Forward

Still Small Voice

Whether or not Jews have faith – and the reality is that many of us are on the fence – there's no question that the pandemic, protests, and politics of 2020 have made people think anew about the divine. About powers beyond ourselves, events that baffle us, kindness, callousness, or upheaval that require a different language or reckoning.

Abigail Pogrebin, a Forward contributing writer, author, and speaker, has spent years pondering Jewish practice and identity, but often avoiding questions about the divine. Now she is our guide to how rabbis and teachers of Judaism translate God for the rest of us — not academically, but practically. Every day.

Pogrebin asked rabbis and scholars of varying denominations and backgrounds, leaders whom she admires but doesn't always agree with – to explore some of the thorny questions that sometimes make us squirm.

Each column consists of one honest conversation with one teacher about one question using one text. We originally published them during the Jewish month of Elul, a traditional time of reflection and accountability, leading up to the high holidays

Illustrations by Noah Lubin.

18 questions about God

The coronavirus has often been compared to a biblical plague. Which begs the question of whether God sent it.

I've also heard people wonder aloud whether George Floyd's death was some kind of divine message, in that it helped wake the world to ingrained, crushing injustice.

Whether or not Jews have faith –and the reality is that many are on the fence – there's no doubt that 2020 has prompted people to think anew about the powers beyond us, events that defy explanation, and whether we're called in some way.

So it seemed like a good time to talk to rabbis about God. The result is this series: 18 teachers exploring 18 questions about the divine. We've named it Still Small Voice, from a passage in the Book of Kings (19:11-12).

Five years ago, I wrote a series of articles in the Forward, taking a deep dive into every Jewish holiday on the calendar. Those fasts and feasts became a book, "My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew," and as I toured the country talking about it, I was often asked why God didn't play a more prominent role in the stories.

The truth is, in all the years of writing frequently about Jewish identity and tradition, I have shied away from exploring the divine. It felt sacrilegious, or audacious; how can I walk into this arena when I'm no rabbi or scholar?

It was rabbis themselves who invited me to take the leap and trust that we're each entitled to the search. I've long wondered how clergy and other scholars explain the unexplainable. What texts do they lean on to help clarify the divine or bring us closer to it, which images do they invoke, how do they talk to congregants or students about God, especially when someone is suffering or scared?

Journalism can be both an excuse and a pathway, so I donned my reporter's hat to ask the questions I harbor myself. Is God everywhere? Does God hear us? Does God punish us? Is God good? What is God's opinion of us?

There were too many wise teachers to consult; I aimed for a cross-section of perspectives: of denomination, background, career, geography, gender and race. Each chose one of my proposed inquiries or suggested a different lens. Before or during each conversation, they emailed me a Jewish text to elucidate their thinking.

It feels right to start this series during the Jewish month of Elul, traditionally a time of rigorous spiritual reflection, building towards the high holidays and Judgment Day.

It is a period when we are supposed to excavate our errors, vow to make changes, apologize to those we've hurt. Our tradition talks about this process as *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of the soul. We must hold ourselves accountable, but God, too, is evaluating us at this time.

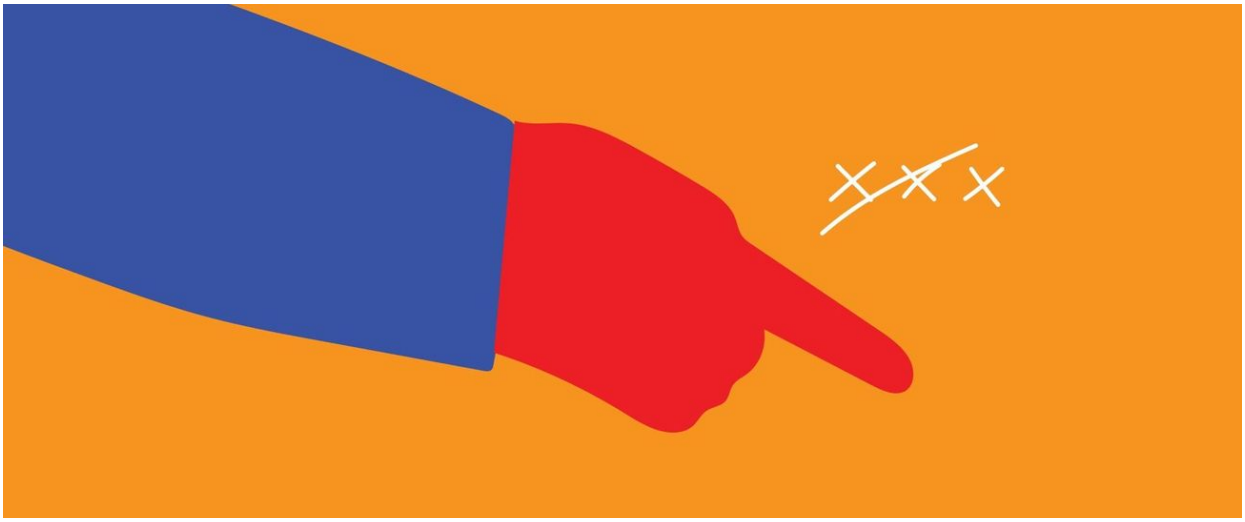
So many Jews I know, laypeople and rabbis alike, struggle with whether we have an unseen protector, navigator, instigator, parent, enforcer, role model, architect who is watching, steering or evaluating our lives. But we lack a regular forum in which to explore this muddy, moving terrain.

