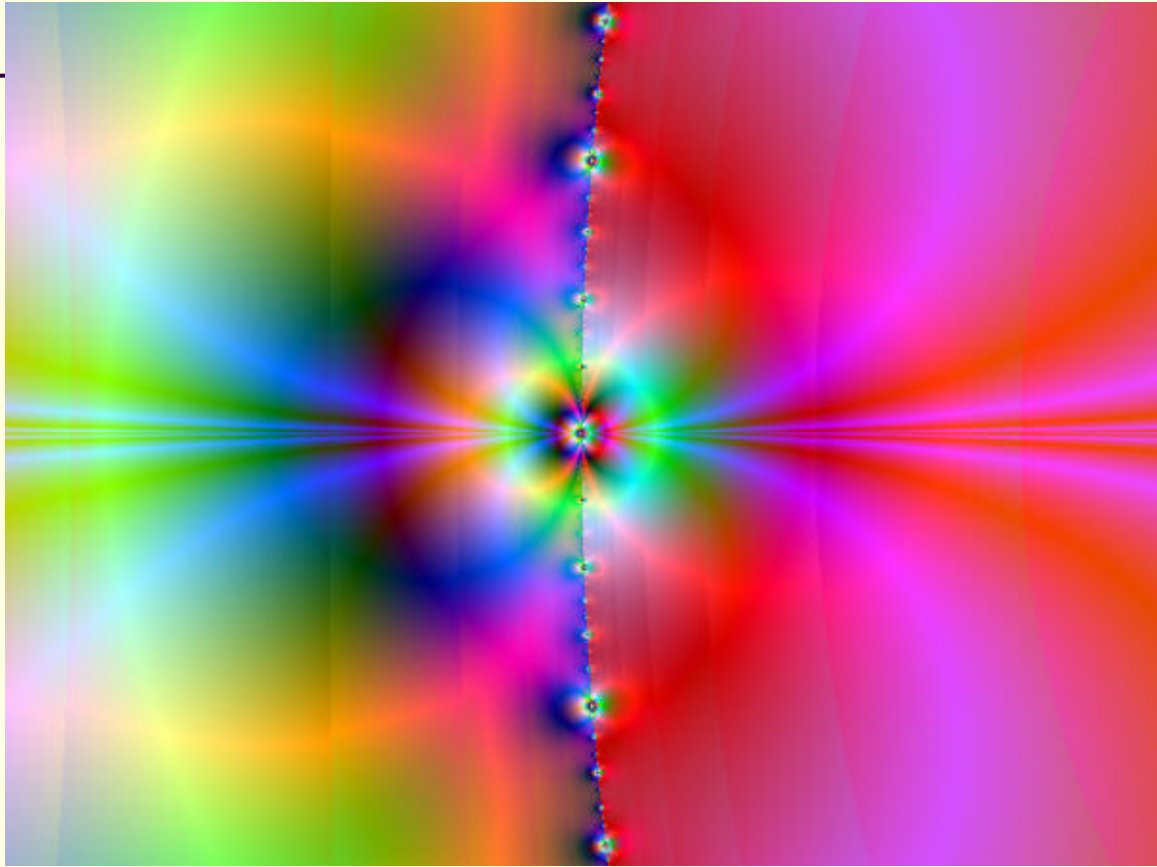


When You Say “God,” What Do You Mean?

A brief look at the evolution of what Jews
have meant by the “G” word
over the last 3,500 years













The God of the Tanakh

4] So Moses carved two tablets of stone, like the first, and early in the morning he went up on Mount Sinai, as the Eternal had commanded him, taking the two stone tablets with him. 5] The Eternal came down in a cloud—and stood with him there, proclaiming the name Eternal. 6] The Eternal One passed before him and proclaimed: “The Eternal! the Eternal! a God compassionate and gracious, slow

to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, 7] extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin—yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.”

8] Moses hastened to bow low to the ground in homage, 9] and said, “If I have gained Your favor, O my lord, pray, let my lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiffnecked people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own!”

