Developing a Relationship with a Personal God in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Studies show that belief in God correlates to lower levels of depression, stress, and anxiety. This has been true in my own life and is what inspired this thesis. Through examining the writings of Rabbis Eugene Borowitz, Arthur Green, and Rachel Adler, this thesis explores what a relationship with a personal God could look like. Using my own story in conversation with the rabbis above, I try to show how this relationship with God can be a meaningful, useful tool in today's world. A relationship with a personal God might be the antidote to the ever-growing disconnection this century has fostered.

The three contemporary rabbis all come from different backgrounds and perspectives, yet still believe in a God who wants to be in relationship with us. Rabbi Borowitz - a covenantal rationalist - Rabbi Green - a mystic - and Rabbi Adler - a feminist - are woven together in theological conversation about what it means to be in relationship with God. I hope to show that belief in a personal God is a thoughtful, helpful, and perhaps even hopeful theology to hold in the 21st century.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

a. Defining the problem and finding a solution

The 21st century is increasingly defined by technology, globalization, and polarization.[1] By themselves, each of these trends is amoral. However, these forces are being harnessed for good by some and for evil by others. The world continues to shrink as technology brings us closer together, allowing us to connect across the globe. Events that occur far away feel nearby because we can witness them in real time. However, wars are constantly being threatened and fought; the wealth gap is expanding as the world's economy gets more and more segregated between haves and have-nots; some individuals have a higher net worth than entire nations and others live in abject poverty with a vanishing middle class. The political climate is becoming more volatile; global warming is getting worse; various hatreds (anti-semitism, racism, Islamophobia, homophobia, etc.) are on the rise around the globe. We are in the fourth year of a coronavirus pandemic, and instead of a unified response based on the leading edge of medical science, populations around the world are acrimoniously divided over vaccinations, masks, social distancing, school policies, and personal freedoms versus social responsibilities. Most everything that happens in this world is now shareable – even the most horrible acts – and almost nothing that is recorded can be erased. We all participate in the beauty and the ugliness of our world in equal measure. All of these factors contribute to making the world more

[1] Grenville, J. A. S. (2005). Into the New Millennium: the twenty-first century. In *History of the world: From the 20th to the 21st Century* (pp. 944–957). essay, Routledge.

impersonal, uncaring, and disconnected. It is in this historical context that we can turn to a timeless and timely source for inspiration and comfort: God.

As we have become more connected to the world through the impersonal Internet, we also have become more disconnected from our personal, real-life relationships. In light of the challenges we are facing as individuals in a global society, we yearn for direct, intimate, and mutually caring relationships - both human and Divine. How do our lives change if we anchor ourselves in a relationship with a personal God? Can this God redeem a technological, globalized, and polarized world? I believe that it is specifically *because* we live in this modern world that a relationship with a personal God is desperately needed. Despite trends that make belief in a personal God challenging, if not daunting, there are still compelling liberal Jewish theologies, mystical *and* rational, that support belief in a personal deity.

As modern Jews, it can be challenging to think about an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God in the world in which we live. When things are seemingly random, chaotic, hurtful, and demanding, it is easy for enlightened thinkers to jump to disbelief. When we cannot see, hear, or feel God in any way and the world continues to challenge us, it is all too easy to give up on believing in a God who cares. This study will show that belief in a personal God is neither ignorant nor naïve, nor is it a stretch for the modern mind. On the contrary, developing a belief in a personal God can be a source of meaning, purpose, and joy in a world that is sorely in need of all three.

b. Understanding the range of Jewish thought throughout time

It is impossible - and also problematic - to claim that there is only one Jewish theology. Like many subjects in Judaism, there are differing opinions on how God interacts with us and the world, and how we can access that Divinity. In her book, *Thinking about God: Jewish Views*, Rabbi Kari Tuling masterfully explores how different Jewish thinkers understood various aspects of God throughout time. She notes that the varying theologies are responses to the trials and tribulations experienced by the Jews in their specific time periods. The rabbis of the early centuries of the common era faced different problems than the medieval rabbis, who faced different problems from what we're experiencing in the modern world.

Although the theological responses look different from generation to generation, the questions being asked about God have remained the same: does God intervene? Does God hear our prayers? What does God want from us? Despite the plethora of accepted Jewish responses to these questions, two themes have remained consistent: 1) God is one and 2) we each have unique relationships to the same God.

In the medieval period, Yehuda HaLevi and Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides) had diametrically opposed ideas about God. HaLevi, ruled by feeling and sentiment, approached Jewish thought from a place of ethics and history. Maimonides, on the other hand, a philosopher ruled by reason, focused on connection to God through law and nature.[2] HaLevi was skeptical of philosophy and criticized philosophers often in his writings; however, his writings also discuss many of the same ideas as actual

[2] Wolfson, H. (1912). Maimonides and Halevi. A Study in Typical Jewish Attitudes Towards Greek Philosophy in the Middle Ages. *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, *2*(3), pg. 307

philosophers. Although he wrote before Maimonides, HaLevi's book, the *Kuzari*, reads as a sort of anticipatory rebuke to Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed*. HaLevi claims that the rationalist (who Maimonides will become just a century later) sees God as merely a logical necessity, while the religionist (HaLevi) is affected by God's existence or nonexistence: the religionist seeks God "not only for the sake of knowing [God], but also for the great benefits which [one] derives therefrom."[3] For HaLevi, God is personal, a guide; for the rationalist, God is "arbitrarily chosen to terminate the otherwise endless chain of potentiality and actuality."[4] For HaLevi, God is personal, a guide; for the rationalist, God is "arbitrarily chosen to terminate the otherwise endless chain of potentiality and actuality."[5] Admittedly, saying HaLevi was not a rationalist is not fully correct. He did use reason to support his arguments. However, he put more emphasis on belief rather than reason – on feeling rather than knowing. HaLevi used reason in a different way than Maimonides, starting from a point of unwavering faith that the Torah and revelation are true.

Maimonides started from a different place. Through his writings, Maimonides hoped to show other Jews how religion and reason could work together simultaneously; they were not in contradiction. He endeavored to demonstrate that faith and reason could be harmonized, that Moses and Aristotle, for example, could relate to the same God. He wrote of God being the "original Cause" and "Prime Mover" of the world, completely

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[3] HaLevi, Y. *Kuzari IV*, 13

[4] HaLevi, Y. *Kuzari IV*, 13

[5] Wolfson, H. (1912). Maimonides and Halevi. A Study in Typical Jewish Attitudes Towards Greek Philosophy in the Middle Ages. pg. 317.

transcendent and absolute. As a rationalist however, Maimonides "argued against making any statements concerning our knowledge of God, out of a deep concern for stating only what is clearly true."[6] In other words, all he can say affirmatively about God is that God *is*. For Maimonides, the most that humanity can obtain of God's essence is that God is unknowable, and "the more conscious one becomes of [their] ignorance of God, the nearer to God [they] draw."[7] Therefore, we should not indulge ourselves in excessive prayer, but rather we should spend time contemplating God. Prayer can lead us to this meditation of contemplation, which is the highest form of connection. We must be focused, prepared, and undistracted when engaging in prayer, so that "the whole of you and your thought [is directed] toward reflection on what you are listening to or reading."[8] Even though both Maimonides and HaLevi started with different assumptions and arrived at different conclusions, both were deliberately trying to "present a vision of Judaism in which the truth and supremacy of their ancestral tradition is to be demonstrated."[9] Yet, both believed in God; both believed that Jews had a unique relationship to the Divine.

This is one example of the wide range of Jewish thought. Maimonides and HaLevi disagreed on fundamental aspects of theology, and yet they engaged in dialogue and debate with one other. They differed profoundly on their responses to the same

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[6] Tuling, K. (2020). *Thinking About God: Jewish views*. The Jewish Publication Society. pg. 78

[7] Wolfson, H. (1912). Maimonides and Halevi. A Study in Typical Jewish Attitudes Towards Greek Philosophy in the Middle Ages. pg. 310.

[8] Maimonides, M. *The Guide to the Perplexed*. 3:32

[9] Langermann, T. (2020). Moses Maimonides and Judah Halevi on order and law in the world of nature, and beyond. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, *81*, 39–45. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2019.02.003

fundamental questions of Jewish belief and practice. However, they both shared a deep commitment to the Jewish people, to God, and to deep thought. They exemplify the ongoing conversation of Jewish theologians - a conversation in which I am excited and honored to participate.

Following their lead, this paper will utilize the writings of three modern theologians: Eugene Borowitz, *z"l* (a rationalist), Arthur Green (a mystic), and Rachel Adler (a feminist). These scholars come to their theologies from different starting places and develop their arguments through different modalities while still believing in a personal, immanent God. In exploring the writings of these three theologians, I hope to demonstrate that belief in a personal God is compatible with a wide spectrum of Jewish theology. Over 1000 years after HaLevi and Maimonides, both mystical and rational theologies still compel Jews to believe in a personal deity. This paper will analyze how Rabbis Borowitz, Green, and Adler understand God's relationship with the Jewish people, and vise versa. I hope to inspire other Jews who are searching for a God in Whom they can believe, to Whom they can pray, and from Whom they can find the comfort that accompanies love, trust, and forgiveness.

c. Defining terms and acknowledging other Jewish theologies

As mentioned above, Judaism contains many different theologies. The purpose of this paper is to offer personal theology with an immanent God as valid and contemporary. I want to name and define briefly several other Jewish theologies and explain why I do not find them wholly fulfilling as responses to the contemporary problem articulated in chapter 1a. First, I will define key words that will help clarify many of these theologies.

1. Immanence - Immanence is the idea that God is "experienced as being very near and personal to us."[10] An immanent God is one who is knowable, perceivable, or graspable.
2. Omnibenevolence - Omnibenevolence refers to maximal goodness. Many believe it is impossible for God to be omnibenevolent while also being omniscient and omnipotent, given the fact that evil and randomness exist.
3. Omnipotence - Omnipotence refers to maximal power. When referring to God, it is the idea that God controls (or at least *can* control) everything. Philosophers ponder whether or not an omnipotent God could "create a spherical cube, or make a stone so massive that even [God] cannot move it."[11]
4. Omniscience - Omniscience refers to maximal knowledge. "The All Knowing One knows all things immediately, simultaneously, and exhaustively."[12]

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[10] Tuling, K. *Thinking About God: Jewish views.* The Jewish Publication Society. pg. xx

[11] Hoffman, J., & Rosenkrantz, G. (2022, January 14). *Omnipotence*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/omnipotence/

[12] Jacobs, L. (2017, January 31). *God's attributes: God's omniscience*. Congregation Shema Yisrael.https://www.shema.com/gods-attributes-gods-omniscience-3039/

Omniscience is often discussed in regard to fate. If God knows all, then God knows the future, including the decisions human beings will make at any given moment.

5. Personal God - When I discuss a relationship with a "personal God," I'm referring to a God who is active in our lives, who cares about us, who hears prayer, and who helps guide us. This is a God who knows us as individual human beings. This is an immanent God, One who experiences life with us.
6. Providence - Providence is the idea that "God takes care of us, seeing that our lives unfold according to plan."[13] This means that God plans every detail of our lives, the opposite of free will.
7. Transcendence - Transcendence refers to a God who is outside of our full experience or perception. A transcendent God is one who is a "distant, commanding, and awesome power."[14]

Different theologies:

1. Mysticism - Jewish mysticism focuses on the immanence of God. Notably, with "this spiritual orientation, one attempts to achieve union or communion with God by going beyond the boundaries of time or space, either through specific ritual practices or through the study of specific texts, particularly those that disclose a hidden meaning."[15] The mystic begins from a place of faith, wonderment, and

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[13] Tuling, K. *Thinking About God: Jewish views*. The Jewish Publication Society. pg. xxi

[14] Tuling, K. *Thinking About God: Jewish views* pg. xx

[15] Tuling, K. (2020). pg. xx

belonging. According to Gershon Sholom, mysticism is a religious system "based on Divine Revelation and the acceptance of Holy Scriptures which determine its tenets."[16] What I find challenging about mysticism is the reliance on *sod* - the hidden pieces of Torah. Mysticism is not something any average person can come to on their own and fully understand. It is a deep and challenging practice that requires invitation by others. I do not subscribe to a theology that intentionally leaves people out, especially in a time when so many are craving connection. In a world of emotional distance, mysticism can make some feel further away.

2. Rationalism - As it sounds, rationalism is "the analysis of the evidence for God and faith on the basis of empirical results."[17] Unlike the mystic, the rationalist focuses on a transcendent God. The rationalists of history sought to make Judaism more compelling to the masses by using science to prove Judaism, which, I believe, is incredibly admirable. But, as Marvin Fox writes in his article *Naturalism, Rationalism, and the Jewish Faith*, "the limits of reason are not necessarily the limits of reality, nor are the boundaries of the empirically verifiable the boundaries of what can be known."[18] Since it is based in science, rationalism is privy to hard limits when things cannot be proved. Unfortunately, theology is one of those things. Although many of the medieval rationalists believed that they could (and did) prove the existence of God through reason and

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[16] Scholem, G. (1956). The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism. *Diogenes*, *4*(14), pg. 36.

