existence” (1:61, 63), an interpretation shared by Aquinas and other medieval metaphysicians. And in the same work Maimonides stresses at length the unknowable nature of YHVH over YHVH’s nearness.

Maimonides showcases proofs of God’s existence whose conclusions are that there exists a first cause, one, simple, and necessary. And he casts Father Abraham as a philosopher who comes to know of God by philosophical argument. Officially, Maimonides’ God is a perfect being, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. God is also simple, having no parts, no inner complexity. Yet, at times, and from what follows from some things he says, or hints at, the God of Maimonides could well be taken to be a super-form meant to explain the intelligibility of reality and of the capacity of the human mind to grasp that intelligibility. Thus does Maimonides assimilate God to a philosophical derivative of the God of creation, God$_E$.

Judah Ha-Levi

The Maimonidean emphasis on God$_E$ and his distancing of God$_Y$ from closeness to his people, had a great influence on subsequent Jewish philosophy. But there was one voice, preceding Maimonides, that protested loudly, before Blaise Pascal (1623–62), against the “God of the philosophers,” in favor of the “God of Abraham.” This was Judah Ha-Levi, the Spanish-Jewish poet and philosopher (c.1075–1141). In his Kuzari, Ha-Levi maintained that philosophers can know only of God$_E$ and not God$_Y$. God$_E$ can be the conclusion of an argument from creation, but not God$_Y$. God$_Y$ can be known only through prophetic experience. “YHVH,” for Ha-Levi, is the name of “someone who speaks to you.” Adam, says Ha-Levi, would not have known of God$_Y$ unless the latter had spoken to him. Thus, when the Hebrew Bible speaks of the “Face” of God, it is almost always the face of YHVH, not Elohim. For Ha-Levi, the referential chain that fixes the referent of “YHVH,” reaches back to the experiences of those to whom God spoke.

In keeping with the preference for God$_Y$, Ha-Levi supports the dynamic reading of “eheyeh asher eheyeh.” Not “I am that I am,” a cold, metaphysical declaration of God’s necessary being, but, “I am present and will be present whenever you need me.” To Ha-Levi, the God of the philosophers is the “God of Aristotle,” but the God of the Jews is YHVH, the God of Abraham. When God$_Y$ introduced Himself to the Israelites in the Ten Commandments, says Ha-Levi, God$_Y$ did not say, “I am YHVH who created the world,” but, “I am YHVH who took you out of Egypt.” Abraham knew YHVH because YHVH spoke with him. And the Israelites knew YHVH because YHVH spoke to them. Thus does Ha-Levi champion the special relationship between the Jews and God$_Y$.

The Kabbalah

God Disappears

Parallel to Jewish medieval philosophy arose the Jewish mystical literature of the Kabbalah. In the Kabbalah YHVH and Elohim do not disappear, but they do not appear as two faces of the Supreme Being—“God.” They are demoted, enmeshed in a complex supernal network. At the apex of reality for Kabbalah is the einsof, the Infinite, beyond
comprehension, also called the “a’yin,” the “nothing,” in whose deepest essence lies the efes, an absolute absence, a “zero.” From the einsof, ten “sefirot,” emanations (singular: sefirah), arise in descending order from the Infinite, in replicative layers called “worlds.” These ten have different powers that they pour downward ultimately to the material world. YHVH and Elohim are but two distinct sefirot out of the ten. YHVH, in agreement with rabbinic thought, is an emanation of the power of mercy, and Elohim of the power of justice. The giver of the Torah is indeed YHVH, but now appearing only as one of ten emanations from the unknowable Infinite. Indeed, YHVH and Elohim are both of lower rank than other emanations.

The “Tenity”

This arrangement led to great criticism by Jewish scholars. The charge was that the kabbalists believed in a “Tenity,” as anti-monotheistic, to their minds, as the Christian Trinity. Here is how Rabbi Isaac bar Sheshet Parfat (1326–1408) formulated the charge:

The kabbalists pray once to this sefirah and then to another sefirah, as the prayer requires. . . . And that is very strange to a person who is not a kabbalist like they are, and they [the non-kabbalists] think that this is belief in a multiplicity [of Gods]. I have heard a philosopher speak in a defaming manner of the kabbalists, and he used to say: “The Gentiles [Christians] are believers in a trinity, and the kabbalist believers in a tenity.”