■ The Attributes of God

-- *Exodus 34: 4 - 9*

The God of the Tanakh

14] If your offering to the Eternal is a burnt offering of birds, you shall choose your offering from turtledoves or pigeons. 15] The priest shall bring it to the altar, pinch off its head, and turn it into smoke on the altar; and its blood shall be drained out against the side of the altar. 16] He shall remove its crop with its contents, and cast it into the place of the ashes, at the east side of the altar. 17] The priest shall tear it open by its wings, without severing it, and turn it into smoke on the altar, upon the wood that is on the fire. It is a burnt offering, an offering by fire, of pleasing odor to the Eternal.

- A God Who Can Smell?
- An Anthropomorphic God?
 - Walks in Garden of Eden
 - Appears in human form at Abraham & Sarah's tent

■ -- *Leviticus 1: 14 - 17*

The God of the Tanakh

7] The Eternal One spoke to Moses, "Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely. 8] They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!"

9] The Eternal further said to Moses, "I see that this is a stiffnecked people. 10] Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation." 11] But Moses implored the Eternal his

God, saying, "Let not Your anger, Eternal One, blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. 12] Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.' Turn from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people. 13] Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, how You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever." 14] And the Eternal renounced the punishment planned for God's people.

- A God Who Can Be Argued With
- A God Who Makes Covenants
- A God Who Can Change God's Mind

■ -- *Exodus 32: 7 - 14*

The God of the Tanakh

5] When the Eternal saw how great was the wickedness of human beings in the earth, that the direction of their thoughts was nothing but wicked all the time, 6] the Eternal regretted having made human beings on earth, and was heartsick. 7] So the Eternal thought: "I will wipe the humans whom I created from off the face of the earth—the humans, [and with them] the beasts, the reptiles, the birds of the sky—for I rue the day I made them." 8] But Noah found favor in the Eternal's sight.

- A God who can change God's mind
- A God who creates and controls, but permits free will
- A God who makes mistakes, learns and grows?

■ -- *Genesis 6: 5 - 8*

The God of the Tanakh

- **6:1]** Now as people began to multiply on the earth, daughters were born to them, **2]** and when the divine beings (*b'nai elohim*) saw how fair were the human women, they took wives for themselves, as they chose. **3]** Then the Eternal One said, "My spirit will not forever endure the humans, as they are but fallible flesh – their lifespan shall be [only] 120 years." **4]** The Nephilim were on earth in those days; and afterward, too, when the divine beings mated with the human women, they bore for them those heroes who from of old enjoyed great renown.

- Is this God alone in heaven?

- -- *Genesis 6: 5 - 8*

The God of the Tanakh

- A God who frees the oppressed and is more powerful than even the mightiest human empires
- A God who authors supernatural miracles
- A God who champions the stranger, the orphan, the widow, the poor, and the vulnerable, and who will hear them if they cry out due to injustice.

The God of the Tanakh

The Tent of Meeting

7 Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the "tent of meeting." Anyone inquiring of the ETERNAL ONE would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. 8 And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. 9 As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the ETERNAL ONE spoke with Moses. 10 Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to his tent. 11 The ETERNAL ONE would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.

- Paradox regarding God in the Tanakh: can a human see God's face?

■ -- *Exodus 33: 7 - 11*

The God of the Tanakh

Moses and the Glory of the ETERNAL ONE

12 Moses said to the ETERNAL ONE, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favor with me.' 13 If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people."

14 The ETERNAL ONE replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

15 Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. 16 How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?"

17 And the ETERNAL ONE said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name."

18 Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."

19 And the ETERNAL ONE said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the ETERNAL ONE, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. 20 But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

21 Then the ETERNAL ONE said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. 22 When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. 23 Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."

■ Paradox regarding God in the Tanakh: can a human see God's face?

■ -- *Exodus 33: 12 - 21*

The God of the Tanakh

13] Moses said to God, "When I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" 14] And God said to Moses, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh," continuing, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, 'Ehyeh sent

me to you.'" 15] And God said further to Moses, "Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: The Eternal, the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you:

This shall be My name forever,

This My appellation for all eternity.