[17] Tuling, K. (2020). *Thinking About God: Jewish views*. The Jewish Publication Society. pg. xx

[18] Fox, M. (1970). Naturalism, Rationalism, and the Jewish Faith. *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, *11(3),* pg. 91.

science, I believe that there is still an element of faith that clouds pure reason. Belief in God is something beyond rationalism - that is why it is called belief. Even if one can reason their way towards a transcendent God, I believe that a transcendent God is not one who can support someone through this challenging time. A transcendent God is remote, unknowable, and impersonal. Reason might allow someone to have an understanding of God, but the God of reason can do little for us. This is a God that is inaccessible to us - totally beyond, totally other. It is a God with whom we cannot engage. It is not a God with whom we can be in relationship.

3. Pantheism and Panentheism - Pantheism is the belief that God and the universe are identical; "God is everything and everything is God."[19] God is the life force that animates the world, which is to say that the whole is present in each of its parts. Panentheism goes one step further. Literally "all-in-God," panentheism "claims God encompasses the world in a reciprocally influential relationship, however, God also transcends it."[20] Both pantheism and panentheism offer a spiritual dimension to the entire world, imposing a Divine spirit within every leaf, pebble, and grain of sand on this earth, with panentheism also arguing for a transcendent, above-us God. Although I do appreciate the feeling of oneness that these theologies offer, it is difficult for me to believe in a God with whom I

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[19] Oxford English Dictionary

[20] Konigsburg, J. A. (2017). Panentheism: A Potential Bridge for Scientific and Religious Dialogue. In M. N. Hill & Wm. C. Holtzen (Eds.), *Connecting Faith and Science: Philosophical and Theological Inquiries.* (1) Claremont Press. pg. 161

cannot have a relationship. This is a passive God – one who simply exists. I, and it seems like so many of us, require something deeper than what a passive God can provide.

4. Theodicy - Theodicy holds three truths: God is good, God is omnipotent, and evil is real. This theology refers to the "defense of God's justice and righteousness in the face of the fact of evil."[21] Theodicy claims that what appears to be contradictory is actually resolvable, although it may be beyond our understanding. There might be a reason, but we are not privy to it. As Pirkei Avot 4:5 states: "It is not in our power to understand either the suffering of the righteous or the prosperity of the wicked."

[21] Sherwin, B. (1992). *Toward a Jewish Theology: Methods, Problems, and Possibilities.* The Edwin Mellen Press. pg.63

d. Introduction to the rabbis of this paper

This paper focuses on the beliefs and writings of Rabbis Eugene Borowitz, Arthur Green, and Rachel Adler. Below are introductions to these scholars, as well as Rabbi Kari Tuling, who heavily influenced my own theology and this thesis.

1. Eugene Borowitz (1924-2016) - Rabbi Borowitz was born and raised in Columbus, Ohio and was ordained at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1948. From 1950-1952, he served as a chaplain to the US Navy before returning to HUC-JIR to get his doctorate. Borowitz understood early on that "a new kind of thinking was necessary which could build on the work of the early modern German religious thinkers, and yet take the modern American Jewish reality seriously."[22] By the 1960s, he was already writing about "the transition from impressionist worship to expressionist prayer, representing a relatively early attempt to grapple with the impact of existentialism, phenomenology, neo-Orthodoxy, and revisionist theology."[23] He was interested in the relationship between the autonomous self and the *mitzvot* of the covenant with God. In his writings, he grappled with this covenantal relationship, and applied the term "covenant theology" in 1961.

   In his efforts to balance individual autonomy and commanding covenant, Borowitz found himself engaged in the conversation on *halakhah* and Jewish ethics. In his essay, *A Life of Jewish Learning*, he wrote, "The problem of a

[22] Sabath Beit Halachmi, R. (2008). *Eugene B. Borowitz (1924-2016)*. Jewish Virtual Library. Retrieved September 14, 2022, from https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/eugene-b-borowitz

[23] Sabath Beit Halachmi, R. (2008). *Eugene B. Borowitz (1924-2016)*. Jewish Virtual Library.

theology of '*halakhah*,' of what non-Orthodox Jews believe should impel them to observe *mitzvot*, we still called it then, the Moral Law." Borowitz also widened his understanding of theology to include the larger claim that, in general, Jewish theology is Judaism's "meta *halakhah*, the belief which impels and guides our duties."[24] Borowitz continued to develop the idea of covenant theology in his book , *Renewing the Covenant,* published in 1991. He identified a postmodern theology as one in which "Jewish people renew their Covenant with God in a way which compels each of us to live a Judaism in which liberalism and the categories of traditional practice created by rabbinic Judaism are complementary rather than competing modes of thought."[25] This commitment to liberalism and theology was a clear indicator of his place in my paper.

2. Arthur Green (1941-present) - Rabbi Green grew up in New Jersey in a nonobservant Jewish home. He describes his father as a "militant atheist" but his mother wanted him to have a Jewish education. Green attended a liberal Hebrew school during the year and Camp Ramah during the summers. In 1957, he began his studies at Brandeis University, where he went through a crisis of faith and sought new approaches to Judaism. It was there that he encountered mystical Judaism.[26] After college, he was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary of

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[24] Borowitz, E. (2002). A Life of Jewish Learning: In Search of a Theology of Judaism. In *Studies in the meaning of Judaism* (pp. 379–414). essay, Jewish Publication Society.

[25] Sabath Beit Halachmi, R. (2008). *Eugene B. Borowitz (1924-2016)*. Jewish Virtual Library. Retrieved September 14, 2022, from https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/eugene-b-borowitz

[26] Chipman, Y. (2009, March 20). *Vayakhele-Pekudei (Supplement) Art Green - A Birthday Tribute*. Hitzei Yehonatan. Retrieved September 14, 2022, from http://hitzeiyehonatan.blogspot.com/2009/03/vayakhele-pekudei-supplement-art-green.html

America, and then returned to Brandeis to receive his doctorate. He became the dean, and then president, of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College before being asked to create a new non-denominational seminary at Hebrew College.

Green has called himself a neo-Chassid, which he describes on his website as:

> …loving and learning from the great spiritual revival of Judaism that took place in Eastern Europe two hundred years ago, while choosing to live outside the strictly regulated world of the contemporary Hasidic community. It means choosing among the many riches of Hasidic teachings to decide which ones might usefully be applied today and which others should be left to history.[27]

It is this balance of tradition and choice that I felt would add an incredible voice to this thesis.

3. Rachel Adler (1943-present) - Rabbi Adler was born into an orthodox Jewish family in Chicago in 1943. She first gained fame in the early 1970s for writing articles about her discomfort with the way Jewish women were treated according to traditional Jewish law. However, she wrote these articles while firmly immersed in orthodoxy. She was marked as a "passionately committed if critical Orthodox feminist, a woman anxious to defend the tradition by employing categories taken from contemporary social scientific literature."[28] However, the seeds were planted for this emerging feminist to change paths. In 1986, Adler enrolled in the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion's doctoral program and then was ordained at the same seminary in 2012. Her book

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[27] http://artgreen26.com/

[28] Ellenson, D. (2021, June 23). *Rachel Adler*. Jewish Women's Archive. Retrieved September 14, 2022, from https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/adler-rachel

Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics was based on her doctoral dissertation "Justice and Peace Have Kissed: A Feminist Theology of Judaism." In 1993, Adler argued against her past 1970s self, becoming a feminist revolutionary for the Jewish world. Unlike other liberal feminists who sought to "correct" the patriarchy of Jewish law, Adler insisted upon a completely different theoretical approach to the question of Jewish law than that found in the work of others:

> Adler employed these insights in *Engendering Judaism* to maintain that a messianic goal—the creation of a more just world—lies at the heart of the Jewish story, and that the responsibility of each generation of Jews is to allow that goal to be more fully approximated so that a messianic vision of righteousness can be more fully realized. Her aim in this book was to indicate to men and women alike how a "more inclusive Judaism" could be forged, one that would inspire all Jews to draw upon the totality of Jewish tradition and law to fulfill the Jewish *paidea* of messianic justice.[29]

Rabbi Adler's determination to examine traditional Judaism through a feminist lens is what inspired me to include her in this essay. She comes to theology from a unique perspective, offering us a helpful outlook on Torah, law, and God.

In addition to the three main rabbis of this paper, Rabbi Kari Tuling (1968-present) also heavily influenced the ideas in this thesis. Rabbi Tuling converted to Judaism in 1994 and received rabbinic ordination in 2004 from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. In 2013, she earned her PhD in Jewish Thought also from HUC-JIR. She has served congregations in Connecticut, Indiana, New York, and Ohio, and has taught Jewish Studies courses at the University of Cincinnati and the State

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[29] Ellenson, D. (2021, June 23). *Rachel Adler*. Jewish Women's Archive. Retrieved September 14, 2022, from https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/adler-rachel

University of New York, Plattsburgh. She currently serves as the rabbi of Congregation Kol Haverim in Glastonbury, Connecticut. Her most recent book *Thinking About God: Jewish Views* addresses the genuinely intertextual nature of evolving Jewish God concepts. By breaking down each selected text into its core components, Rabbi Tuling helps the reader absorb theology both on its own terms and in the context of essential theological questions of the ages. This book was an incredible read, and it influenced my own evolving theology. In preparation for this thesis, Rabbi Tuling's book was my guidebook. It is easy to read, comprehensive, and inspiring. I am including her in this list of theologians as her book remains my go-to for theological definitions and framing and a wider perspective on the various questions that I will discuss.

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e. Assumptions

This paper will assume one thing: God exists. I am not trying to prove the existence of God, nor will I try to prove that God is immanent. Instead, with the help of Rabbis Borowitz, Green, and Adler, I will make an argument that belief in an immanent God is a legitimate and useful theology to hold in the 21st century.

Chapter 2 - How do we know?

a. What it means to believe and why theology is important

The relationship - or lack of relationship - with God is unique for every individual human being. Our particular experiences shape how we connect with and understand divinity, and how we believe divinity interacts with us and the world. Judaism, in its boundless wisdom, does not have a clear explanation of what this relationship looks like. Even if it did, many modern Jews might understand God differently and push back against that conclusion. Except for the credo, "You shall have one God; there shall be no other gods besides *Adonai*,"[30] Judaism dictates very little about belief. Judaism is a religion of action; the rabbis of the Talmud focused on what Jews should *do*, not what they should believe. This leaves plenty of space for personal interpretation about God's place in one's life. For many contemporary Jews who do not see *mitzvot* as binding or the Talmud as Oral Torah given at Sinai, the notion of God can seem overwhelming, confusing, and exhausting. Trying to figure out one's relationship with God can be challenging, especially without a well-defined starting point.

Many modern Jews struggle with their theology, especially in light of modern atrocities like the Holocaust. The question, "How can there be a God if bad things happen?" comes up regularly and can negatively affect the way people see the world. It is extremely difficult for contemporary liberal Jews to make the jump to belief when there is so much negativity in the world around them. Or, even more simply, enlightened thinking makes it hard to believe in something we cannot perceive. It makes sense that

[30] Exodus 20:2-3

modern Jews would struggle with notions of any type of God, let alone an immanent, caring one.

Whether or not individual Jews believe in God, I believe it is important for everyone to reflect on what they believe. Belief in God - no matter how one relates to God - is, admittedly, a challenging commitment. We often think that our beliefs have to remain static – that if we change our beliefs over time, we are hypocritical, uncertain, or maybe even insincere. However, as Rabbi Laura Geller explains in her blog "All Theology is Autobiography," theology is meant to change over time. As we grow and experience the world differently, our beliefs in God are inclined to change. Rabbi Geller writes of two Torahs:

> There is a Torah of our lives as well as the Torah of tradition. The Torah of our lives transforms the Torah of tradition, pushing us to ask different questions and enabling us to uncover different voices in the Torah of tradition.[31]

The same is true with God. The experiences of our lives transform the experiences we have with God, encouraging us to question, play with, and try on different theologies. At every point in our lives, we are bound to experience God in different ways, or in no way at all, challenging our previous assumptions and maybe adopting new ones.

No matter where one is in their theological journey, engaging with theology is both crucial and beneficial. For one, belief in God has been shown to have positive effects on mental health. The research is clear that engagement with God can be vital to positive well-being. Believers show fewer signs of depression and anxiety, better coping

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[31] Geller, L. (2017, January 4). *All Theology is Autobiography: Reflections on Forty Years in the Rabbinate* [blog]. Retrieved from https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/all-theology-is-autobiography-reflections-on-forty-years-in-the-rabbinate/.

mechanisms, and have a more positive outlook on the world in general.[32] One study measured certainty of belief over belief itself. The results showed that depression, anxiety, and stress were strongly related but distinct constructs, and that belief in God helped lower depression in individuals, but not anxiety or stress. However, *certainty of the belief* had a higher impact on anxiety than the belief itself: "The individuals who were less certain about God's existence or non-existence had higher levels of anxiety than the individuals with greater certainty."[33] Rabbi Tuling clarifies this in her book.