(Responsa Section 157)

The kabbalist, Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzato (1707–46), rebutted this charge as follows:

The enemies of the Wisdom of Truth have called the believers in it, “Believers in ten-ity.” . . . They have said, “Anybody who believes in Divinity other than His, is but a denier of the God of Israel.” And we answer them by saying that the sefirot are not separate from the one who emanates, for they are like the flame connected to the coal, and all is one, a unity that has within it no division.

(Sefer Kinat Adonai Zivaot, Part 1)

What Kabbalah hath torn asunder, the Jews have the power to put back together. For the ten sefirot can constitute a world of “detachment,” of fragmentation, in which there is no organic unity among the sefirot, or they can constitute a world of “unity,” where all the sefirot are bound in a comprehensively united whole. The unity is effected through and surrounding YHVH, the power of mercy. In observing the commandments, the Jews theurgically effect unity in the Divine sphere, mending the supernal world—tikkun olam. Thus, while YHVH and Elohim do not become one reality, justice and mercy are combined as in a standard “God.” Eventually, the united structures of the repeating world will ascend back into the Infinite from which they came. Thus does Kabbalah empower the Jews to theurgically bring about redemption for the entire world.

Some versions of Kabbalah have been interpreted as panentheistic, that is that all is included in God, but that God is more than what is properly included in God (Idel
Baruch Spinoza

Baruch (Benedictus) Spinoza (1632–77) deserves to be included in the Jewish story because although he did not think of himself as providing a “Jewish” philosophy, he drew out to the end the implications of Maimonides’ philosophy. Spinoza made God triumphant. Spinoza cuts the cord that ties the Jewish people to God as “God’s chosen people,” replacing that notion with that of the Israelites having, as it were, chosen God. The ancient Israelites made a covenant between themselves, according to Spinoza, to serve God. The actual, special, intimate mutuality between God and the Jews, which is nurtured by God, disappears. Spinoza’s concept of God precludes the notion of “choice” or “purpose” in creation, since, according to Spinoza, all has been determined by necessity from the divine nature that exists necessarily and all comes to exist by impersonal cause and effect (see Novak 1995: Chapter 1). Indeed in Spinoza’s philosophy there cannot be mutuality between God and any human being. Spinoza’s God is a spin-off of Elohim, is God, the God of the cosmos, the God of nature.

Spinoza promulgated a monistic pantheism (or, a “panentheism,” if we confine the “world” to the physical and mental). There exists only one substance, God, in which inhere an infinity of attributes, the mental and physical being only two of them. This signifies a severe break from earlier Jewish philosophy (though bearing some affinity to certain kabbalistic views) and not many religious Jews were willing to follow. Nonetheless, Spinoza had a fervent following among Jewish rebels against the tradition, and still has such today among present-day proclaimed “secularists” in Israel (Yovel 1989a, 1989b).

Hasidism

Cleaving to God

The wheel turns once again with the advent of the Hasidic movement in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe. It was as though God arranged for a comeback among the Jewish people after being utterly abandoned by Spinoza. Building on Deuteronomy’s language of cleaving to God (see, for instance, Deuteronomy 4:4), the central religious principle of Hasidism was devekut, or “cleaving,” a mystical communion, to the point of amalgamation with God. As put by the first Hasidic work ever published by Rabbi Yaakov Yoseph of Polonoya (d. 1782): “For the purpose of the entire Torah is to enable us to cleave to God and love Him. . . . The 613 commandments are counsels on how to achieve cleaving to Him, may He be Blessed” (Yoseph of Polonoya 1973/74: Volume 1, 7).