In the months I have been working on this project, I kept returning to a poem about God by Yehuda Halevi, the Spanish physician who died in 1141. It's called "Where Will I Find You?" and asks, "who could fail/to search for you?"

Maybe, I thought, when we fail to search, we fail. Here's my favorite stanza:

I sought your nearness. With all my heart I called you. And in my going out to meet you, I found you coming toward me.

Does God punish us?



It's hard to watch God's wrath and not feel alienated.

God's punishments in the Torah seem disproportionate. He drowns all of humanity soon after creating us; orders thousands killed for building the Golden Calf; and opens the earth to swallow rebels who question Moses' authority in the desert. I can't square those scorched-earth rebukes – not to mention the coronavirus? – with a loving God.

But when I spoke to Rabbi David Wolpe, who heads the largest Conservative synagogue west of the Mississippi, he rejected entirely the idea that God punishes.

Wolpe, 61, a nationally known author and speaker whom I met in 2007 at a conference called "Why Be Jewish?," said the image of a punitive God is from a Biblical time that no longer applies. He suggested that God had to start out as a tougher parent so that a nascent people could absorb the rules; once we learned them, we were free to be ethical – or not.

Today's God, Wolpe said, is not a punisher – and did not orchestrate the pandemic. Today we have a different divinity, which asks more of us.

The first of Wolpe's eight books, published in 1990, was "The Healer of Shattered Hearts: A Jewish View of God.", He told me he wrote it "entirely because I came out of a Jewish religious tradition where nobody ever talked about God."

"Partly because when we talk about God in English, it sounds Christian – we can't help it; English is a Christian language," Wolpe explained in our interview. "So when you say 'faith' or 'grace' or 'love,' they all sound Christian.

"I came from a Jewish tradition that didn't talk about God, and it used to drive me nuts because this is what we're supposed to be built on," he added. "And it's still true. For most non-Orthodox Jews, that is still not the conversation most of them want to have."

That gets to why I embarked on this project: in two decades of writing about Jewish practice and identity, I had rarely touched on the divine. Whenever I talked about my own book, "My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew,", people asked why it was more focused on ritual than God.

When I invited Rabbi Wolpe to send a text to elucidate his take on whether and how God punishes, he chose a passage from the Book of Kings (19:11-13). It's one I've long favored because of its poetry. And because its idea rings true – that God would appear not in storms, but in stillness.

And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and

strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire, a still small voice.

The passage has become a refrain in my head and inspired the title this project Still Small Voice. In it, I explore 18 questions about God with 18 Jewish thinkers.

My conversation with Wolpe follows, edited for clarity and length.

'That's a very mechanical and small god'

Rabbi David Wolpe: The reason that I go to that text is because what the reader expects is that God is going to be in the earthquake and fire, God is going to be in the huge public, crushing demonstrations, because that's how God appeared throughout most of the Torah. But the Hebrew – *"kol d'mama daka"*– means the thin voice of silence. I think the text is preparing us for how God is going to function in our lives now: these soft voices in conscience, in whispers, not in grand gestures.

Abigail Pogrebin: But how do we look at those grand gestures and not say God is a punishing God?

DW: You can go through the entire Jewish tradition from beginning to end and find God's punishments. I see it as an earlier understanding of the way God works.

In the same way that it starts with children, you have to do the punishment part so that people's ethical intuitions will be trained. But once they are trained, then you have to step back and say, "OK, now you know what you're supposed to do. Go do it."

And then the essence of your connection to God is in relationship, not in goodies that God dispenses from the sky. Even if they're really important goodies.

AP: Like what?

DW: Like someone who says, "God, please heal my sick mother," and the mother dies. And then they say, "I don't believe in God anymore." What kind of God did they believe in? They believed in a God who, if you say *the right words the right way* does what you want. That's a very mechanical and small God.

AP: So then where's the big God? If you're saying God is not punishing us – not causing someone to live or die depending on behavior – where is God's power?

DW: God's power is in the ability of human beings. And to some extent, I suppose, in the natural process to work for healing. In the way that God has set up the world and how you can still relate to God and draw strength from God.

I remember when I was treated for cancer in the hospital and all these rabbis were telling me they were saying *Mi Shebeirach* for me, and I was really grateful; it did give me strength. But I did not believe for a second that God would look down and say, "You know, no one's praying for that other patient in Bed 4, so he can succumb to cancer, but Wolpe's got a bunch of people praying for him, so I'm going to save Wolpe." I'm putting it crudely, but that's the theology behind it.

'I believe deeply in randomness'

AP: So you don't believe that God is mapping out who's rewarded or punished.

DW: I believe deeply in randomness. The reason that I do is, first of all, from observation. As the Rabbis put it, the righteous man suffers and the wicked man prospers. We know that your deeds don't control your fate in this world, and the Talmud says that in several different iterations.

At a certain point I realized that randomness was the only way you could construct a world if you wanted to achieve goodness.

AP: Why does goodness require randomness?

DW: Because when people ask, "Why don't good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people?" –what they're wishing for is a world that's built like a Skinner box, where if you do good, you get rewarded, if you do bad, you get punished. In such a world, everyone would do good, but it wouldn't be real goodness.