"Theology defines what is possible in our lives."[34] If we believe in a God who hears our prayer, then we feel heard. If we believe in a God who performs miracles, then miracles can happen. In a contemporary society where believing in God seems to be harder due to an increasingly distant and cold world, more and more people are struggling with the notion of belief itself, let alone belief in a personal God. As the research demonstrates, theology has a huge impact on mental health and well-being, and belief in a personal God brings amazement into our lives. In our modern world, defined by technology, globalization, and polarization, perhaps this is the God that we need.

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[32] Research done by me for another project on religion and mental health. Ashouri, F.P., Hamadiyan, H., Nafisi, M., Parvizpanah, A., Rasekhi, S., (2016)., Moreira-Almeida, A., Lotufo Neto, F., & Koenig, H. G. (2006)., and Upenieks, L., & Schieman, S. (2020).

[33] Magin, Z., et. al., (2021). *Belief in God and Psychological Distress: Is it the Belief or Certainty of the Belief?* pg. 8

[34] Tuling, K. (2020). *Thinking About God: Jewish views*. The Jewish Publication Society. pg. xvii

b. What do we *know* and how do we know what we know?

Almost every Jewish theologian and philosopher agrees that we can never know everything about God, but they disagree about what and how much we can know. Eugene Borowitz, the covenantal rationalist and the first theologian on whom this paper will focus[35], believes that our liturgical declaration of the *Shema* is the closest we get to an ultimate truth of God: "No traditional Jewish statement about God comes closer to the literal truth and the central affirmation of Jewish faith than the *Shema*: God is One."[36] This, for Borowitz, is all there is.

This lack of absolute truths, he says, is a product of the times. He explains that we have been convinced that we can know more about what God wants us to do than about what or who God is. However, he mentions a shift in the way we think about knowing God:

> Our shift in recent decades is largely founded on a new humility about what we can really know. One effect has been a new openness to the possibility of God's active role in healing. Judaism these days involves a significant dose of spiritually, a personal quest leading to experiencing the presence of God. Hesitantly we shed our old sense of certainty and quietly seek meaning even in our doubting.[37]

Borowitz is noting a change in our confidence of knowing. He believes that we are entering a new age of belief, after many years of disbelief, or even resistance to belief. So

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[35] Chronological - Rabbi Borowtiz (1924-2016) is the oldest of the theologians I'm focusing on. As his writings come earlier than Rabbis Green and Adler, I begin the paper with his theology.

[36] Borowitz, E.B., & Schwartz, F. W. (2010). *A Touch of the Sacred: A theologian's informal guide to Jewish belief.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 15

[37] Borowitz, E.B., & Schwartz, F. W. (2010). *A Touch of the Sacred: A theologian's informal guide to Jewish belief.* pg. 45

many were certain about God and God's limitations post-Enlightenment; now Borowitz says that such certainty seems naïve. He specifically discusses this in regard to science and healing and offers that "the old air of omniscience that had permeated the scientific disciplines, including medicine, has largely disappeared. [He is pointing to] the current prevalence today of accepting a cure that may lack scientifically proven authority."[38] Perhaps more and more, people in today's world are searching for something to believe in, something to hope for.

Arthur Green, on the other hand, a modern mystic and the second of the theologians whose work this paper will discuss[39], stresses the duality of the one God: "These two (the transcendent God and immanent God) are one, the same God known to us in stasis and in movement, in formlessness and in all forms that exist."[40] This, Green states, is the "ultimate knowledge to be absorbed by both mind and heart."[41] Everything else that Green discusses stems from this truth: God is both beyond and above, both near and inward. This is perhaps just a more nuanced view on the oneness of God than that of Borowitz's truth. Yet the duality of God's presence is the point from which all of Green's thoughts begin. He clarifies that when he speaks of God, he means the "inner force of existence itself... the single unifying substratum of all that is."[42] In being limited in

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[38] Borowitz, E.B., & Schwartz, F. W. (2010). *A Touch of the Sacred: A theologian's informal guide to Jewish belief.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 44

[39] Chronological - Rabbi Green (1941-present) is the second oldest theologian of the three, and so will come second in this paper.

[40] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 47

[41] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology.* pg. 75

[42] Green, A. (2014). *Radical Judaism: rethinking God and tradition*. Yale University Press. pg. 19

human language, Green personifies this oneness as "God," yet maintains that there is both an immanence and transcendence within that oneness. I will expand on imminence and transcendence in the following chapter.

Revelation also plays a large role in Borowitz's and Green's sense of knowing. Rabbi Green believes in ongoing revelation, the idea that God is constantly revealing God's self to us. He explains that at Sinai, Moses's voice became the bearer of God's, spreading God's message to others. Today, those "who believe that revelation is an ongoing process, not a one-time event... must allow [their] voices too to become bearers of that [Divine] voice."[43] There is a reciprocity in our relationship with God. Through revelation, we get to know God in deep, extended ways; we must also share that revelation with others. Without us, God will remain unknown.

Like Green, Rabbi Borowitz also believes in ongoing revelation. He acknowledges that revelation is hard to describe and is beyond our reason, but still maintains that there was something within us at Sinai that we knew: "Reason may have preceded and later refined the insight [of revelation], but it did not rule the self at the critical moment of insight and decision."[44] Even if reason cannot help us articulate revelation, God continues to reveal God's self to us as we continue to be in relationship with God. Borowitz compares our relationship with God to our relationship with anyone else. As we get to know one another, we learn more about each other. So too with God. As we continue to be in relationship with God, we know more about God's character.

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[43] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 143

[44] Borowitz, E.B. (1996). *Renewing the Covenant: A theology for the postmodern Jew*. Jewish Publication Society. pg. 273

What is most important about this relationship is that it is reciprocal. God is coming to us just as we are coming to God. Borowitz explains: "Revelation begins in our awareness but could not transpire if God did not also 'come forth to meet us' and enter into personal intimacy with us."[45] This reciprocity is what makes the human-Divine relationship so meaningful.

Rabbi Rachel Adler, one of the first Jewish feminist theologians and the final rabbi of this paper,[46] joins these two rabbis in her understanding of knowledge. Rabbi Adler explains that we know what we know because of two things: *masoret* (the tradition) and *svara* (reason). The *masoret* has been passed down to us and serves as our basis of divine knowledge. In quoting her teacher Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, *z"l*, Rabbi Adler clarifies that "when there is a conflict between a *halachic* mandate and the current best rationally provable information on the subject, *svara* wins."[47] The rabbis of the tradition would agree on this, as Rabbi Berkovits explains in his book *Not In Heaven*. For Rabbi Adler, this proves most prominent in the way Jews have engendered God throughout time.

The *masoret* that has been passed down is male-dominated; as such, God has traditionally been engendered as male. Yet Rabbi Adler explains that the purpose of feminist theology is "not to reject either text or law but to seek ways of claiming them

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[45] Borowitz, E.B. (1996). *Renewing the Covenant: A theology for the postmodern Jew*. Jewish Publication Society. pg. 274

[46] Chronological - Rachel Adler (1943-present) is the youngest of the three theologians, and so will come third in this paper.

[47] Adler, R. (2022, November 11). Interview for Thesis. Personal.

and living them out with integrity."[48] Indeed, we are meant to "exercise our own covenantal authority to redefine and refashion [Judaism] fundamentally so that contemporary Jewish women and men can live it out with integrity."[49] The best way to do this, Adler argues, is through redefining God's genderedness and reclaiming metaphor. If metaphors are all we have to try and know God, then we must expand our God language to include all Jews who want to know God. This, for Rabbi Adler, is the mission of modern theology: taking *masoret* and infusing it with the "best information that there is currently around [us] about what's real, what the universe is about, and things that [we] can count on rationally."[50] That is knowledge.

All three of these theologians have a deep faith in God that they believe in strongly. All begin their theological journeys with the assumption that God exists, and then continue forward in their exploration from that assumption. Their individual theological perspectives are contingent on their following experiences and insights. It seems that none would argue that their theologies are capital-T True, for truth implies certainty. Even Rabbi Green clarifies that people of faith (him included) "have nothing we can prove; attempts to do so only diminish what we have to offer. We can only testify, never prove."[51] Yet they are all people of faith who embrace doubt. A person of faith is also a person of doubt - secure, but not sure, open to adaptation based on evidence,

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[48] Adler, R. (2005). *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics.* Beacon Press. pg. 58

[49] Adler, R. (2005). *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics.* pg. 21

[50] Adler, R. (2022, November 11). Interview for Thesis. Personal.

[51] Green, A. (2014). *Radical Judaism: rethinking God and tradition*. Yale University Press. pg. 19

willing to learn and consider multiple perspectives. Their commitment to tentative, unfolding theologies is integral to liberal theology. They allow for ambiguity and change over time. Theologies are subject to revision based on new life experiences. Yet all of these rabbis strongly embrace God's oneness as a core pillar of their faith, although "oneness" is clarified by each theologian in different ways.

I find it challenging to say with absolute authority that we know anything about God. I, like these three theologians, have faith that God exists, but *knowing* implies proof that I, as well as everyone and anyone else, simply do not have. Human beings might never know God in the way we hope to, in a way that other scientific proofs are known. But perhaps that is not the point. As soon as God becomes provable, known, or conclusive, God is made vulnerable to human dissection. With strong enough faith, we can continue to engage in these theological conversations, uncovering more and more about what we feel to be true. When we are in dialogue with theologians of the past and present, trying to understand how we relate to God, we continue to grow and develop ourselves, our beliefs, and the theological conversations themselves.

In one of her sermons, Dr. Amy Kalmanofsky[52] discusses the important difference between belief and faith, explaining: "The statement that I *believe* something to be true communicates that you *know* something is true. The statement that I have *faith* that something is true suggests that you *desire* or *suspect* something is true."[53] The only thing I *know* to be true is the feeling I get when certain things happen. As Rabbi Tuling posits

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[52] Professor of Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York

[53] Kalmanofsky, A. (2022, September 3). *Prophets of Faith*. Sermon.

though, maybe that "proof" exists only because I am looking for it. I already have faith in a God who is active in my life, so I see God everywhere around me.

There have been too many "coincidences" in my life for me *not* to believe in God. Too often I have run into the right person, been exactly where I needed to be, or experienced a pattern that I could only describe as Divine. There were many times when I genuinely did believe these were all coincidences, that there was a glitch in the system that felt too real. Even as I am writing this, I cannot think of one particular moment, and yet I know there are tens if not hundreds of examples from my life. The memories of these moments do not always transfer to long-term memory, but the feelings of divinity do. The goosebumps on my arms might be proof enough for me. The sparks of Godliness that shock my system in those moments make it hard for me to believe in anything other than a God who is active in my life. Even in this world of chaos, there is too much that happens with heavenly intention for me to deny the existence of the One.

Jewish theology is an ongoing conversation that spans space and time. Everyone who engages in this conversation engages with those who existed before them, and with those who will exist after them. Jewish theology is available for all who want to engage with it, without the requirement of believing in God. I believe that God exists. If you do not currently have a relationship with God, I invite you to hear my experience, to engage not just with me, but also with Rabbis Borowitz, Green, and Adler. I feel blessed to be in conversation with my predecessors, powerhouses of Jewish thought. This, too, is where I feel God: in this growing, and ever-evolving dialogue of Jewish theology.

Chapter 3 - Where is God?

a. Transcendence and immanence

It has been my experience that so many people - of all ages - cannot move past the old-bearded-man-in-the-sky theology. Often learned in childhood, this primitive theology limits our ability to think about God in any abstract way. The old bearded man in the sky is tangible, something to imagine and picture when we think about God. It is easy. It is simple. It is often what keeps people from engaging seriously with theology. Rabbi Green calls this theology "vertical theology, the sense that God stands (or sits, actually) above us."[54] This theology comes from other ancient religions which did believe in gods who lived away from human beings on Earth. As far as we think we have come from these ancient beliefs, Green argues that we have a certain attachment to vertical theology that makes it challenging to move past. We still turn our thoughts and prayers upward, trying to reach a *higher* spiritual level. This language still permeates our religious spaces, keeping God "up there" and away from us, out of reach, too distant to be in meaningful relationship.

When I ask people if they believe in God, many of the responses are, "Well, not *that* God." To which I respond, "Who said that is what God is?" Again, many of the answers are things like the Bible, old religious school teachers, or simply that that was the image of God they created in their minds and it never changed. Now that they are adults, instead of developing their theology, they simply push it away. Maybe if we analyze the old-bearded-man-in-the-sky theology, it will be easier to establish a new one.

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[54] Green, A. (2014). *Radical Judaism: rethinking God and tradition.* Yale University Press. pg. 34

Rabbis Borowitz, Green, and Adler discuss God's physical location and oneness in great detail, in an effort to expand, and in some ways destroy, this simplistic, enduring, and pervasive theology.