God is present and palpable for the Hasidim, who generally favored panentheism. The motto of the initiator of Hasidism, Israel Baal Shem Tov (1698–1760) was “There is no place devoid of God,” borrowed from the kabbalistic Tikunei Zohar (57). All of Jewish law has as its telos devekut, with the 613 “commandments” becoming “strategies” on how to cleave to God. Such was his instrumentalism that Israel Baal Shem Tov reportedly instructed his followers to interrupt their Torah studies (the supreme rabbinic religious act!) from time to time in order to recreate their cleaving to God.
There were two disparate expressions of the Hasidic mood. One, while promoting cleaving to God, recoiled from addressing God as “Thou.” Thus Israel Baal Shem Tov declared: “If a person thinks he is cleaving to God, then that person is far from God. . . . So if he thinks of God as ‘Thou,’ then God is for him only a ‘He'” (Yoseph of Polonoya 1973/74: Volume 1, 374). The other direction in Hasidism did not hesitate to engage God in the most familiar, human terms. A most extreme form of this Hasidic orientation was with the Hasidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev (1740–1809), who argued with God for the sake of the Jewish people. He charged God with being too strict a father and complained that God should look at the merits of God’s people rather than at their sins. It is reported that once the rabbi became so impatient with God’s behavior that he spoke these words to God: “Good morning to you, YHVH, Master of the universe. I, Levi Yitzhak, son of Sarah of Berditchev, I come to you with a court summons from your people Israel” (Dresner 1974: 86). And he complained: “What have you against your people Israel? Why do you pick on your people Israel?”

In the twentieth century, the Hasidic mood of engagement with God was developed most famously by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–72), scion of an illustrious Hasidic dynasty. To Heschel the basic truth was that God was in search of “Man,” although “Man” did not always respond in kind. Sadly, God is not our ultimate concern, as Paul Tillich would have it. Rather, we are God’s ultimate concern (Heschel 1987). Furthermore, Heschel argued strongly against Medieval Jewish philosophers and Kant for depleting God of emotions, claiming in opposition to them an anthropopathic concept of God, a God possessed of real emotions that God readily expressed (Heschel 1975). God engages with us through what Heschel calls “Divine pathos,” engaging us with passion and concern.

In sum, in the Hasidic ethos we see in modern Jewish history a deepening and broadening of an orientation centrally dedicated to an extension of earlier ideas about God.

Modern Jewish Philosophy

Meanwhile, back in philosophy. The story of modern Jewish philosophy is one of a pulling in opposite directions, one toward God and the other to God. Here I present one representative of the first direction: the early Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) (hereafter: just “Hermann Cohen” unless otherwise noted), and two of the second: Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), a student of Cohen, and Martin Buber (1878–1965).

Hermann Cohen

Hermann Cohen, one of the first Jews allowed to teach at a German university, continued Spinoza’s abandonment of God in favor of God, but for reasons very different from Spinoza’s (Guttman 1966: 400–16; Novak 1995: Chapter 2). Cohen was a neo-Kantian, and in his earlier works took a starkly Kantian, autonomous view of ethics, and, like Kant, saw God as a postulate of reason. But, for Cohen, God was not the guarantee of ethical happiness, as for Kant, but a postulate of a ground, an “origin,” that guarantees “a necessary congruence of natural and moral teleology” (Guttmann 1966: 402). God is the ground of ethics. But ethics must be able to be implemented, and the idea of God functions also as that which makes possible the implementation of ethics in nature. Hence, God guarantees that nature fits the teleology of ethics, including the most basic
of all, by securing the existence of humankind. God guarantees, that is, a unity of ethics and the character of nature.

According to Cohen, for nature to be congruent with ethics is for the world to be conducive to unending ethical progress. The “messianic age” of ethical perfection becomes an ideal toward which nature guarantees progress but which is never reached. And here the Jews, finally, come in. For the real “Torah” for Cohen was the universal moral law, created and promulgated by the prophets, embedded within the array of particularistic laws applying to Jews only. The Jews were the keepers of the pure message of the “messianic” ideal for the future, a symbolic representation of the unending ethical progress toward a “messianic” kingdom. The Jewish ritual law had the purpose only of keeping the Jews distinct so as to insure their existence in this role.

God, for early Cohen, was nowhere to be met with in the world, never to be experienced, and had no relationship with humanity. Cohen’s God, at this point, is a God of reason, a universal God; God at the origin of ontological and ethical order, as it were a “creator” God: a God in stark contrast to GodY, and a family resemblant of the earlier GodE. In Jewish philosophy, GodE had absorbed yet another blow, and was about to succumb, done in by a Jewish follower of Immanuel Kant. Of Cohen’s God, Martin Buber wrote that “Cohen has constructed the last home for the God of the philosopher” (Buber 1997: 58).