If every time I stole, I was going to get a disease, I would never steal. Not because I thought stealing was wrong, but because I thought it was dangerous to me. But the definition of a good act is to do something *without knowing what the consequences will be to you*.

AP: We should do good simply because we believe in goodness.

DW: Right – not because I know that if I give money to *tzedakah*, God's going to prevent me from getting Covid. So much of religion is built on almost a child-like level of religiosity – "if you do this, you get a cookie. If you do that, you have to go to bed early." But at a certain point, you hope that children reach the stage where they'll do it for the intrinsic reason.

When people say, "God did *this* because I did *that*," what they're basically doing is destroying the possibility of genuine human goodness. So if you ask me, "Does God punish?" my answer is no. God doesn't work that way.

I think that it makes much more sense to think that God creates a world in which you can turn to God for guidance, encouragement, for strength.

So I see God's power in the natural processes of the world and through human beings, too. But I don't think that God supernaturally reaches down to take out tumors or quell viruses.

'When a crisis comes along, we're really tested'

AP: So what's happening with God right now? Should we even be talking about God in this pandemic? Is there any kind of God presence here?

DW: Yes. In the sense that, we are called upon to be both witnesses and healers. And that call is from God.

AP: How should we answer it?

DW: The way in which we react to this crisis determines our faith and how much we want to realize God's mission in this world. We know day to day how we ought to live–at least in broad outlines. But when a crisis comes along, we're really tested.

And that's when you find out the extent to which your relationship to God has actually shaped the way you act in this world, whether you really believe that other creations – other human beings – are in God's image too, and whether you really have a responsibility to them.

AP: Why do you think rabbis don't talk more readily about God?

DW: Because the Jewish tent is broader without it. I never said it that way before now, but I think that's why. Because without God, you can include the people who love Israel but don't believe in God; you can include the people who love Jews but don't believe in God; and the people who haven't walked into a synagogue for years and never thought about God but still feel Jewish.

AP: Can a Judaism without God sustain itself?

DW: No. Because we are a religious family. That's our raison d'etre. We have this mission, and this relationship with God throughout history. And that's why we're here.

'If you don't like the word God, I understand that'

AP: What do you say to the person who says, "I'm sort of a literalist, and when I see breathtaking things or I feel moved, I don't know why I would put the word 'God' to that – that seems like an arbitrary label."

DW: Here's what I would say: The world is not really divided between believers and nonbelievers, but between materialists and non-materialists. Either you think the world is only *stuff*, everything is chemicals – we're made only of synapses – or you think spiritual realities are real – there's something about a soul that makes your heart sing, there's a mystery at the heart of the universe.

If you believe that those spiritual realities are real, then you believe in some source of those realities, whatever you want to call that source. If you don't like the word God, I understand that, but you're on the religious side if you believe that there's more to this world than stuff.

AP: And the idea that rationalists want some proof of God's existence?

DW: Ultimately, the proof is in presence. And if you feel God's presence, that's your proof. It says in Proverbs: "The fool says in his heart, 'there is no God.' It doesn't say it in his head. It says it in his heart, because that's where you feel God or don't feel God."

AP: So you either have it or don't.

DW: No, you can cultivate it – like an appreciation for music or art. I'm not intrinsically a religious person. I cultivated that sense in myself. I really believe that. There are some people who have told me they've never doubted God. They are born with that talent, just like some people are born with perfect pitch. That's not me. I have to work at it.

Does God's gender matter?

I have always thought of God as male. That's no eureka, considering the language in our liturgy, Torah and commentaries–God is "King,""Father," "He," "Him," "His."

My mother, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, was raised in a fairly observant home in 1950s Queens, and later became one of the early advocates of more egalitarian Jewish practice and leadership (and a co-founder of Ms. Magazine). When she challenges me as to why I'm so sure God is male, I admit I don't respond well. I'm good with my God as is. That may be lazy or retrograde on my part, but it's hard to change one's mental picture of the divine.

But Mom did have a point when she suggested I ask clergy how – or if –they talk about God's gender, as part of this series for which I have spent months asking 18 Jewish thinkers about God.

Rabbi David Ingber told me he was interested in tackling this question when I approached him for an interview. His approach to God's gender widened the lens to suggest that God appears not as exclusively male or female, but as both and neither. God tells us to look for the divine in everyone and everything.

I often say, "I knew Rabbi David Ingber when," because years before he founded his immensely popular spiritual community, Romemu, in Manhattan, he played ice hockey in a league with my brother, who accidentally broke the future rabbi's nose with a puck.

Every time I interview Ingber for a story, he manages to brush the cobwebs off an ancient verse, but this time he stumps me. At least at first. The text he sends before our interview, (I ask each teacher to choose one) is a midrash, or rabbinic commentary, from the 6th century, in which a sage known as Rab Kahana analyzes the First Commandment: "I am the Lord, your God."

Kahana suggests that when God asserts, "I am the Lord," it's to clarify not only that God is *one*, but God is *all*. We should not assume the Lord takes one shape or is found in just one place.

Ingber builds on Kahana's analysis: if the Lord our God has multiple iterations, the Lord is therefore not one gender at all times.

It's not because of some feminist principle that Ingber seems to suggest this, though he's known for an egalitarian approach to traditional observance. Instead, Ingber says that asking whether God is male or female is the wrong question. God takes any form you need God to take. And the midrash gives us permission to find – or feel – God in whatever form speaks to us.