Let us first analyze the concept of God represented as an old bearded man. Rabbi Adler writes extensively about the fallacy of exclusively calling God a man, and even goes so far as to call it *avodah zara* - idolatry. In traditional Jewish prayer and *halakhic* discourse, God is always defined by male pronouns and terminology, which legitimizes the otherness of women.[55] Adler asserts that if God is only male, then only men can truly identify with God. Women are othered simply by the fact that God does not share this experience with them. Rabbi Green notes that this maleness was established when the various Pagan gods were unified under the one Hebrew super-deity, "it was always clear that this deity would be male, reflecting the power situation in the human community."[56] He recognizes that many of these Pagan gods were female, but in the unifying of many gods into one, the Hebrew God lost its potential for being more than one thing. All possibility of difference, all capacity for nuance, all metaphor came to a halt. God was now exclusively male.

Truly, we cannot speak of God without metaphor, as that is how human beings can try to understand God at all. Human pronouns and human metaphors of a masculine God must remain in the realm of metaphor. Over time we have totalized masculine God

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[55] Also people who do not live in the gender binary, for example, trans, non-binary, and gender fluid people. As Rabbi Adler speaks of only men and women in her book, I will do the same here. But I acknowledge that gender is a spectrum, and people who are neither men nor women are also excluded from this experience.

[56] Green, A. (2014). *Radical Judaism: rethinking God and tradition*. Yale University Press. pg. 40

metaphors to be truth: “Instead of a diversity of metaphors, we restrict ourselves to this single one, repeating ‘God the Father’ and ‘God the King’ until we forget that other metaphors are possible.”[57] This exclusivity removes the possibility for women to see themselves as *b’tzelem Elohim*, created in God’s image, when that image is exclusively male. Men are able to connect with God in a way that women are not, excluding an entire population from that relationship.

Rabbi Adler does note that the *Shechinah*, the most well-known, feminine aspect of God is the part of God that is the most immanent. The root of s*hechinah*, ש.כ.נ, means to dwell, bringing the *Shechinahh* down to dwell with us in a very intimate way. Adler clarifies that this is “the part of God we can most easily experience.”[58] However, she notes in her book that the *Shechinah* is often viewed by others as a separate being from God, becoming almost a different deity entirely, instead of a facet of God’s being. Perhaps because Judaism has made God so exclusively male, any popular depiction of God as feminine must be considered “other.” Nevertheless, Adler, along with many other feminist theologians, identifies the *Shechinah* as the part of God that is nearest to us. It is not something separate or other. *Shechinah* is God; *Shechinah* is feminine; and *Shechinah* is a part of God that is accessible.

However, Adler also believes in God’s transcendence. God’s transcendence is necessary in order for God to be in a relationship and a covenantal partner: “God’s Otherness, God’s difference from us, is what makes possible relationship and

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[57] Adler, R. (2005). *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics.* Beacon Press. pg. 87

[58] Adler, R. (2022, November 11). Interview for Thesis. Personal.

exchange."[59] To be in a relationship with God is to affirm that God matters to us, and that we matter to God. In Adler's attempt to explore the power of God (discussed in chapter 4b), she further explains how we and God exist symbiotically: "As storytellers together, we and God write our lives. God presents us with inevitabilities, with opportunities and constraints. We present God with our choices and responses. Because of our power to choose, things also, as it were, happen to God."[60] This type of relationship shows a God that is very near to us, one who is even affected by the choices that we make. So, God is no longer the old bearded man, nor does he sit passively in the sky. God represents and includes all gendered experiences and dwells within us.

Rabbi Borowitz, a firm believer of both the immanence and transcendence of God, explains that God's transcendence is needed for us to experience awe and mystery about God. He writes:

> Jews know enough about God to know that God is utterly beyond us, what theologians term 'transcendent.' That despite all God has told us, there's also so much about God we don't and can't know, and it is this sensibility that prompts Jewish thinkers today to talk about the mystery of God.[61]

For Borowitz, God's transcendence makes God divine. God's transcendence places God far enough away from us that we cannot experience God fully. We can never truly know God, because so much of God is beyond us, transcendent. It is this transcendence that allows God to command us: "A merely immanent God cannot command for it has no

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[59] Adler, R. (2005). *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics.* Beacon Press. pg. 92

[60] Adler, R. (2005). *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics.* pg. 95

[61] Borowitz, E., & Schwartz, F. W. (2010). *A Touch of the Sacred: A theologian's informal guide to Jewish belief.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 11

status greater than anything else in nature."[62] If God was purely immanent, existing within us or within nature, then there would be no one or nothing to look to for support or guidance. That wisdom might exist inside of us, but we could lose sight of it easily. Transcendence allows us to look towards God, outside of ourselves and our immediate surroundings.

Yet, Borowitz does not deny that God is also very near to us. He does "not mean by emphasizing the transcendent quality of God to negate the accompanying reality and virtue of God's immediate availability in personal religious experience. I believe God is immanent and that this conditions the tone of Jewish religious life."[63] God's immanence is real, allowing us to connect with God on very personal levels. Evoking mysticism, he writes, "What tends to characterize [mysticism's] numerous individualistic forms is the insight that ultimately there is only God, and a gap between the human and the Divine is baseless."[64] He paints a picture of a ladder that we climb every day as Jews. When we actively work on our relationship with God, or even when it is not active and we still experience God, we move higher and higher up the ladder, seeing "how much closer to God we may become."[65] Even though God is completely beyond us, wrapped in mystery and awe, we are still able to experience God and find ways to be closer.

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[62] Borowitz, E.B. (1996). *Renewing the Covenant: A theology for the postmodern Jew.* Jewish Publication Society. pg. 91

[63] Borowitz, E.B. (1996). *Renewing the Covenant: A theology for the postmodern Jew.* pg. 91

[64] Borowitz, E., & Schwartz, F. W. (2010). *A Touch of the Sacred: A theologian's informal guide to Jewish belief.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 167

[65] Borowitz, E., & Schwartz, F. W. (2010). *A Touch of the Sacred: A theologian's informal guide to Jewish belief.* pg. 167

Rabbi Green is more explicit in discussing where God is: within. He writes: "Inwardness means that the One is to be found within all beings. We find God through a turning in to ourselves, to be sure, but also through the inward experiences that we share with others."[66] God is found by turning inward and finding the Divine in others and in nature. He believes that God is the life force of the world, an immanent Being that "dwells within the universe and all its forms, rather than a Creator from beyond who forms a world that is 'other' and separate from its own Self."[67] Although this is Green's main position, he also believes in God's transcendence. Like Borowitz, Green believes in a God that is both transcendent and immanent but complicates this by insisting that these are in fact the same thing. He believes that God's transcendence and immanence are one and the same, not two parts of the same God: "These two (transcendence and immanence) are one, the same God known to us in stasis and in movement, in formlessness and in all forms that exist,"[68] and "to be a religious Jew is to walk the tightrope between knowing the invisibility of God and seeing the face of God everywhere."[69] This invisibility mirrors Borowitz's notion of transcendence, the mystery and awe of a God we cannot understand. Green even goes so far as to say that God's transcendence is entirely faceless, none other than the *Ein Sof*, the One without end or limit.

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[66] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 10

[67] Green, A. (2014). *Radical Judaism: rethinking God and tradition*. Yale University Press. pg. 21

[68] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology.* pg. 47

[69] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology.* pg. 35

Rabbi Green states very clearly that he is a mystical panentheist, claiming that "transcendence means that God is so fully present in the here and now of each moment that we could not possibly grasp the depth of that presence. Transcendence thus dwells *within* immanence."[70] The *mystical* part of mystical panentheist, Green explains, is that an "underlying oneness of being is accessible to human experience and reveals itself to humans as the deeper levels of the human mind become open to it."[71] God, or "Being" is constantly revealing itself to us, as long as we are constantly looking for it. Green believes that we can get close to knowing God by knowing each other, ourselves, and nature, and seeing divinity "anywhere, wherever the eye is open, and anytime."[72]

Even though all of these rabbis acknowledge God's transcendence, it is a different type of transcendence than the old-bearded-man-in-the-sky theology. They understand that there is a limit to how much we can know about and connect to God, and yet whole-heartedly believe that God is close enough to us that we can still experience Godliness. Today, in a world of increasing pressures and difficult moral quandaries, it can be comforting to be in relationship with a God who is both far enough away to feel separate from this challenging world, but close enough to talk to and be in relationship with. Rabbi Borowitz contends that in order for a Jewish theology to be valid it must be able to make relationship with God possible and meaningful:

> "Life with God means a life of personal piety, in which we see all our experiences, our failures as well as our activism, in divine

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[70] Green, A. (2014). *Radical Judaism: rethinking God and tradition*. Yale University Press. pg. 18

[71] Green, A. (2014). *Radical Judaism: rethinking God and tradition*. pg. 18

[72] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 23

> perspective. It means a life of faith in which, despite the frustration of our plans and hopes, we remain confident that God's rule continues and we can therefore steadfastly hope for God's vindication of the good; a life of prayer, one in which we can speak to God out of the fullness of what we are and long for, expecting to be inspired by God's own strength and trusting that, if not now, we shall soon know God's answering concern."[73]

This type of relationship with God gives me hope. This is why I choose to believe in a transcendent God who is separate from me, while also being very near, listening and caring for me. This is a God who looks out for me. This world is hard enough; I do not want to believe in a God who sits on "His" heavenly throne and watches me live my life, never intervening, never wanting to be in relationship with me. What benefit does that belief bring me? What do I gain from that theology?

Believing in a fully transcendent God who has no interaction with me or with this world makes me feel even more lonely and distant. I used to believe in this God. Until I was 21, I believed in a God who sat on "His" rocking chair and just watched us like an episode of reality television. I used to be fine with this reality. It did not bother me until I started to experience real struggle. When I needed an anchor to keep me tethered to this earth, that theology needed to change. My belief in a personal God saved my life.[74] I am thankful that I was able and willing to evolve my relationship with God. Now that I have lived this theology for a longer amount of time, I feel more connected to myself, to the world, to others, and to God. Pure transcendence was too distant for me. Immanence is

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[73] Borowitz, E.B. (1996). *Renewing the Covenant: A theology for the postmodern Jew.* Jewish Publication Society. pg. 60

[74] This is a dramatic claim that I am purposefully leaving vague. This story is too personal, and one I wish to keep between myself and God.

important for my health and well-being. With God as a near Other, a God who is both here and there, close by and beyond – that is a God with whom I can remain in relationship. There are elements of God that are knowable, and elements of God that are unknowable. Rabbis Borowitz, Green, and Adler give us ways to see ourselves in our relationships with God, and to see God within us. Wherever we feel God, that is where God resides.

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b. Reciprocity of relationship

Our relationship with God is a strange one. As mentioned above, God is the ultimate Other, and yet remains very close by seeking a relationship with us. Rabbi Adler explores how this relationship grounds certain metaphors in which we and God are interdependent: friends, lovers, co-creators of the world. Within these metaphors, we and God work together to be in a relationship. This interdependence not only assumes that we matter to God, but also that "our covenantal partner can be held accountable in relationship."[75] This gives us permission to feel *about* God. We can be angry, question, wonder, feel excited or proud of what God does for us or how God acts in the world. We are not limited to a one-dimensional alliance to a deity that we cannot understand. We can push God and try to understand what God is doing or wants of us. This is what God as a partner looks like. However, this also leaves God vulnerable. Rabbi Adler continues: "[Relationship] acknowledges that God is dependent on the other partner for what God wants... God's desire for sincere and unconstrained recognition from the other renders

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[75] Adler, R. (2005). *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics.* Beacon Press. pg. 95

God vulnerable to disappointment and abandonment."[76] This means that we have a responsibility to God, just as God has a responsibility to us.

What exactly is our responsibility to God? Rabbi Borowitz claims that our responsibility is simply to stay in touch with God continually. He directs us to Torah, which commands us to love God, not necessarily to understand God.[77] We do not have to fully understand what or why God does what God does, but we are meant to love God regardless. This also supports Adler's relational metaphors of us and God as partners or lovers. All three rabbis - Borowitz, Green, and Adler - support the notion that we show our love for God by being in community with others. Rabbi Green believes that "we come to know God through the deep connections we make with one another, opening ourselves to the Divine presence as manifest in those whom we allow ourselves to love."[78] Love is at the center of all of our relationships, which is where Divinity resides. Rabbi Adler, in quoting her teacher Emanuel Levinas, believes that "every human face is one in which God dwells."[79] Our responsibility to God is to treat God's creatures with love and respect. That is the basis of all humanity and relationships. Whether we believe that is through traditional *halakhah* or modern ethics is up for debate, but our Divine responsibility is to treat each other the best way we know how. When we do that, we cannot let God down.

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[76] Adler, R. (2005). *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics.* pg. 161

[77] Borowitz, E., & Schwartz, F. W. (2010). *A Touch of the Sacred: A theologian's informal guide to Jewish belief.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 13

[78] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 23

[79] Adler, R. (2022, November 11). Interview for Thesis. Personal.