■ -- *Exodus 3: 13 - 15*

- A non-anthropomorphic God beyond human comprehension.
- *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*: "I Am That I Am," or "I Will Be What I Will Be."
- Y-H-W-H – the sacred 4 letter Divine name is a blending of the various tenses of the Hebrew verb "to be." Past, present, and future are all rolled together into a grammatically impossible word that we can't pronounce!

The God of the Talmud's Rabbis

A God who gave two Torahs, not one, to Moses at Mt. Sinai

The Written Torah



The Oral Torah



The God of the Talmud's Rabbis

A God of a defeated people in exile, longing to return home

- Messiah will come / redemption will come
- Part of God is in exile while we are in exile

From the Talmudic Period: Part-of-God in Exile With Us

Come and see how beloved Israel is before God; for wherever they went into exile the Shekhinah went with them. When they were exiled to Egypt, the Shekhinah went with them; in Babylon the Shekhinah was with them, and in the future, when Israel will be redeemed, the Shekhinah will be with them.

Babylonian Talmud – Megillah 29a

The God of the Talmud's Rabbis

A God Who Changes Forms to Meet the Needs of the People and the Occasion

Because the Holy One appeared to Israel at the Red Sea as a mighty man waging war, and appeared to them at Sinai as a pedagogue who teaches the day's lesson and then again and again goes over with his pupils what they have been taught, and appeared to them in the days of Daniel as an elder teaching Torah, and in the days of Solomon appeared to them as a young man, the Holy One said to Israel: Come to no false conclusions because you see Me in many guises, for I am God who was with you at the Red sea and I am God who is with you at Sinai: *[as Scripture says,] I am the Eternal your God.* The fact is, Rabbi Chiyyah bar Abba said, that God appeared to them in a guise appropriate to each and every place and time.

-- from the Midrashic collection, *Pesikta de Rav Kahanah*

The God of the Talmud's Rabbis

A Transcendent, Incomprehensible God who is also an Intimate, Personal God

Rav Hanina bar Isi said: Sometimes it is that the world and all that fills it cannot grasp or contain the glory of God's divinity; sometimes it is that God speaks with the human being from between the hairs of his/her head.

Therefore it is written in Scripture [Job 38:1], "*And the Eternal answered Job from the whirlwind* – [we can also read it as saying] *And the Eternal answered Job from between the hairs of his head.*" [The midrash is using a word-play.]

Hebrew word: סְעָרָה

The God of the Medieval Philosophers & Mystics

AN IMPOVERISHED person thinks that God is an old man with white hair, sitting on a wondrous throne of fire that glitters with countless sparks, as the Bible states: "The Ancient-of-Days sits, the hair on his head like clean fleece, his throne—flames of fire." Imagining this and similar fantasies, the fool corporealizes God. He falls into one of the traps that destroy faith. His awe of God is limited by his imagination.

But if you are enlightened, you know God's oneness; you know that the divine is devoid of bodily categories—these can never be applied to God. Then you wonder, astonished: Who am I? I am a mustard seed in the middle of the sphere of the moon, which itself is a mustard seed within the next sphere. So it is with that sphere and all it contains in relation to the next sphere. So it is with all the spheres—one inside the other—and all of them are a mustard seed within the further expanses. And all of these are a mustard seed within further expanses.

Your awe is invigorated, the love in your soul expands.