I relate to that idea. I've experienced a sense of God showing up in myriad interactions, and sometimes not in a person at all, but in a place, a gathering, an instant.

Our conversation is below, edited for clarity and length.

'God is the elephant in the room'

Rabbi David Ingber: Even though God is in every synagogue service or ritual event in Jewish life, God is the elephant in the room. We come at God as a given, but we try to sidestep God in a way – by talking about values or morality or whatever it is. The God question is one that Christians or Muslims are more comfortable having a conversation about.

Abigail Pogrebin: In your 20 years as a rabbi, don't people ask you about God all the time?

DI: I think that people mostly avoid the question. And for good reason. Jewish history has been both a testimony to the deep impact of God – and the God idea – on the Jewish people, but also a testimony to the unrelenting trauma of believing in a God who disappoints you over and over again.

I think that we all have a kind of 'Post Traumatic God Disorder' – or PTGD – and that's the reason why I love this 6th Century text: because it allows a kind of opening up of a limiting belief or construct.

AP: And that 'limiting construct' for God is what many Jews absorbed in childhood – God as a male, all-powerful, often-punishing, unrelatable king in the heavens or something like that?

DI: Yes. One of the ways to heal Post-Traumatic God Disorder is to ask a fundamental question: What is God and how do I know that? Where did I learn that? How am I going to maybe think about this differently? Why didn't I think about it differently before?

AP: And if a cautionary voice in our heads tells us we're straying too far off the reservation to think about God as anything but the most conventional imagery?

DI: Here is an ancient, authentic, subversive, powerful traditional text that explores and also explodes the idea of whether or not we ever really know who or what God might be. It says God can be so many things you never thought of. This is the excerpt:

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 teacher 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: I am Adonai your God.

The fact is, R. Hiyya bar Abba said, that God appeared to them in a guise appropriate to each and every place and time.

AP: *You see me in many guises….*

DI: Exactly. My teacher, Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi – one of the greatest theologians of 20th-century American Jewish life – would often say that we human beings have a paucity of root metaphors when we think about God.

'What's the root metaphor for God?'

AP: Root metaphors?

DI: Essentially that there's no way for us to talk about God without borrowing metaphors from some of our own experience. Even when we try our best to do without any image of God whatsoever, we'll still use a borrowed metaphor from human language, like 'nothingness.'

We're constantly using human language to describe God or no God. And so the question is: What's the root metaphor for God? When we say 'God is King,' that's a difficult root metaphor for many of us because we don't have the experience any longer of what royalty feels like.

AP: What other metaphors have you seen people apply to the divine?

DI: God as CEO. God as sibling. God as mother; it's not literally that God is a mother, but it's figuratively borrowed in order to give us some experience that we

might draw from. On Friday nights we call God *yedid nefesh* – beloved of my soul. God as dear friend.

AP: So this text encourages us to see God wearing many hats.

DI: Or faces. It actually invites us to imagine even more ways that we might relate to what God is, what God's gender might be.

This beautiful text says, 'Don't come to any false conclusions about me. I am the same one who was at the sea and the same one that was at Sinai.'

'Will the real God please stand up?'

AP: Let's backtrack to the reason for this midrash in the first place. How does it explain the First Commandment?

DI: Why would the first thing God tell the people of Israel be, *I am the Lord your God?* There must be a hidden reason. The rabbis are imagining a God who is really concerned that the people not be confused by the polymorphic nature of God. Will the real God please stand up?

So this text is decidedly trying to say, 'I appear in multiple places, in different ways, but they're all me.' God is saying, 'You can see me as your aunt or uncle, your father or mother. You can see me as a God who at one time feels like a stern disciplinarian and another time feels as a loving, compassionate comforter. All of these faces are legitimate expressions of who I am.'

AP: What do you say when your congregants can't find a metaphor that brings God closer?

DI: I have sat with people who say, 'Listen, I didn't have a good father. So when I think of God-the-Father, all I can think about are the Torah images of God being stern, aloof, distant and cold. So how do I import a new root metaphor, a new image for me?' Everyone has their roadblocks.

AP: How did you get over one of yours?

DI: For many years I worked with shifting God's gender around. I felt like it was yoga for my soul. The same way that when I'm doing a yoga posture, I'm brought to the edge of my muscle's capacity to strain and stretch, I felt that my theological muscles were strained for me to relate to God as a woman and mother.

AP: Why was it important for you to push yourself to see God as another gender?

DI: I began to explore all kinds of assumptions and feelings I have because of relating to God as a man all of these years. When I shifted the gender, I also shifted my experience of what God could feel like for me.

AP: I think for many people, they want the bottom line: does God exist or not, is God a being or not, male or female? This text says that's a fool's errand; there's a mutability to God.

DI: That's a beautiful word for it.

AP: And you're suggesting that our spirituality might expand if we didn't try to pin God down.

DI: If the only God that you allow is *one* of these faces, then you will be frustrated by reality. And in some way you will say, "I'm not going to find God in *that* face." We're trying to expand people's capacity to have theological uncertainty for the sake of a more mature relationship to reality.

'I feel that God's with me all the time'

AP: Can you apply this to the pandemic we're living through right now? If someone feels that God is not appearing, is there a way that you say, 'Look again'?