Chapter 4 - Does God hear us? Does God answer?

a. Prayer

If it is true that we have a reciprocal relationship with God, then prayer is how we communicate. Rabbi Borowitz clarifies:

> Prayer is talking to Adonai, the Ultimate One of the universe. And that sense of prayer holds true today no matter whether you think of God as concept, 'person,' Nature, Transcending Unity, limited or unlimited Power, the most intimate Parent, the feminist Bearer-Nurturer, the Great Whatever, the utterly Unspeechifiable, or some mix of these.[80]

When we pray, we are praying to God, no matter how we understand what or who God is. In his book, *Renewing the Covenant*, Borowitz discusses an experience he had while saying *berakhot* over his McDonald's meal. He details his busy day, his dash to the restaurant for a quick lunch, and the crowded restaurant bustling with people. Finally, when he sits down to eat his fried fish sandwich, he takes a moment to stop:

> As I hastily unwrap the sandwich I remember – this time – my Jewish duty to say a *motzi* before I eat. Something inhibits me from doing this in McDonald's. Even elsewhere, I don't quite know how to handle the situation when I lunch with another Jew who does not say the *berakhah*. In either case, if I say the prayer out loud, other people will feel uncomfortable. So, not wishing to be a public nuisance or because of my inhibitions, I say it to myself, silently – which, because of the tumult, isn't always easy. If I let all this overwhelm me, I know that saying the *berakhah* will not be very meaningful. So, hoping to let its spiritual purpose work, I must stop dead still, take control of my frazzled self, center my soul for a precious minute, and only then say the prayer.[81]

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[80] Borowitz, E., & Schwartz, F. W. (2010). *A Touch of the Sacred: A theologian's informal guide to Jewish belief.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 40

[81] Borowitz, E.B. (1996). *Renewing the Covenant: A theology for the postmodern Jew.* Jewish Publication Society. pg. 111

Here, Borowitz reminds us that being in connection with God is not always easy. In our day to day lives, we have a million things to do. We are running from work to family to friends to chores to following along with the news that we often get lost in the shuffle. Prayer helps ground us. It reminds us that we are not alone and that we are able to be in touch with the Sacred. Borowitz clarifies that he doesn't always encounter the Transcendent when he says a *berakhah*, but something does occasionally happen: "Saying the *motzi* amid the city rush, I sometimes, again fleetingly but truly, feel touched by the Ultimate... Few things are as precious for they momentarily restore to me everything that the metropolis seems organized to take from me."[82] Prayer allows the world to stop around us, to halt for a just a minute, to enable us to reach towards the Divine. *Dayenu* - might that be enough?

Unsurprisingly, none of these three rabbis talks about God's response (or lack therefore) to our prayers. For those who have deep faith in a personal God, the relationship between God and us is enough. Rabbis Borowitz and Adler believe in a God who is completely relational. Rabbi Adler makes this perfectly clear:

> God is infinitely complex, but of course, so are human beings. God encounters human beings in many ways. Prayer is our way of initiating communication. But God is not Santa Claus. God does not prove God's reality by giving you a red sled or a million dollars.[83]

Prayer is how we connect with God, but we are meant to do the heavy lifting. Though God might seem to be absent in the world, God is actually relying on us to do the work.

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[82] Borowitz, E.B. (1996). *Renewing the Covenant: A theology for the postmodern Jew.* Jewish Publication Society. pg. 112

[83] Adler, R. (2022, November 11). *Interview for Thesis*. Personal.

Rabbi Adler uses the metaphor of a parent with an adult child. Even though the parent might have an opinion (and often does), they must let their child act on their own, make mistakes, and grow. We pray to be in touch with the Divine, but God has to let us decide what is right and wrong. If all our prayers were answered in obvious, clear ways, human beings would not have a chance to try, to grow, or to succeed on their own. Prayer would become a gumball machine: put in a prayer, get a response. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, prayer does not work like that.

There is something unique about prayer which Rabbi Green elucidates. He explores the nature of prayer; even "Jews who know full well what happened in the Holocaust and what happens daily throughout history, that the pious and impious suffer one fate, and that there is no divine interference in history, *still want to pray*."[84] What is it about prayer that brings people back regularly, even though the world might seem in shambles? Why do we continue to pray? For Rabbi Green, prayer allows us to engage with God as a partner, to have a sincere, personal relationship:

> We are created in the image of God, if you will, and we are obligated to return the favor. God seeks to make us become ever more holy; we seek to make God human. The divine voice deep within each of us calls upon us to reshape our lives as embodiments of divinity. But in exchange, we need a God to whom we can cry, with whom we can argue, whom we can trust and even love.[85]

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[84] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 13

[85] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology.* pg. 31

Prayer allows us to do that and more with the deity that created us. But what about the prayers that have been written for us - the prayers in the *siddur*? Do they evoke the same type of relationship that Green expresses here?

The struggle of *keva* versus *kavanah* is one that I have found exceedingly interesting in the months leading up to my ordination. *Keva* - the routine prayer practice, the three prescribed services (*shacharit*, *mincha*, and *ma'ariv*), the words of the *siddur* - gives us the safety of repetition but often lacks the sincerity of *kavanah*. *Kavanah* - the intention, the focus, the prayers of our hearts - is often more spontaneous, less consistent and reliable, but allows us to focus our hearts towards our prayer. It has been my experience that many modern Jews have a hard time relating to our pre-written prayers. They are in a language many do not speak and refer to ideologies many disagree with, if they know what the prayers say at all. Many have asked me, "If I don't know what I'm saying, why should I say it?" This is a good question. Rabbi Adler offers two reasons. Participating in group prayer (i.e. waking up on time to go to a morning *minyan* for *shacharit*) gives her a reason to get out of bed every day. Since she lost her younger sister in early 2022 - may her memory be a blessing - she has relied on morning *minyan* to start her day and give her a purpose.[86] Even if she does not want to go, she knows that her community is showing up for her so that she can say the Mourner's Kaddish. This group prayer encourages her to keep going.

She also believes that repetition matters. The more we repeat our prayers, the more we embody them. It may take us time to understand them, and we may feel

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[86] Adler, R. (2022, November 11). *Interview for Thesis*. Personal.

differently about a certain prayer on one day or another, but just as we are in a relationship with God which ebbs and flows, so does our relationship to prayer. Sometimes we just will not feel it. Sometimes prayer will move us to tears. Either way, it is important to keep praying.

People pray for myriad reasons. Some pray simply because it connects them to the larger Jewish history and community. Some pray for the self-reflection and introspection that prayer helps facilitate. Many pray to build their relationship with God. I pray to stay in dialogue with God. Whether that prayer was written many years ago by others or in my own words from my heart, my prayers keep me in touch with the Divine. I take Rabbi Borowitz's charge seriously, that "those of us who only have a passing sense that God is near ought to find a way, in whatever style, of cultivating a serious, personal relationship by regularly acknowledging the Presence."[87] Prayer is my way of regularly acknowledging God's presence in my life, whether or not I receive an answer.

I pray every day. I say *brachot* over every food I eat and am in constant dialogue with God. This dialogue usually happens in my car, or when I am too tired to get out of bed in the morning, but every time I pray, I feel blessed to be in relationship with God. I trust that God hears my prayers and is thankful that I want to be in relationship. In whatever way God responds, *if* God responds, I will continue to pray, constantly searching for and feeling the Divine around me.

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[87] Borowitz, E., & Schwartz, F. W. (2010). *A Touch of the Sacred: A theologian's informal guide to Jewish belief.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 28

b. Evil

If there is a God, why does evil exist? Can God be good if the world contains bad? What kind of God would allow things like cancer - or a global pandemic - to exist? The question of evil is perhaps the most asked question of God and theology in general. It makes sense that people ask these questions, but I do not think that they are valid. As Rabbis Borowitz, Green, and Adler will discuss, the question of evil (or randomness) in the world does not necessarily challenge the existence of God, or of God's benevolence.

When I was in college, my university's Chabad family lost their three-month-old baby to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). In the face of the worst tragedy a family could endure, I was astounded by the mother's theological resilience. She was grateful that her son's *neshamah* chose her to be his mother and trusted that God does not give people challenges that they cannot overcome. With that faith, she knew that she could grieve deeply and continue her life. As I struggled with clinical anxiety and depression, this was inspiring. I was struggling with my own mental health issues at the time and was feeling frustrated that *I* had to go through it all. Why did *I* have to have a brain that turned against me? Why did *I* have to feel like my life was falling apart when really, everything was fine? To think that this was my personal test from God was helpful at the time. To think that God cared enough about me to give me a challenge that I could manage, that would push me just enough to grow and turn into the person I am meant to be, was comforting. It was not malicious; God was not punishing me. It was personalized. We all go through hardship; this was mine.

Other people questioned me. What about the people who do not overcome their "tests?" What about "tests" are benevolent? How could a good God actively cause harm? If God is all-powerful and all-knowing, what's the point of the test? Wouldn't God know the outcome? These questions infuriated me. I could not answer them. I understood what people were asking and I did not know how to explain. But the theology I held was helpful for me! God had to be all-powerful and all-knowing, otherwise God would not be God. God had to be good because I could not believe in a God that was not good. This was the only theology that made sense for me. I believed that God was good and omnipotent and acknowledged that evil is real. I was fine not knowing why. God does not have to tell me why evil exists, and how arrogant of me to think I *should* understand! How selfish of my friends and classmates for trying to poke holes in the theology that made sense to me. I learned later that this type of theology was called theodicy. All of the pushback and questions from my classmates led to my work on this thesis.

When I started my research, I came across the theology of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in *Thinking About God: Jewish views*:

> Since God's involvement in the world does not mean that God will save us from our most destructive impulses, Heschel argues that we are called upon to be partners with God in transforming the world. God is not solely responsible for the consequences of human behavior, but neither are we left alone in the universe. God is in search of humanity. God is in search of humans who will make the world what God conceived it to be. Heschel teaches that we have the power to choose to do good or to do evil – but we have to live with the knowledge that each choice we make can unleash a cascade of unintended results. That is why God gave us

> the commandments: to help us structure our lives so as to do what is right.[88]

Now that my mental health is more under control, I am able to think about God in different ways. This piece from Heschel allowed me to rethink God's omnipotence. Perhaps God actively removes a part of God's self from our world so that we can make our own decisions. If we are partners with God in this world, then maybe God has to let us act on our own and hold back God's power so we can enact ours. Like Rabbi Adler's metaphor of a parent to an adult child, maybe God is holding God's Divine tongue, hoping that we were raised right and can make the right decisions in the face of tough choices. This theology of *tzimtzum*, contraction, is shared amongst the three theologians of this paper.

In the original act of *tzimtzum*, Chassidism teaches that God removed a part of God's self in order to make room for the creation of the world. God had to physically (in whatever anthropomorphic way that means) make room for us to exist. In the theology of *tzimtzum*, God continues to remove God's self from the world in order to let us continue the act of creation. We, not God, are in control of the outcomes of our actions. God is self-limiting, allowing us to succeed or fail on our own.

In his book *Liberal Judaism*, Rabbi Borowitz clarifies three truths of Jewish faith: God is good, God is powerful, and evil is real.[89] There are some religions that dispute these claims. Some say that God (or gods) is morally neutral, uninterested, or above human morality of good and evil. Others go so far as to say that God is evil. In

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[88] Tuling, K. (2020). *Thinking About God: Jewish views*. The Jewish Publication Society. pg. 187

[89] Borowitz, E. (1984). *Liberal Judaism*. Union of American Hebrew Congregations. pg. 191

Zoroastrianism for example, there is a God of Good and a God of Evil. They are constantly struggling against each other, but neither is powerful enough to gain a permanent victory. However, there are still times when the God of Evil prevails. There are some religions that believe that evil is simply an illusion: "it is only our mistaken way of looking at things."[90] Borowitz admits that any one of these views would end all of our problems, but that is not the Jewish reality. Judaism takes evil seriously, but God's ultimate goodness is serious as well. We see even in ancient texts like Psalms, Jeremiah, and Job that people have always been frustrated with why the good God does not help righteous people but allows evildoers to flourish. Yet none of these biblical authors gives up on the existence of God. Even more so, Judaism does not consider these people or their questions heretical or impious. Quite the opposite - they are lifted up as holy and enshrined in our sacred texts. This is a religion of questioning, of pushing, and of wrestling. I feel grateful that we are given the space to do that. Yet our questions remain. How can a good, all-powerful God allow evil to happen? Where is God in the chaos? Who is helping us?