Later, Cohen modified his conception of God (though scholars debate to what extent a real change took place) by allowing that God grants love and compassion, a model for human love and compassion. This was followed up by Franz Rosenzweig, who fell in love with the God of love, and by Martin Buber, who nurtured an I–Thou relationship with God, both modern versions of the rabbinic God of mercy, GodY.

**Franz Rosenzweig**

For Rosenzweig, in his *Star of Redemption*, “creation” does not refer to a long ago act, but to God’s ever-present intimate relation to the world. This relation is known through ongoing “revelation,” God’s revelation of God’s self to individuals. Nothing else is known about God save what is revealed in the experience of the divine presence. And what is revealed is God’s love. No *mysterium tremendum* of Rudolph Otto (1869–1937) for Rosenzweig; God’s “one” commandment is the imperative to an individual: “Love me!” All other “commandments” flow from this and are expressions of it. Only a lover can issue such a command, and so there ensues a mutuality of love. It is then God’s love of us that makes possible for us the love of other persons, which is an “after-affect” (a lovely term I owe to Joseph Turner) of the divine love in human experience. We return God’s love by first loving God, and then expressing our love of God by turning our love outward into the world (“redemption”), much as God directs God’s love out into the world. Our human love, in turn, deepens our love of God.

For Rosenzweig, God’s ongoing revelation is to individual persons, and individuals are to respond “redemptively” to God’s self-disclosure by directing their love toward the world and bringing into existence a community of love. The Jews, says Rosenzweig, created themselves as a community based on the experience of God’s self-revelation of love. Thus, the chief task of the Jews is to hold fast to revelation as a focus of God’s love in a community. The task of Christianity, in turn, is to flow outward from revelation, to actively spread “redemption” outward to the world in the name of the God of love. While Rosenzweig’s God is also one of justice, Rosenzweig tightly embraced a variant of
YHVH, the intimate God of the Hebrew Bible and the merciful God of the Talmudic era, GodY.

**Martin Buber**

The same was true for Rosenzweig’s friend and colleague, Martin Buber. If Spinoza broke the special connection between God and the Jewish people for the sake of GodE, Martin Buber at first did practically the same, only then to reinstate the connection to GodY in a new way. In his *I and Thou*, Buber speaks of an individual, “dialogical” I–Thou relationship with God. For Buber, God can be known only as a thou in an individual I–Thou relationship with God. But, in reverse of Rosenzweig, that relationship must first be mediated through an I–Thou relationship between human beings. In the I–Thou relationship to another person as “thou,” the I passes through the human “thou” to the Thou of God. There may be an intimate “relationship” between a person and God, but none between a people and God. Thus is GodY, who in the Hebrew Bible makes local appearances to both individuals and the Israelite nation, transformed into a God who “thous” individuals only.

Later, Buber reinstated the “chosenness” of the Jews as having a “God-given” task to create a “dialogical society.” Of the Jewish people Buber says:

> I am far from wishing to contend that the conception and the experience of the dialogical situation are confined to Judaism. But I am certain that no other community of human beings has entered with such strength and fervor into this experience as have the Jews.

(Buber 1997: 16)

However, this remained a minor theme in Buber’s writings.

Thus do Rosenzweig and Buber retrieve the God of intimacy, GodY, from the hands of Spinoza and the neo-Kantians. The trajectory of modern Jewish philosophy since this pair has heavily favored GodY.

**Neuro-Mysticism**

**Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook**

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935) picks up on panentheistic trends in the history of the mystical Kabbalah to develop an elaborate dipolar conception of God, anticipating some of the ideas of later dipolar theism (see Hartshorne 1962). In *Orot Hakodesh*, Rabbi Kook argues that there are two basic types of values: (1) value due to a stable, static feature, and (2) value that comes from achievement, in a process of attainment. Since God is perfect, God must have both types of value, and those to a perfect degree. Thus, God must have *shlemut*, perfection, as well as *hishtalmut*, “perfectionization” (my word). The first perfection is possessed by God in God’s unchanging attributes. The second is possessed by God by way of the created order, which is included in the very being of God. Every achievement of value in the world signifies an increment of value in the very being of God. God has this dynamic value to a perfect degree both because *everything* in world-reality contributes to the process of value-accretion and because the process is never-ending, an infinite achievement of more and more value.
Predicated on the nineteenth-century faith in progress, as well as a bit of Hegel, Rabbi Kook believed that created reality was going to go to ever higher attainments of value, with dips in between (for instance, World War I) which would contribute to the next stage of advancement. All of the evil in the world was necessary to an achievement of a better world, adding to the attained hishtalmut value in God. The God of perfection might be God\(_p\), but the God of incremental value is as close to us as our own breath, God\(_v\).