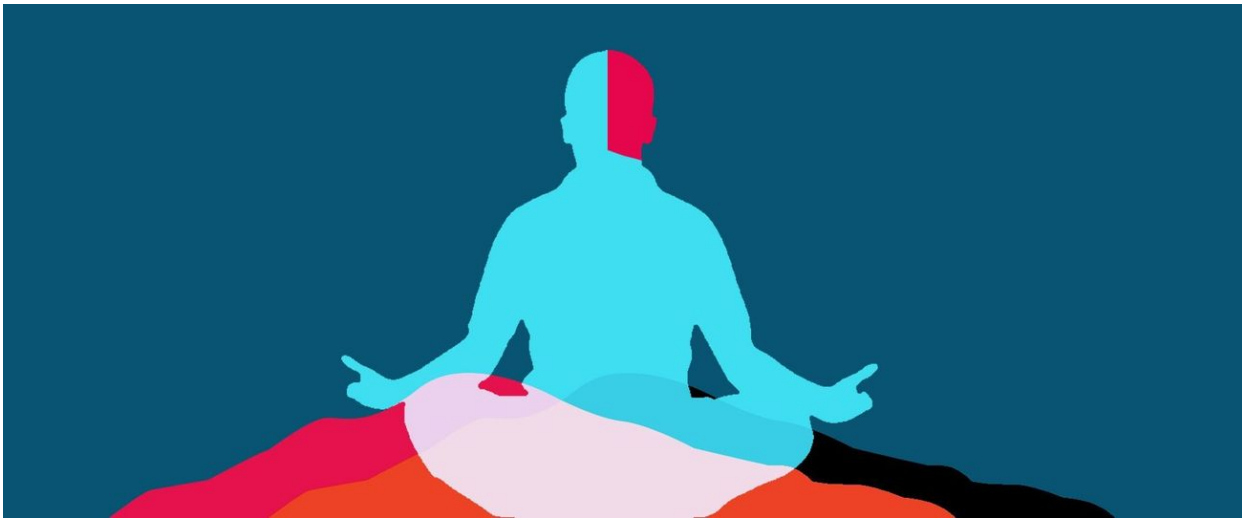
DI: Sure. You know that song, "Looking for love in all the wrong places. Looking for love in all the wrong faces"? I believe that can be applied to looking for God in all the right places, looking for God in *all* of the faces.

There's an invitation now to see God where you might not have looked. If the midrash were being written today, it would be something like this: "Because God appeared as the healthcare worker, because God appeared as the patient and also the doctor."

You might think that all of those are different faces, but it's just God saying, "It's me. I come in the form – the *partzuf* [divine visage] – of the one who suffers and the one who is healing. I am with the one who is alone and scared. I am with the one who is at great risk, showing up."

I feel that God's with me all the time. Even in the most horrific moments, I feel that God is with me. And I think that's a gift that no one should be deprived of because of a really bad teacher or a really limited vocabulary for God.

Is the word 'God' the hurdle?



It feels like a radioactive proposition – that the word "God" might be the obstacle to connecting to God. The mere suggestion that more Jews might feel divinity if there was no label attached to it makes me quake slightly at the predictable outcry.

But then I pause and consider the argument. The word or idea of God as a *being* , decider, punisher or rewarder – does alienate many Jews who have decided the God of Torah feels antiquated, patriarchal, punitive, irrelevant to their lives. What some rabbis say is more relatable is defining God as divine presence – felt in our blessings and in a recognition that every person is created equally, connected to, and therefore responsible for, each other.

The question of what to call God, or how that vocabulary can be a stumbling block for many Jews, is one of 18 questions I put to 18 Jewish thinkers for this project, Still Small Voice. In a surreal year of pandemic, protests and politics, many of us are asking such questions anew.

Rabbi Laura Geller, 70, has always been direct, even as she is serene – a rare combination. She's perhaps even more candid since she retired four years ago as senior rabbi of the large Reform congregation Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, which she led for 22 years. [She was only the third woman to be ordained in the Reform movement and one of the first women ever to head a major metropolitan synagogue when she was hired in 1994.]

There were several moments in our conversation when I felt it important to remind Geller that we were speaking for publication, and that Orthodox Jews may chafe at her assertions. But I was, refreshingly, dismissed; she assured me that these views are not as controversial as I fear.

Our conversation is below, edited for clarity and length.

'People have experiences that are not intellectual'

Rabbi Laura Geller: Why use the word "God" at all? If I could get rid of that word, I would.

Abigail Pogrebin: That's a big thing for a rabbi to say.

LG: I think that when people say, 'I don't believe in God,' what they mean is, 'I don't believe that there's a man sitting in the sky with a beard who decides who is going to live and die.' I don't believe in that, either. I do believe that there is this divinity, this connectedness, this transcendence, this aliveness that animates me and the world. And if I pay attention to that aliveness and stay awake, I believe I will have a life that's more rich and meaningful and will maybe be part of the

world's repair.

AP: So the better question is what divinity do we feel – and act upon, rather than what God do we believe in?

LG: The question is, 'How do you *experience* God?' not, 'Do you believe in God?'

AP: What does it mean to 'experience God'?

LG: If you ask people whether they believe in God, they often say, 'No.' But if you say, 'Tell me a story of when you had an experience of something that transcends you, of oneness,' then people will tell you what it's like when they're in nature, or gave birth, or first saw the tulips bloom in Amsterdam. People have experiences that are not intellectual. It's different from belief.