Borowitz defines what he believes are appropriate complaints to God - what can be considered "evil." Although discouraging, there are some human experiences that cannot be considered evil. Things like frailty or temperament are not evil and "to attack God's goodness or justice over a matter of individual difference testifies only to our false values."[91] Borowitz extends this to include other things that people regularly and wrongly

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[90] Borowitz, E. (1984). *Liberal Judaism*. Union of American Hebrew Congregations. pg. 191

[91] Borowitz, E. (1984). *Liberal Judaism*. pg. 193

consider important, like money. Although having less money is difficult, it is not an evil, nor a matter of divine righteousness. We tend to see evil in places it does not truly exist, which can lead us down a path of dissatisfaction and anger. Rabbi Green states very clearly: "Suffering... is not the same as evil, but is often confused with it."[92] With this change in perspective, hopefully we will be able to discern what is truly evil in this world, and God's relationship to it.

Since the book of Deuteronomy, many Jewish thinkers have seen evil as Divine justice, punishing us for our sins and mistakes. It would be impossible for the rabbis of the Talmud to believe in an unjust God, so instead they understood the problem of evil as punishment. This was - and still remains in many Jewish communities - the justification for the destruction of the Second Temple. There was too much baseless hatred among the Jewish people, so God destroyed God's dwelling place. This line of thinking runs up against three severe issues: a theology of God as an abuser, justice as conditioning, and real evils like the Holocaust.

In *Engendering Judaism*, Rabbi Adler discusses the metaphor of marriage between God and the Jewish people. As a firm believer in relational covenant, marriage seems an apt metaphor for Rabbi Adler. However, the marriage metaphor is complicated by the Biblical understanding of marriage. Biblically, there is no ceremony, no exchanging of vows, no commitment from one to the other. Instead, marriage is a contract - a legal exchange of property (a woman) from one party (her father) to another (her husband). This conception of marriage, "a unilateral acquisition of property,

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[92] Green, A. (2003). *Ehyeh: a Kabbalah for Tomorrow.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 140

analogous to the acquisition of slaves, animals or fields, rather than embodying commitments on the part of the two participants," also dominates legal thinking in rabbinic texts.[93] This metaphor, when applied to God and the Jewish people, does allow for more ethical possibilities. However, feminist critics have argued that "the depiction of women as whores and nymphomaniacs, stripped, battered, raped, humiliated, but ultimately forgiven by a magnanimous divine spouse, is too high a price to pay for a covenant."[94] When Israel is the adulterer, God becomes the punisher of those sins, the breacher of contract. This constructs a theology that equates masculinity with Divinity, holiness, and restraint and femininity with wickedness, impurity, and unrestraint. Even more so, God is portrayed as an abuser: "Pathologizing God's violence radically narrows our options for response. We are left with a God without insight into His violence and without the capacity to integrate or assume responsibility for His behavior."[95] Rabbi Adler concludes that if this is the God of Israel, if this is the God with whom we are in relationship, one who punishes Jews for their mistakes, then we can do nothing else but reject that God.

As we will see, these theologians understand evil to be a human problem, not a Divine one. For if evil was God's punishment, God would be conditioning us to do good instead of behaving morally because we are meant to or choose to. We are not God's Pavlovian dog, nor does God hope to train us like one. In expanding on a quote from Ezekiel, Rabbi Borowitz explains that God's goal is not punishment. God "desires

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[93] Adler, R. (2005). *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics*. Beacon Press. pg. 157

[94] Adler, R. (2005). *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics*. pg. 157

[95] Adler, R. (2005). *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics*. pg. 157

righteous living which means our freely choosing to do the good. An automatic justice would destroy our freedom."[96] God gave human beings the incredible power to choose the ways in which they behave. If we are truly to be free, then God must grant us the space to make our own decisions. More specifically, "God must permit us to choose evil without immediately punishing us for it."[97] This is the *tzimtzum* that God must engage in regularly – the contracting of God's self from our world just enough to allow us to learn and grow. This, unfortunately, is where real evil can flourish.

The Holocaust changed how many viewed evil in the world. It was such a dramatic evil, so organized and awful and prolonged that many had to rethink their theologies and their understanding of evil. However, Rabbi Borowitz does not consider the Holocaust a *new* evil. Many Jewish thinkers consider it a "horror without parallel," but Borowitz and others believe that, "for all its unprecedented suffering, for all that it distended the proportions of the problem of evil, [it] did not utterly transform it."[98] He clarifies that this stance does not mean to diminish the tragedy of the Holocaust, but rather to acknowledge how "our unutterable pain under the Nazis seems not to pose a radically new set of questions," instead, it only makes the old ones press upon us with intense ferocity.[99] Could the evils of the Holocaust be considered Divine justice? Can we blame God for inflicting this evil upon us? Of course, Borowitz, as well as Rabbis Green and Adler, would say no.

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[96] Borowitz, E. (1984). *Liberal Judaism*. Union of American Hebrew Congregations. pg. 196-7

[97] Borowitz, E. (1984). *Liberal Judaism*. pg. 197

[98] Borowitz, E. (1984). *Liberal Judaism*. pg. 194

[99] Borowitz, E. (1984). *Liberal Judaism*. pg. 194

Rabbi Green complements this thought by examining God's absence. He emphasizes that God does not plan. Green does not "attribute human-like consciousness to the One."[100] For Green, God is not conscious in the same way human beings are. God is in essence, absent. In discussing the theodicy of his mystical predecessor, Rabbi Nachman of Bretzlov, Rabbi Green illuminates the reality of feeling God's absence. He says there are three levels of faith. The first is the idea that earth is filled with God's glory. Both Green and Nachman consider this "naive faith," because as soon as you start looking for that glory, you will often come up empty. This is the second level, which Rabbi Nachman calls "the void," the empty space, the place where there is no God:

> That absence of God has to exist if we are to be human. We become human, we grow, we stretch, only in that absence of God. If the Divine Presence were there all the time, if we lived in a world in which we could truly always say 'the whole earth is filled with God's glory,' we wouldn't be stretching and reaching and growing and becoming what we need to become as human beings.[101]

And yet our humanity thrives because of this absence of God.

Even in the perceived absence of God, there is still Divinity to be found - a third level of reality. Rabbi Green clarifies that this reality must be taken seriously, for it is easy to slip into negation of the void, apologizing for the absence of God. When approached correctly, this level of faith recognizes that even though the void is real, we can still have faith. The faith has to include the doubt, and the doubt has to include the faith:

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[100] Green, A. (2014). *Radical Judaism: rethinking God and tradition*. Yale University Press. pg. 24

[101] Green, A., Plaskow, J., Cox, H. (1992). The Problem of Evil: A conversation [Interview by N. Fuchs-Kraemer]. *Reconstructionist*, *57*(3). pg. 16

> [We] have to keep faith with the Holocaust in this generation and have to say the absence of God is real and it is total and absolute, and it is not something we are going to deny for a moment. At the same time, we have known moments, and there is some ability to go beyond.[102]

As a result of God's absence being real, it is up to us to find the Divinity that still remains in our world.

God's absence does not just affect us, but it affects God as well. In God's pulling back, God chooses not to know or control every outcome. From individual decisions to collective action, God's power is absent. If we are to take the covenantal relationship seriously, if we truly believe that God cares for us and wants us to choose good, then God must weep when we choose evil. Green writes: "In this sense, we say that a *Shekhinah* who loves and cares is also a *Shekhinah* who hurts, who suffers with us in our pain and loss."[103] God cries out with us. God is begging us to choose good, to do right. God sits with us in our pain, holding our hands and praying for us to do better, to be better. But what if we choose to do evil? Is God to blame?

Rabbi Adler agrees with Green that God is affected by our choices: "Choices make human beings human, but I imagine God is often frustrated by this."[104] Adler believes that God genuinely loves us, collectively and individually, and that is why God does not control us. So much of the evil in our world is because human beings chose to act violently, or without consideration. Even Rabbi Borowitz states very clearly: "Much

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[102] Green, A., Plaskow, J., Cox, H. (1992). The Problem of Evil: A conversation [Interview by N. Fuchs-Kraemer]. *Reconstructionist*, *57*(3). pg. 17

[103] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology*. Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 90

[104] Adler, R. (2022, November 11). *Interview for Thesis*. Personal.

of the real evil in the world is not God's fault but ours."[105] We misuse our freedom, idolizing material goods, physical pleasures, or intellectual superiority. Should we blame God for giving us free will? The gift to choose is indeed a gift. We are separate from animals, able to think through moral quandaries and come to our own conclusions. That is not something for which we should blame God; we should thank God.

When we cry out against oppression, when we pray for peace or fight against hatred, we are becoming God's hands in this world. Rabbi Adler believes in a God who hears our cries and is indignant about them. God gives us the strength to fight, but it is up to us to march: "We are God's hands. The integrity to realize that something is wrong, and the indignation and the courage to confront what's wrong, that's what God gives us, but we have to be the hands."[106] Evil is real, and God's absence is real, but we can rely on our relationship with God and on our texts to find the right answers.

All three of these theologians stress that our relationship with God is the most important thing - that even in the face of hardship and struggle, we have to rely on our relationship with God and never give up faith. That can feel almost impossible in the face of real evil, especially. In the contemporary world where there is plenty to be seen, Borowitz reminds us that "God is good and real but limited in power... If the relationship [between us and God] is to remain solid, we must remain lovingly involved even though we can't always understand God."[107]

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[105] Borowitz, E. (1984). *Liberal Judaism*. Union of American Hebrew Congregations. pg. 197

[106] Adler, R. (2022, November 11). *Interview for Thesis*. Personal.

[107] Borowitz, E., & Schwartz, F. W. (2010). *A Touch of the Sacred: A theologian's informal guide to Jewish belief*. Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 174

Evil exists in every corner of this earth. People are robbed, mugged, and murdered every day. People with the means to help others actively choose not to in order to maintain power and wealth. Entire nations fight over land and resources, hurting their people and others in the process. It is so hard to see these awful things happening on a daily basis and still maintain faith in a good God. Yet, I do find comfort in the theology of *tzimtzum*. I appreciate the idea that God wants us to make our own decisions and that God hurts when we make poor ones. It helps me navigate my choices in ways that force me to think about the consequences of my actions. For some this might feel overwhelming, but I have found a lot of comfort in the process of trying to do good, leaning on God for help and guidance, and knowing that even if I make a mistake, I am able to do *tshuvah*, repentance, and continue marching on. I enjoy having God as my partner in this world, rather than as a dictator of fate. I am comforted knowing that God is rooting for me to do good, and I hope that I make God proud.

c. Illness

I would be remiss if I did not talk about illness. Although not considered an "evil" by these three theologians, it is part of the chaos of our world and often challenges our belief in God. Even with all the above being true, human beings are not in control of scientific mutation. Viruses, bacteria, and disease are not human inventions, they are natural causes. Did God create them? Why does God not remove them from our world? Why do some people get sick and others do not? These questions and more fill our minds when we or our loved ones fall ill, and it can be hard to find any satisfactory answers in those moments. Proactively building a strong relationship with God before that happens can help us navigate those difficult moments.

It is clear that none of these theologians believes that illness is a form of divine punishment or retribution. Therefore, it is fair to assume that they would not believe illness is the fault of any individual person or collective behavior. These theologians do not write much about illness, but I imagine they would agree with Saadia Gaon's[108] understanding of mutation. Saadia says that God created the world and all of its processes and then they mutated and changed on their own on account of their own natural process. It might not have been God's intention, but God did create illness and disease, or at least created the things that became them. I appreciate this thought. It is helpful to think that it is not just people that may stray from God's path, but nature strays as well. The entire world has to grow, as it were, and function on its own accord without God's constant interference.

[108] 9th century Egyptian rabbi and philosopher. The following comes from the book "The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs" by Saadia Gaon.

I wonder how our world and theology would change if we had no illness. Rabbi Adler mentions that she is increasingly aware of her limitations as a human being. This comes up most intensely for her during the High Holidays while singing *Unetaneh Tokef*, the haunting poem which asks God how we might die.[109] Sometimes we have to remind ourselves that ultimately, our mortality is not always in our hands. Rabbi Borowitz does believe that God gave doctors specific skills in order to try and help us. He trusts science implicitly and believes that those who have the knowledge and skills to understand science are meant to be trusted. God might not save us from illness with God's own hands, but God continues to reveal scientific truths that continue to save our lives.

I am not going to try to justify illness or give it a Divine purpose. As I mentioned above, having a theological reason for medical suffering was helpful for me at a very specific time in my life. It is sometimes still helpful, though I am much more content with the chaos and randomness of the world now than I was in the past. When I thought that my mental illness was a test from God, it meant that I could "pass" the test by working on myself. Perhaps I might say that I have passed it. I have my mental health under control, and it does not command my life in the same ways it did when I was younger. That is not to say that I no longer have anxiety or depression. Instead, I am able to manage them in ways I could not even imagine only a few years ago. Thinking of myself and my mental health in this way feels good. I imagine if I were still in that dark place, or if, God forbid, I "failed" the test, I would feel differently. This type of theology really only works if you are able to "pass," – if you can heal from whatever illness plagued you and find meaning

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[109] Adler, R. (2022, November 11). *Interview for Thesis*. Personal.

in it. Chaos and mutation form a much more consistent theology, and one that I do not mind anymore. It used to anger me; why did *I* have to be struck with this or that? At least when God chose it for me, God *chose* it for *me*. But I am learning to be okay with the randomness now. Maybe there doesn't have to be a reason for everything. Or at least, maybe God does not have to be the reason.