Moses Cordovero - 1522-1570
teacher of R' Isaac Luria

- God as a Mystical, Emanating Energy

The God of the Medieval Philosophers & Mystics

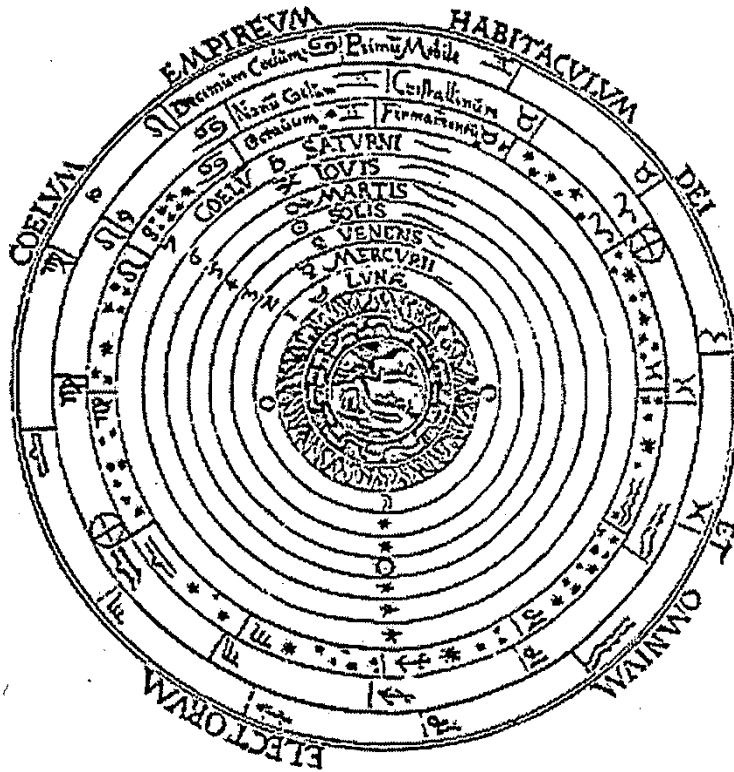


Maimonides,
aka the Rambam,
(d. 1205)

- Science / philosophy and Torah both reveal truth, and when both are correctly understood they don't contradict each other.
- God is unchanging, non-anthropomorphic and indescribable. *All words* used to describe God are inadequate and therefore inaccurate.
- God uses Torah as a teaching tool, and includes “gracious ruses” including commandments that are intended to take a community from Step A to Step B, but which are not what God desires for all time. Sacrificial offerings are one example.