AP: Can you explain oneness?

'We're all connected; to ignore that is like cutting off your own arm'

LG: It's me realizing that I am connected to every other living being. The best metaphor is the one I learned from my meditation teacher, Sylvia Boorstein, at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. She suggested that we are all on an airplane going through turbulence, and at that moment, you're connected to – and even love – everybody else on the plane, because we're all experiencing the same turbulence.

And that is a heart-opening realization: I am not different from you. It isn't about me and my story; it's about the connectedness. I think that's what the *Shema* prayer is about. "*Shema* -– Listen." It starts with me: Listen, Israel! It's not referring to the country, Israel, but the people Israel.

But really it's addressed to each of us: Listen, Laura. Listen, Abby. It goes on: *Adonai* (this name we can't even say) is our God, is only one. Not in the sense that there could be two or three gods, but that there is only oneness.

And look at the first of the Ten Commandments: I am the Lord, your God. God – or divinity– is saying: There is oneness. If you actually get that, then of course you're not going to betray or murder somebody, you're not going to ignore someone who is hurting. Because we're all connected. To ignore that is like cutting off your own arm.

AP: So God is our connectedness or oneness, instead of God being some divine commander-in-chief.

LG: Yes. That place of interconnectedness is, for me, what it means to see God's face in the face of other people. We're all the same and we're all connected. We have to be reminded of that.

AP: And when we're reminded of our shared humanity, we're reminded of our shared responsibility?

LG: Absolutely. Part of being alive right now is to tell the truth of all that is happening: the pandemic, the fear, the systemic racism – telling the truth about that is part of being awake.

AP: You sent me a text that underscores the idea that the focus of spiritual practice is alertness.

LG: Yes, from Nishmat in the morning service: "YHVH [the unwriteable word for God] neither slumbers nor sleeps. God arouses those who sleep and awakens those who slumber." God or Divinity is the power that helps me stay awake, to pay attention, to be grateful.

'We have to do things in the world'

AP: It feels like a recurring Jewish idea that it's not enough to sit back with our blessings and be thankful; we actually have to do something. Does that fit into your construction of divinity?

LG: Yes – it makes a claim on me to make the world better, to make all this real. This is why the second quote I sent you – by Heschel – was so important:

"Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision."

AP: How would you define the vision?

LG: We have to do things in the world – *"Aleinu"* – it is on us to repair the world. That's what that prayer essentially is saying. There's no question that that is

essential to the Jewish story, what it means to be Jewish.

AP: So is there any kind of divine eye watching us to make sure we do our part? Is there some sense of being accountable to something, if not someone?

LG: There's a sense of being accountable because you and I are the same. I am accountable to you because if you are suffering, so am I. It isn't that some commander is making a claim.

For example, I'm a mother; I respond to my children not because somebody is saying I have to respond to them, but because they make a claim on me. I love them, and therefore I respond to them. I don't respond to them because somebody is judging me. So is somebody watching me and making me accountable? No. Am I accountable? Yes.

AP: But if God is not judging or deciding, and if divinity is found not in God but in each other, then what or who are we praying to?

LG: We're not praying to anything. I pray not to a God that answers me, but I pray as a spiritual practice. I have to ask myself how I treat other people, how do I deal with my children or mourn my husband? It's not a God who answers my prayer.

AP: But that frame is all over our liturgy – that we petition God for things.

LG: Right. And that is the big problem.

AP: So how do we get past the liturgy?

LG: Good question: How do we get past the liturgy? The problem with Jewish prayer is the prayer book, the images of God that got put into the traditional prayer book where other images didn't. They get in the way.

'I do not take prayer literally; I take prayer seriously.'

AP: Can you give me an example of an included liturgy that is a hurdle for people?

LG: The most perfect example is the *Unetanetokef* liturgy –who will live and who will die. If I had one prayer that in some ways I wish I could take that out of the Yom Kippur liturgy, it would be that one. Because Yom Kippur is the day that most Jews in my community come to shul, and if that's the only time they meet God – who shall live and who shall die – then no wonder people have a lot of trouble with God.

I have given many sermons about the *Unetanetokef* liturgy: It doesn't mean that God is going to punish you. It does mean you're going to die someday, and you need to think about the meaning of your life.

I think part of why meditation has become more important in Jewish tradition is because silence is probably a way better way to connect to divinity than through liturgical texts that are so problematic. But we're stuck with them because of our historical tradition and there's something powerful when I say prayers that my great grandparents said, or when I recite the same prayers in my synagogue that you're reciting in yours.

AP: What about the *Kol Nidre* prayer – All our vows are cancelled?

LG: *Kol Nidre* has meaningless words– what is that about? It's about this: the choices that you make matter. But you can't take it literally, or you'll end up being very angry…I do not take prayer literally; I take prayer seriously.

AP: You wrote a sermon in which you basically said that when you are no longer the senior rabbi, you're going to go to the meditation service at Temple Emanuel as opposed to the main High Holy Day service.

LG: Yes, because silence does not get in my way, whereas sometimes the liturgical metaphors do.

AP: I imagine some of what you're saying will get a lot of observant Jews riled up.

LG: Yeah. They will. But that's okay. I don't begrudge people having different views.