Rabbi Green says that even through suffering, we can and must continue to search to find God: "God is present in places of devastation as well as where there is joy, in the house of mourning as well as the house of feasting. We may both seek and find the face of God wherever we are, even in the pain of great loss."[110] What does it mean to find God in these moments? It is a perspective change, Green argues. Even if the reality of the suffering cannot be changed, it allows a chance for "the deep force of healing that comes from a level of consciousness beyond our control or knowledge to work its magic on us."[111] This healing may look different for everyone. It may be accepting the things we cannot change, or coming to terms with the situation we are in which we are experiencing. It might be in trying to find meaning. However the healing manifests, if one turns inwards to God, one is likely to find it.

The COVID-19 pandemic clarified what many had known for years: we often turn to religion in times of hardship. When lockdown began, many were scrambling to find community online, working hard to sew masks for everyone, and ensure that people had the resources that they needed to remain at home. This, in and of itself, is Divine. As

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[110] Green, A. (2003). *Ehyeh: a Kabbalah for Tomorrow.* Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 141

[111] Green, A. (2003). *Ehyeh: a Kabbalah for Tomorrow.* pg. 142

Rabbis Borowitz, Green, and Adler mention, God is found in community. When we show up for each other, God is present. Yet the Divinity did not stop there. When vaccines became available, Jewish blessings were created for that special moment. New versions of the *Mi Shebeirach* prayer for healing were released *en masse*. People who had never gone to synagogue before found their communities on the other side of the country, sometimes the other side of the world. There may not be a Divine reason for illness, but illness often brings Divinity with it in some capacity.

The pandemic did not directly influence my theology, but forced me to rethink the way I do ritual, which in turn, affected my relationship with God. I could no longer pray with my communities in person and I could not have Shabbat dinner with my friends. There was illness and death all around and the forced quarantine made it so that I could not distract myself as easily. I had to contend with the world around me and my theology was a part of that. I could not understand why all of this was happening, but I also knew that I would never have that answer. I had to try and find the Divinity wherever I could, or else I would lose myself in the isolation. Like the rabbis above, I found God in the efforts of the Jewish community to find ways to be together, even on Zoom. Although it definitely was not the same, I could feel the Divine sparks of community, of trying to hold each other through the distance. It might not have felt like enough at the time, but I know that was all there could be. In hindsight, it was more Divine than I realized.

Chapter 5 - What does God want? Does God command?

a. God as *Metzaveh* - One who commands

If we are truly in relationship with God as these three theologians suggest, then why does God mediate that relationship through commandments? What is our responsibility to those commands? As covenantal partners in this world, can we command God too?

When I was first struggling with my understanding of a personal God, traditional Jewish law was my biggest roadblock. I was told that *halakhah* came straight from God, and that the laws of "traditional Judaism" were what God wanted from us, from me. The *mitzvot* of the Torah were explained and elaborated on through the *halakhah* of the Talmud, then clarified and made understandable to the masses in the *Mishneh Torah* and *Shulchan Aruch*. At a Chabad retreat I attended the summer after college, I talked with my *rebbetzin* about wrapping *tefillin*. I had never done it before and I told her that I thought it would bring me closer to God. Wrapping is a very physical act, a way to literally bring Torah to your body. I was really excited about it. She told me to go talk to the renowned "Chabad Feminist" about it. So, I did. I was expecting a conversation about the potential to wrap *tefillin* in women's company only, or the option to do it once just to try it. Instead, she offered this metaphor: We are helping to clean God's house. God asked the men to clean the bedroom and the women to clean the living room. Neither chore is better or worse than the other; instead, they work together to help God maintain the home. She told me that God literally gave me a to-do list of ways to get closer to Him: light Shabbat candles, have Jewish babies, give *tzedakkah*, etcetera. I might feel more

spiritual doing something that is not on the list, but it will not bring me closer to God. Wrapping *tefillin* is on the men's list, not mine. I left that conversation and cried.Who was this God who was keeping me from experiencing all that Judaism had to offer? Who was this God that did not want me to try anything and everything to try and be close to "Him"?

This was my first theological crash. I did not know how to merge my new theology - this wonderful, helpful God who was looking out for me - and my deeply-rooted feminism, the knowledge that I was the same as my male counterparts and that I deserved the same access to God as they did. I thought that if I believed in this God, I had to make the jump to following traditional *halakhah*. I did not know there could be another way. At that time, belief in a personal God was the same thing as orthodox practice. I was being told that belief in God and following *halakhah* were the same; one couldn't exist without the other. I felt lost and conflicted for years.

God as a *metzaveh* - commander - is challenging. People tend not to like being commanded, instead relying on their own intellect and ethics to make decisions about how they live. Many do not have any issues with Jewish ethical laws - such as giving *tzedakkah*, being ethical in business, caring for those in need - but it is the ritual laws that require further examination. When we are asked to do things that do not make sense, that maybe seem silly or outdated, it is natural to question the need to continue doing these things. If a ritual practice does not have a logical or ethical reason in our contemporary world, should we still be required to do it? Are "because that's what the Jews do" or

"because God said so" good enough reasons for the practices to continue? It is often these laws that continue to question God's authority as a *metzaveh*.

Rabbi Borowitz contends that God does not command us, but rather remains in relationship with us. This ongoing presence is what we are meant to interpret for ourselves.

> What was given us in the revelation-meeting can strictly only be called "presence." The other gave us not rules but self and with it the empowerment of the I-thou relationship. So, too, God "speaks" and "commands" by being there with us; and we, heavy with the meaning we have come to know, then create the acts or write the accounts that will carry this truth into our lives. Religious practices and texts arise entirely from the human side of the relationship but do so in living response to encounters with the real God. They remain sacred as long as they authentically reflect or renew our relationship with God.[112]

For Borowitz, God's command is simply being with us. Talmudic law was how the rabbis of the early centuries came to know God's revelatory presence, but that might not be our way. For some people, "that may mean adopting more traditional practices; but it may well encourage others to seek newer ways of piety. If it was truly God we connected with, we will want to build on and enhance that experience."[113] God commands us to know God, and we have to figure out how.

Rabbi Green very much agrees with Borowitz. The revelation at Mount Sinai made God approachable and apprehensible through language. But this still did not make God a *metzaveh*. Green does not see revelation and Torah as "the specifically revealed

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[112] Borowitz, E.B. (1996). *Renewing the Covenant: A theology for the postmodern Jew*. Jewish Publication Society. pg. 143

[113] Borowitz, E., & Schwartz, F. W. (2010). *A Touch of the Sacred: A theologian's informal guide to Jewish belief*. Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 19

will of God, [nor] as a body of binding legislation, but rather as the ancient and powerful root of our people's ongoing sacred task of building a religious civilization."[114] Yet Rabbi Green does support following traditional Jewish law, not because God commanded it, but "but because the Jewish people, using its own sacred energy, declared them holy to its God."[115] In other words, the Jewish people decided over centuries of what they were being commanded and how they should fulfill those commandments. Rabbis Borowitz and Green understand the balance of power has changed in favor of the Jewish people. We decide how to respond to God's presence. We declare the *mitzvot* holy. We agree to the terms of the relationship with God – not as commanded people, but as accepting people.

I find this perception of *mitzvot* and *halakhah* much more compelling than that of being commanded. When we choose to follow these laws and rituals, we do so in order to build connection and relationship with ourselves, our communities, and God. There is no proverbial mountain hanging above our heads.[116] Yet when I do actively choose to follow *halakhah*, or at least engage with the *mitzvot* in ways that I deem most appropriate, I find that my relationship with God is even stronger. I can feel the Divine tug of the rope that connects us, bringing me closer and closer. That is how I know orthodoxy is not for me. Any system of practice that keeps me from feeling that tug, that pull towards God is not a

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[114] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology*. Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 119

[115] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology*. pg. 120

[116] Talmud Bavli Tractate Shabbat 88a - The Torah says, "And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the lowermost part of the mount" (Exodus 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Ḥama bar Ḥasa said: the Jewish people actually stood beneath the mountain, and the verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial. Rav Aḥa bar Ya'akov said: From here there is a substantial caveat to the obligation to fulfill the Torah. (Sefaria translation)

system of practice I want to be a part of. I appreciate that for many Jews, traditional *halakhah* - gender separation and all - is wholly fulfilling and compelling. But I am not willing to try and bridge that gap anymore. I am not willing to bridge the gap that the Chabad *rebbetzin* dug for me - of equating a personal, caring God with orthodox practice, the gap of demanding separation and segregation when all people are created *b'tzelem Elohim* and are deserving of equal opportunity and access. That is not a Judaism in which I care to participate or for which I advocate.

Every time I wrap myself in my great-grandfather's *tefillin*, I can feel the weight of my religion and my people surround me. It is not something I take lightly, and I am proud to be among the next generation of Jewish leaders. I believe that God is proud of me for clawing my way through this theological crash, coming to the other side stronger and more secure than ever. Although it was one of the most burdensome and painful experiences I have ever had, it brought me closer to the God I believe to be true, the God that makes me feel wanted and cared for, and for that I am forever grateful for that Chabad *rebbetzin*. May she find the comfort and beauty in her theology as I have now found in mine.

b. Halakhah

While in rabbinical school, I started to distance myself from Talmudic law. In my attempts to reconcile the gap between a personal God and a patriarchal system of law, I found the rabbis to be the problem, not God as commander. Men wrote the *halakhah;* they were to blame. Surely the rabbis misinterpreted God's command, or at least interpreted to the best of their abilities, which meant their laws were not binding. Rabbi Green supports this claim, stating: "All of the forms [of Jewish practice] came about at one time or another as products of human innovation and the ensuing evolution of religion, rather than as dictated by the will of God."[117] I did not care about what the rabbis had to say about certain laws, and I was not interested in following their lead. They claimed to speak for God and what God wanted and I could not understand why we - modern Jews - let them do that. I was so mad at the rabbis for codifying law, but I was more mad at modern Jews for letting the law remain codified. I resented that the Talmud gave Orthodox Judaism the *halakhic* authority to tell me I could not do something Jewish. I was frustrated with rabbinic rigidity and assumed that the rabbis were immovable, stuck in a system that they themselves made up. Then I took a class on prayer in the Talmud and my understanding of the rabbis and *halakhah* changed. I found empathy for their plight of recreating Judaism after the Temple was destroyed. I saw the creativity and leniency in their attempts to make Jewish law more accessible. I began to soften.

[117] Green, A. (2014). *Radical Judaism: rethinking God and tradition*. Yale University Press. pg. 96

This paper is not about the rabbis of the Talmud, but it is important to acknowledge their role in the creation of traditional *halakhah*. In doing research for this paper nearly five years after my conversation with the "Chabad feminist," I finally have the language to discuss the relationship between *halakhah* and God in ways that make sense to me. I still believe in an active, present God, but not one who supports separation, difference, and hierarchy. Rabbi Borowitz validates this theology by explaining that much of the negative emotion brought by Jews to this conversation is due to a conviction that "to accept God would mean, for a person of integrity, restoring the yoke of the commandments, all of them."[118] As he later clarifies, this is not what he believes at all. Rabbis Borowitz, Green, and Adler explain how contemporary Jews can wrestle with rabbinic *halakhah* in appropriate ways, struggling with the laws and the systems without completely giving up on the idea of God.

The orthodox belief that God commands us to follow all traditional *halakhah* in order to be authentic is - I believe - a fallacy. Orthodoxy is certain that the Written Torah is God's word and the Oral Torah represents God's word mediated through the rabbinic mind. This belief might make life a little bit easier: "One's motivation is never sullied with ambiguity about why one must do it or do it in just this way."[119] There is no choice to be made, no thought to be had. This is the law, and this is how it is done. When I was struggling with my practice and belief, this clarity was really nice. I did not have to guess what God wanted of me and I had the answers to almost every question I could ask. Yet

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[118] Borowitz, E. (1984). *Liberal Judaism*. Union of American Hebrew Congregations. pg. 319

[119] Borowitz, E. (1984). *Liberal Judaism*. pg. 320

when my modern sensibilities came into direct conflict with the traditional texts, I was stuck. How do we reconcile those differences?

Rabbi Adler questions the entire system of *halakhah*. She asks: "Whether gender justice is possible within *halakhah* and whether a feminist Judaism requires a *halakhah* at all are foundational questions for feminist Jewish theology."[120] When seeking to create an inclusive theology, one has to question the foundation of the traditional texts. Rabbi Adler clarifies that "the otherness of women is directly linked to theological conceptions of God as male and to the male authorship of Jewish tradition."[121] Since the Talmud was written by and for men, the majority (if not, entirety) of women's experiences are left out. Yet, Adler does not advocate for abandoning *halakhah* entirely; she believes that *halakhah* is the holy transformation of our everyday reality. Though many feminist theologians believe we should throw out *halakhah* altogether, Rabbi Adler instead believes that we need to "reclaim this term [*halakhah*] because it is the authentic Jewish language for articulating the system of obligations that constitute the content of the covenant."[122] As covenantal partners, we are able to exercise our authority to redefine and refashion *halakhah* as we see fit, so all contemporary human beings can live out Judaism authentically and with integrity. All of this is based in Adler's belief in covenantal relationship with God.