The God of the Medieval Philosophers & Mystics

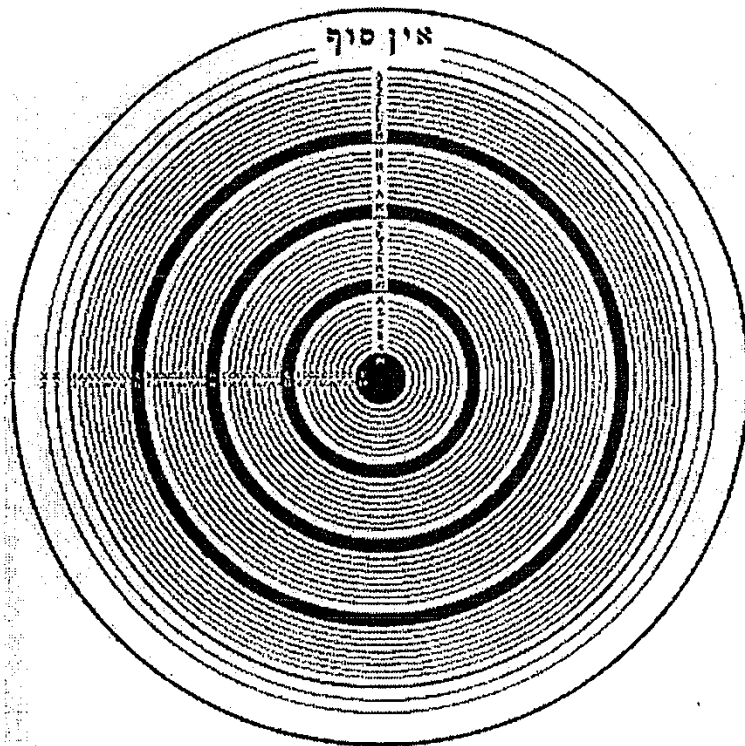
Aristotle



- God as a Mystical, Emanating Energy: influence of Greek philosophical ideas

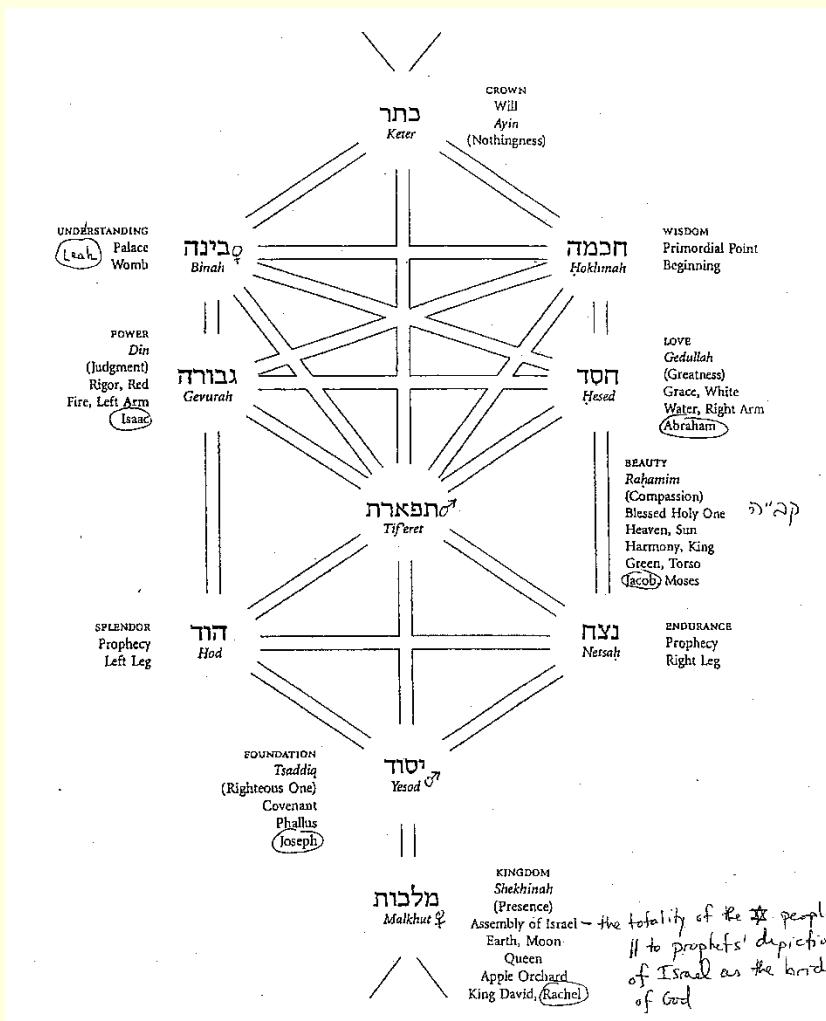
The God of the Medieval Philosophers & Mystics

Kaballah



- God as a Mystical, Emanating Energy – the sefirot of the Kabbalists shown as concentric spheres

The God of the Medieval Philosophers & Mystics



- God as a Mystical, Emanating Energy – the sefirot of the Kabbalists shown in the more familiar form of the Tree of Life
- God has both masculine and feminine energies

The God of the Medieval Philosophers & Mystics



1534 - 1572

- The Kabbalistic God of Isaac Luria: God as a Mystical, Emanating Energy
- New Creation Story: Shvirat ha-kelim / the Shattering of the Vessels
- Tikkun Olam
- Human beings help repair God!

The God of the Hasidim

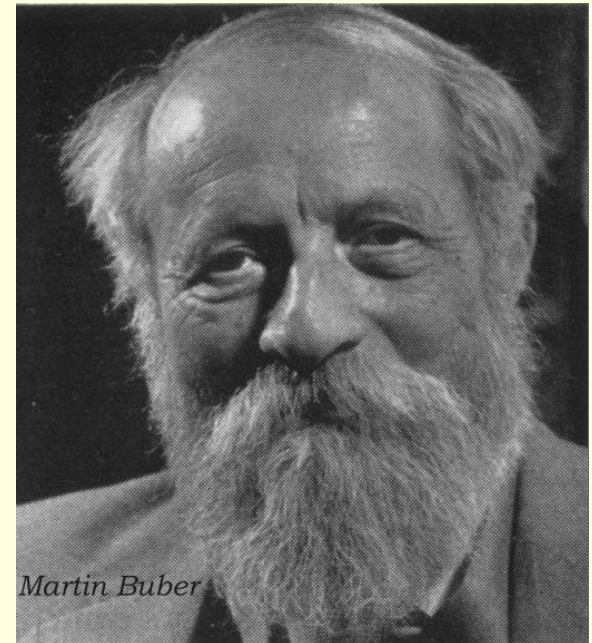
- Semi-pantheistic
- God who is present and directly accessible throughout the universe
- God who is near to us, and who loves humble piety and goodness
- Even the most irretrievable evil is capable of, and longing for, redemption
- Each Jew has a role to play in the transformation of coarse matter into elevated spirit, and a role to play in the transformation of the mundane into the holy. “Raising up the sparks.”