AP: I imagine some would ask, how can you be a rabbi? You're not talking about the God of our books.

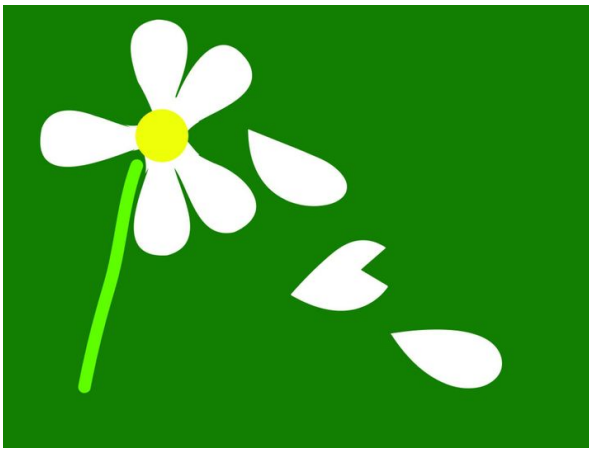
LG: I would say, 'Well, let's talk about the God of our books. Which book?' The God of the Hebrew Bible is

different from the God of the Rabbinic tradition, which is very different from the Kabbalistic tradition, which is very different from the Neo-Hasidic tradition. I honestly can't believe that other folks that you're interviewing, aren't actually saying some of these things.

AP: Yes, they're agreeing that God is not a being, but they seem more inclined to justify what's actually on the prayer page.

LG: Well, I'm not. But I don't want to get rid of what's on the page completely because one of the ways I stay awake is through Torah study. So it's in reckoning with all of this, even in this conversation with you, that I'm staying awake.

Does God love us?



Does God love you? That sounds like a question that Texas televangelist Joel Osteen would shout out to his megachurch. It doesn't ring in the ears as a particularly Jewish query.

But the idea that God is a loving God is in our tradition, loud and clear, even if it's not heard in the vernacular of most synagogue homilies or congregational newsletters.

I'd wager that the concept of God's love in Judaism is not crystal clear to most Jews – what divine "love" means according to our texts and ancient teachers, how we should feel God's love if we don't.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, senior rabbi of Central Synagogue in Manhattan – and the congregation where I was privileged to be president from 2015 to 2018 – wanted to tackle this question. I had hesitated before including Rabbi Buchdahl in this series,"Still Small Voice: 18 Questions about God," because it's daunting to try to encapsulate the theology of one's own rabbi.

I also admit that I have little journalistic distance when it comes to Angela (which is what I call her after 15 years of being in each other's lives), because in so many stirring, specific, private ways, she is responsible for my finally finding my Jewish home.

Though it risks hyperbole, I know many other Central members will agree that Angela, who is 48, helps us

feel God's love – when she's on the pulpit, in the classroom, under the chuppah and at every shiva. It's hard not to feel God's presence when she's singing (she's also an ordained, revered cantor) or when she's walking any of us through a difficult time.

That doesn't make God's love a simple idea. It just makes it accessible as a real possibility when it might otherwise have felt remote.

Our conversation is below, edited for clarity and length.

'I just felt that God loved me and I loved God back'

Abigail Pogrebin: Why did this question – does God love us? – speak to you?

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: I guess because my experience of a relationship with God is as a loving God. And when I think about the most powerful idea about belief or faith, it's this idea that we are unconditionally loved by God.

AP: How is God's love unconditional?

AB: Because we are all children of God, without having to earn it. Without having to create or do anything, just by virtue of God having helped create us, there's a sense of investment, that we are just loved.

I will acknowledge that you can find places in the Torah where God's love feels conditional – where God essentially says, "Do this, and then you will be blessed," or, "If you don't do this, you will be cursed." But even that is, I think, an explanation of actions and consequences more than it is that ultimately God does or doesn't love us.

AP: Where in the Bible do we see God's love described explicitly?

AB: Maybe most powerfully in the Song of Songs in Ketuvim (Writings). In some ways, it is ridiculous that it made it into our canon because it reads like love poetry from an erotic relationship. But our rabbis called it the Holy of Holies of the entire Hebrew Bible because they saw this text as the greatest descriptor of our relationship – Israel's relationship – with God: one of love, even romantic love.

AP: You just reminded me that the covenant at Sinai is sometimes described using wedding language.

AB: Right. Our brit, our covenant with God, is, in a sense, like a *ketubah* [marriage contract]. And there's even language in Hosea (in Prophets) – *"v'erastich li"* – which echoes marriage between us and God: "I will betroth you to me forever, I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice and in loving kindness." (Hosea 2:21)

Those same words are said when you wrap the tefillin around your middle finger three times; you're literally putting a triple wedding ring on your finger when you recite it.

AP: Are you personally comfortable with the language of a "loving God"?

AB: Yes. From a very young age, I just felt that God loved me and I loved God back. I know that sounds very strange, but I was in relationship – a kind of constant dialogue – with God. I looked up at the sky and felt as if God made all these beautiful things so that I could enjoy them; I knew they weren't just for me, but I also felt a little bit that they were created for me, as if that's just one of the ways that God loves me.

I had very loving parents and that undoubtedly helped shape my feelings about a loving God. My mother was very spiritual, even though she had a very different vocabulary since she wasn't Jewish. She helped me feel what was magical and transcendent in the world around me.