In a retelling of a classic Yiddish folktale, "Here Comes Skotsl," Rabbi Adler masterfully explores the relationship between women, *halakhah*, and God. It reads:

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[120] Adler, R. (2005). *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics*. Beacon Press. pg. xx

[121] Adler, R. (2005). *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics*. pg. xxi

[122] Adler, R. (2005). *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics*. pg. 25

> Once upon a time, women began to resent that men seem to own on the world. Men got to read from the Torah and had all the interesting mitzvot and all the privileges. The women decided to present their grievances directly to God. They appointed Skotsl, a clever woman and a good speaker, as the representative. But how was the messenger to be dispatched? They decided to make a human tower. She was to scale the tower and then pull herself into heaven.
>
> The scrambled up on one another's shoulders, and Skotsl began to climb. But somebody shrugged or shifted, and women tumbled every which way. When the commotion died down, she had disappeared. Men went on ruling the world, and nothing changed. But still, the women are hopeful, and that is why, when a woman walks into a house, the other women say, "Look, here comes Skotsl." And someday, it might really be she.[123]

Firstly, the storyteller seems to imply that it is easier for women to go directly to God with their grievances, rather than talk with the men on Earth. Secondly, all the women work together to get Skotsl to heaven. This suggests the need for unity, even in the face of disagreement. All these women had the same end goal, even if their solutions about how to get to that goal might have differed. If our collective goal as modern Jews is to create a *halakhah* that is inclusive, unifying, and Divine in nature, then we must work together to build it. Together, not just as human beings, but human beings and God. God is our partner in this work, as we are God's. This work of updating, renewing, and interpreting Torah is what many refer to as ongoing revelation.

A proponent of ongoing revelation, Rabbi Borowitz counters following traditional *halakhah* with the notion of continuous revelation and relationship with God. He believes that we are at the "end of the period when Jewish living could still be disciplined by

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[123] Adler, R. (2005). *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics*. Beacon Press. pg. 22

rabbinic *halakhah*... The relational theory of revelation generates the possibility of creating its own pattern for giving form to Jewish life - its own '*halakhic*' structure."[124] Like Adler, Borowitz is advocating for a new way of "doing Jewish." The *halakhah* in and of itself is not important, rather, finding ways of being actively Jewish, rooted in tradition is what keeps us connected to each other and to God. He rejects the notion that living a non-*halakhic* life is inauthentic, as "our people did not lack Covenant-faithfulness in the millennium before the rabbinic period, when its primary religious structure appears to have been priestly and cultic."[125] Before the rabbis codified Jewish law in the early centuries of the common era, Jews were still living Jewishly, still connected to God. They had structures, practices, and rituals that guided their lives in specifically religious ways.

Borowitz notes that this new "*halakhic*" system is simply imbuing our days with Divinity: "When we seek God as a partner in every significant act, we invest our deciding and doing with direction, worth, hope, and in failure, the possibility of repair."[126] This is how Borowitz lives his authentic Jewish life.

Rabbi Green, however, supports following *halakhah*. He considers all religion "a series of ongoing and evolving human responses to the silent 'Where are you?' that we hear or feel welling up inside us."[127] In Judaism, this response is *halakhah*. Yet Green does question the call itself. To what exactly are we responding? What does the silent

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[124] Borowitz, E.B. (1996). *Renewing the Covenant: A theology for the postmodern Jew*. Jewish Publication Society. pg. 282

[125] Borowitz, E.B. (1996). *Renewing the Covenant: A theology for the postmodern Jew*. pg. 281

[126] Borowitz, E.B. (1996). *Renewing the Covenant: A theology for the postmodern Jew*. pg. 169

[127] Green, A. (2014). *Radical Judaism: rethinking God and tradition*. Yale University Press. pg. 94-95

voice want in calling out to us? Green clarifies that the only want of God - what he calls the "Innermost One" - is to be aware, "to attain the deepest understanding we can of the evolving oneness of being, and to live in faithfulness to that awareness."[128] We are meant to know, hear, and respond to the call of the Innermost One. In order to succeed in this ongoing response, we need help - reminders. For Green, the reminding is the purpose of *halakhah*. Religion creates rituals and rites that remind us of God's oneness, keeping us grounded and aware of this fact. He says:

> I do not know a God who 'commands' or cares about the fulfillment of specific rites. But I am suggesting that the creation of such ritual forms is indeed our human *response* to an authentic single *mitzvah*, a divine imperative of the immanent presence.[129]

Green remains a *halachic* Jew because that is how we, the Jewish people, respond to the One that calls out to us.

I have been using the terms *mitzvot* and *halakhah* interchangeably, but Green clarifies that he sees them differently. He says that "*halakhah* is the 'path' of living to fulfill the *mitzvot*."[130] For him, the *mitzvot* are the responses to the call from the One; the *halakhah* is *how* we respond.

Green also finds *halakhah* important because of its centuries old staying power: "The *mitzvah* is holy because Jews do it, because they have done it for such a long time, and because they have invested it with a depth of *kavvanah*... [that] only builds in intensity over the course of centuries."[131] *Halakhah* is reinforced by antiquity and is

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[128] Green, A. (2014). *Radical Judaism: rethinking God and tradition*. Yale University Press. pg. 95

[129] Green, A. (2014). *Radical Judaism: rethinking God and tradition*. pg. 95

[130] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology*. Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 74

[131] Green, A. (2014). *Radical Judaism: rethinking God and tradition*. pg. 96

therefore imbued with Divinity. This is where I disagree with Rabbi Green. There are many things that people do for many years before realizing there might be a better, or simply a different way to get to the same result. Perhaps *halakhah* had a time and place, but I find Rabbis Borowitz and Adler's arguments more compelling. They both advocate for continuous reevaluation and renewal. Historical relevance only matters at the beginning of the conversation, not the end. It is worth asking, "Is this thing (ritual, law, belief, etcetera) that has been around for centuries working for us anymore?" If the answer is no, then its historicity is no longer relevant. What remains relevant is how we use that thing to connect to God.

Rabbi Borowitz discusses two periods of time in which Liberal Jews used their freedom to make decisions about *halakhah*. The first he calls "negative freedom," ranging from the origins of *halakhah* and extending into the present with declining influence. This negative freedom is characterized by glorifying their right not to do what prior Jews had considered mandatory. The second period, which Borowitz traces back to the 1920s, and "whose impact has been increasingly visible since the late 1960s," he calls "positive freedom."[132] This is characterized by many Liberal Jews utilizing religious self-determination to add to their religious observance. They adopt previously neglected traditions and create new ones to express their growing Jewish affection. This positive freedom is what all three of these theologians argue for. Like Green, I believe Borowitz would agree that *halakhah* is the Jewish response to many of our theological and

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[132] Borowitz, E. (1984). *Liberal Judaism*. Union of American Hebrew Congregations. pg. 324

existential questions. We want to live good lives, but we do not always know how. The theologians differ on what systems to follow.

I want to acknowledge that Rabbi Green believes we are entering into a new manifestation of Judaism, one which might include a new type of *halakhah*. He says that this next stage will continue to need *halakhah*, which is to say that

> Judaism, like any religious tradition, will have to be defined and recognizable by forms of praxis and cannot afford to let itself be dissipated into proclamation of theological or moral vagaries alone. Although it will not be justified as divine will in the literal sense, this *halakhah* can become the bearer of divine presence, the *davar shebi-kedushah,* in our lives. This new *halakhah*, rather than viewed as the specific will of God, will be understood as a human-Divine embodiment, created by Israel, but in which real holiness is contained.[133]

Perhaps this new *halakhah*, this human-Divine invention, will be closer to what Rabbis Borowitz and Adler are advocating for: a *halakhic* system that is inclusive and moldable, resting upon tradition while also allowing us moderns to find our paths to God on our own terms.

I still struggle with my relationship to *halakhah*. Sometimes I feel guilty if I do not follow a certain law, or think that God is upset with me for trying to modernize them. Yet I feel strongly that God is proud of my engagement with *halakhah.* I believe God wants me to continue engaging and connecting, even if I struggle at times. I think I will always be wrestling with Jewish law: whether or not to follow them and how. But it is work that I am committed to. I know that this work brings me closer to God, and that is all that matters.

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[133] Green, A. (2014). *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology*. Jewish Lights Publishing. pg. 125-126

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

a. Bringing it all together

This thesis serves as my love letter to theology. Being in conversation with such incredible theologians as Rabbis Borowitz, Green, and Adler, I have found this process to be both enriching and incredibly healing. In exploring the belief in a personal God, I have tried to illustrate that it is a thoughtful, helpful, and perhaps even hopeful theology to hold in the 21st century. Through my own story, the only thing that never wavered was my faith in God. The specifics of my theology have changed, but since college, since starting this theological journey, God has remained a close and intimate partner in my life. It has only been through the writing of this thesis that I feel ready to close this chapter of my theological journey and start a new one: simply enjoying, expanding, and enriching my relationship with God.

When I first started writing this thesis, I thought that I would have a lot in common with Rabbi Green. I thought that my theology was more mystical, more esoteric. But I found that I had much more in common with Rabbi Borowitz. He was able to name a lot of my own experiences and anxieties in ways I had not been able to name for myself, and give language to ideas that I have felt as authentic, but could not yet understand. Much of his writing on halakhah and prayer resonated in ways I did not think it would. This also lead to a new shift in my theology, spurred at first by the Abraham Joshua Heschel piece I mentioned in chapter 4b. Rabbi Borowitz's writing, along with Rabbi Adler's, gave me space to feel passionate about Reform Judaism in ways I had not experienced before. As proud members of the Reform Movement, they showed me how I

I could combine my feminism and necessity for inclusion with tradition. Rabbi Adler's writings were instrumental in finding myself in Torah and halakhah in ways I never had before. I feel blessed to have been a part of this ongoing theological conversation, and am inspired to continue learning from and with those who came before me and those who will come after me.

The 21st century continues to challenge us: global warming is rapidly approaching its point of no return, authoritarianism is back in style, and technology is shrinking our globe but lengthening the distance between each of us. There is so much worry and anxiety, unanswered questions, struggle, and strife. There is evil and illness and we wonder where God is. The theologians of this paper remind us that God may not be the solution, but theology is absolutely a resource to help us navigate these trying times. God is our partner in this life. God is both distant enough to be called upon but near enough to be felt. We can call out to God and maybe get a response, depending on what we are looking for. Yet God wants us to make our own choices. God pulls back God's self so that we have the freedom of choice. We might not always make the correct decisions, but we can ask God for advice and support, and try again and again. This is a life-long conversation. In each moment in our lives, we are able to reach out to God, perhaps in different ways based on what is happening in our lives at the time. For my life, for my anxiety, this on-going conversation, this belief in God, is one of the best relationships I have ever built.

I thank God every day that I found a way to be in relationship with Them.[134] Although this relationship continues to grow and change, I am so grateful that it is there. It has helped me through some of my darkest days and has given deeper meaning to some of my brightest. All relationships are hard work, but this is work I am not only happy to do, but feel I *need* to do. Hopefully others will see theology as a valid, useful solution to the challenges of our modern world. As Rabbi Tuling said, "Theology defines what is possible in our lives."[135] If we believe in the Divine, then maybe we can bring Divinity to ourselves, to our communities, and to the world.

My life has been incredibly enriched since cultivating a relationship with God. I experience miracles regularly and can feel God's presence near me always. I feel looked after and cared for, prepared for challenges I never thought I would be able to face on my own. Mundane moments are elevated through prayer and gratitude. My life feels just a little bit more holy. I said that God is the one of the best tools in my tool belt. Belief in God makes it possible for me to let go of some of my anxiety in incredibly productive ways. It allows me to focus on what I can change, instead of dwelling on what I cannot change.

As Rabbi Laura Geller said, "All theology is autobiography." My belief in God may look different at different points in my life, but I pray that I will always find the joy and the peace that I have found in theology. I pray that even through my next theological

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[134] Gender neutral pronoun for God. I have intentionally avoided using pronouns for God until now. I use They/Them pronouns for God as that is the best the English language can do for gender neutrality at the moment. Using They/Them pronouns does not connote plurality of God, rather the expansiveness of Divinity.

[135] Tuling, K. (2020). *Thinking About God: Jewish views*. The Jewish Publication Society. pg. xvii

crash - and I am sure there will be one - I have developed a deep enough relationship with God to work my way through it. I pray that anyone wrestling with the trials and tribulations of the 21st century might consider belief in personal God to be one of their tools. I pray that it helps them as much as it helps me. May we all find the Divinity in our lives.

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