The Holocaust

The massive destruction of European (and some non-European) Jews leading up to and during World War II has brought massive unbelief to the Jewish world and led to the creation of radically new theologies of God. During those times, millions of Jews were murdered, tortured, and agonizingly brutalized. Those who survived were marked with scars far deeper than the heart can reach. The suffering of the surviving parents has in many cases been handed down to the second generation and even to the third. The destruction, dislocation, and desolation of the Jewish people in the European Destruction have constituted, for many, a devastating attack on the very idea that there is a God who is morally perfect, omniscient, and omnipotent, let alone a God who loves the Jewish people. Many agree with Rabbi Irving Greenberg when he eloquently declares concerning the Holocaust discourse that: “No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children” (I. Greenberg 1977: 23).

Various revisionist theologies have appeared in response to the European Destruction. These include that God abandoned the Jews, that God “hid his face,” that God withdrew from history for good, that God is far from being perfect, and that God violated the covenant, as a result of which Jews are no longer bound by the covenant. Such theologies tend to associate the Holocaust with a profound, disappointing, change in God, of one sort or another. As a result, such theologies agree that a radical change must be wrought in the Jews’ concept of God. On the other hand, some Ultra-Orthodox continue to insist that no change in the concept of God is necessary, since the murder of six million Jews was punishment . . . for the sins of Jews who were not Ultra-Orthodox (G. Greenberg 2004).

A Vulnerable God

One thinker who endured the suffering of the Warsaw Ghetto and was murdered in the Majdanek death camp in Poland, adopted for himself a theology of a vulnerable God. This was Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro (1889–1943), the Hasidic “Rebbe” of Piececzna, Poland. For him the Destruction was too enormous, too grotesque, too inflicting of human misery, to be explained as an event in the history of God’s relation to the Jews.

So the Rebbe has no recourse but to say, “There are travails that we suffer with Him. . . . ‘Save those who suffer your suffering!’ For Israel also suffers His suffering” (Shapiro 1960/61: 191). What was happening could have been nothing less than a catastrophic upheaval within the very being of God, a heartbreakingly earthquake taking place in the ground of all being. Only that could explain the enormity of the tragedy. It must be that God was violently shaken-up in the innermost places within himself. And so, God must
be enduring great suffering. And the Jews, aye, the Jews, God’s “chosen people,” are the place in God’s creation where the waves of Divine suffering vibrate most violently, felt far beyond mortal endurance. The Shoah is a reverberation of God’s suffering in creation, with Jewish suffering a figuration of a catastrophic upheaval in God. (The Nazis were not to be exonerated on this theology, just as Pharaoh was not exculpated for carrying out God’s earlier decree of slavery and exile to Abraham’s descendants.)

Perhaps, indeed, a fragility exists somewhere very deep in (a di-polar?) God that requires loving care on the part of God’s creatures and a sharing by them in God’s suffering. The ultimate mutuality between God, and his creation would come to expression exactly there.

**Conclusion**

Meanwhile, as the philosophers and the theologians, the mystics and the rationalists, were propounding their ideas of Jewish theism, over millennia prayer to YHVH continued, for wisdom, for grace, for health, for rain, and for redemption of the Jewish people. YHVH has been for us a most personal being who listens to prayers and, at times, finds our prayers worthy of positive response. YHVH is a God who continues to accompany God’s people through history, going into exile with them. As far as the Jewish people were concerned, the God of the Jews was a Jewish God.

**Related Topics**

Chapter 1: Western Philosophy; Chapter 20: Philosophy of Religion

**References**


THE GOD OF THE JEWS AND THE JEWISH GOD


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