Based on Arthur Green's chapter in Back to the Sources

The God of Martin Buber

- God is the Eternal Thou
- Buber describes two kinds of relationships, the "I-It", and the "I-Thou". The I-It relationship is one based on detachment from others and involves a utilitarian approach, in which one uses another as an object. In contrast, in an I-Thou relationship, each person fully and equally turns toward the other with openness and ethical engagement. This kind of relationship is characterized by dialogue and by "total presentness." In an I-Thou relationship, each participant is concerned for the other person. The honor of the other--and not just her usefulness--is of paramount importance. The ethical response of the I-Thou relationship is central to Buber's understanding of God. For Buber, God is the "Eternal Thou." God is the only Thou which can never become an It. In other words, while relationships with other people will inevitably have utilitarian elements, in a genuine relationship with God, God cannot be used as a means towards an end. --*Rabbi Rachel S. Halachmi*
- We can't really talk about God; rather, God is *encountered* and *experienced*, especially through each Thou we encounter



1878 - 1965

The God of Mordecai Kaplan

- God is the Power or Force that makes meaning and goodness possible.
 - God is like electricity, magnetism, or love: real, ever-present, available, amazing, and animating all creation.
 - Not supernatural – God is part of Nature
 - God is a cosmic process that makes for humanity's life abundant ... As a cosmic process, God is more than a physical, chemical, biological, psychological, or even social process. God includes them all, but what is distinctive about the God-process is that it is greater than the things and experiences it includes.
- “We affirm that the Torah reveals God, not that God revealed the Torah.” God didn't write the Torah; rather, the Torah is our ancestors' record of their seeking after God.
- “Any teaching about God which fails to make humanity free cannot be true religion.”
- God doesn't favor one people over another – God loves all peoples' equally.



1881 - 1983

The God of Judith Plaskow

- A Theology formed by the intersection of feminism and Judaism
- An inclusive monotheism
 - Deliberately shifting the metaphors we use
 - A “naming *towards* God” in which all Jews are encouraged to speak the names that come from their personal experience
 - God’s presence emerges richly in community – a community of empowered equals
- Rediscover traditional images of God that have tended to be overshadowed
 - God as lover, friend, Shekhinah
 - God as place
- God as intimate, imminent, as well as mysterious and beyond our comprehension.
- God is One yet has many faces.



Born 1945

שִׁמְעֵ יִשְׂרָאֵל יְיָ
אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֶחָד:

אֶחָד:

Closing Words

- In a midrashic collection, various rabbis debated why the Torah uses the words, “I am the Eternal One your (singular) God who brought you out of the land of Egypt...” to open the announcing of the 10 Commandments to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. Since God was addressing the entire nation, the sages puzzled over why the text didn’t say “I am the Eternal One your (plural) God...” Here’s how some of them responded:
 - Rav Hanina bar Papa said: the Holy One appeared to Israel with a stern face, with a neutral face, with a friendly face, and with a smiling face. With a stern face: appropriate to the teaching of Scripture...; with a neutral face: appropriate for the teaching of Mishnah; with a friendly face: appropriate for the teaching of Talmud; and with a smiling face: appropriate to the teaching of Aggadah. Therefore the Holy One said to them: Though you see me in all these guises, [I am still One] – [and that is why the Torah uses the singular form of the word “your”, to acknowledge that each individual at Mt. Sinai saw something different and appropriate to his or her capacities.]
 - Rabbi Levi said: The Holy One appeared to them as though in the form of a statue with faces on every side, so that though a thousand people might be looking at the statue, they would be led to believe that it was looking at each one of them. So too, when the Holy One spoke, each and every person in Israel could say, “The Divine Word is addressing me.” [And that is why the Torah text uses the singular version of the word “your” and not the plural version of it.]