On my own, I started a daily prayer practice every night before I went to bed. That was my way of checking in with God every night. While I did not actually believe, if you pressed me, that God watched over me or my sister, parents or grandmother in a direct way, even as a little kid I understood that part of what I was doing was maybe accessing whatever was divine within me.

I really did believe that there's a little spark – we're all created in God's image – and this nightly prayer was a chance to ask God to protect the people I loved.

AP: That's not every youngster's path – to create a prayer practice unprompted.

AB: I know it sounds kind of crazy. No one told me I had to pray at night before I went to bed. I just felt like, "I want to call God now."

'That's how you know that we love you'

AP: Let's go to the texts you chose to focus on – the two prayers that sandwich the *Shema*.

AB: The Shema prayer is surrounded by love. Before we say the *Shema* (our core avowal of faith), we recite *Ahavat Olam*(eternal love) or Ahava Rabba (great love) – a kind of revelation prayer. And then right after the *Shema* is the *V'ahavta* prayer (and you shall love).

In general terms, I would say the *Ahavat Olam* describes the way God loves us, and the *V'ahavta* prayer describes the way we love God back.

And what's interesting is to look at the text of *Ahavat Olam*, and see what it says God gave us in love. "How great is your love? You love us by..." and the list follows. You might predict it would enumerate gifts like, "You gave us the world, creation, our life," etc. Right? No. How does God love us? By giving us Torah, commandments, laws.

That's not the first thing you would imagine: "God, You love us so much, you gave us *rules*." But that's essentially what it says. And I think it's incredibly powerful.

AP: Rules are love?

AB: When I think about the people who love me the most in the world – my parents, they gave me life, food, a beautiful home to sleep in. But what they really gave me was guideposts.

They essentially said, "Here are the laws that can make you the most elevated human being you can be. This is how you are going to realize your potential. Here are the rules so that you actually treat people the best possible way." That is what people who love you the most do.

AP: I don't want to take the parent/child metaphor too far, but don't kids have to love parents back for this to work in the long run? Or at least feel reciprocal respect so the laws aren't just obligatory.

AB: Exactly – that's the brit. It has to be covenantal and mutual in that sense. That is exactly what the *V'ahavta* is about. Right after the *Shema*, what does the liturgy say? "Well God, WE love YOU back.

"How great is our love for you? What are we going to do to show it or prove it? We're going to teach your laws to our children. We're going to talk about your laws when we wake up, when we go to sleep, on the way; we're going to write them on our doorpost, inscribe them on our heart and head.

We're going to do all of these things and pass them onto the next generation, God. That's how you know that we love you."

'Our tradition values action more'

AP: What do these two prayers say about love in Judaism?

AB: Neither of these prayers is about a feeling. Both are about action – loving, direct actions that we take. "Loving" is a verb here in the Torah. "V'ahavta" is in the command form: "you shall love." Which is kind of an amazing thing – because how can you command a feeling? Well, you can command the loving action.

I think too often we think of love as this ephemeral emotion, but our tradition values action more.

AP: How does this love extend beyond people we know – to loving our neighbor or the stranger?

AB: Again, it's not a command to love your neighbors with an emotional feeling. It's more direct in terms of how you should then act towards them. Are you treating them the way they would want to be treated, not doing what is hateful to them?

AP: Why does God love us? Why are we worthy of that love, or why does God have that disposition to love us? Is that chiefly because God created us? What's the driver?

AB: Well this betrays my own view of humanity, but I think we're pretty lovable. I think human beings are capable of such beautiful acts of courage, joyfulness, creativity, resilience and strength. I'm constantly amazed by what human beings can do. But I don't think that's the reason God loves us.

God loves us because you just love your creation. That's how we're built. Think about how you feel about your children. When they were first born, they didn't have to do a thing; you just felt overwhelming investment and attachment. I think that God is invested in us in that way.

'We are chosen for a particular mission'

AP: I can hear skeptics saying that these days, humanity is not exactly emulating God's love for each other.

AB: It's true; the way people are treating each other right now is not loving. And I don't mean the way they feel, although I see there's a lot of venom and suspicion of people who think differently, but I'm talking about the actions people are doing – canceling each other, ascribing the worst intentions to people.

That, to me, is the opposite of love. There is a sense in my mind of a model that God gives – for love – which we should be emulating. We should be asking, 'What are loving actions?'

AP: Finally, since you and I are talking soon after the summer's racial reckoning, I want to venture into tricky territory and talk about God's love when it comes to Jews of color.

I know you identify as a Jew of color yourself and have said publicly that the Jewish community has lagged in our embrace of those among us who are of mixed race, adopted, or converted. Do you think the rebuff that some Jews of color experience translates to feeling that God might love some Jews more than others?

AB: I think when you have a concept, as Judaism does, of a chosen people that has some special relationship, as a tribe, with God, then if you don't feel fully part of that peoplehood – perhaps because you have one parent who's not Jewish, or because you were adopted or converted in – if you don't feel secure in terms of being 100% a part of "The People," you can question whether or not you are loved by God in the way The Chosen People, or the *Am Segula*, the Treasured People – are loved.

My understanding of "chosen people" is that we are chosen for a particular mission, not chosen to be better, but chosen to be the exemplified other and stranger.

And if you choose to be Jewish and tie yourself to that mission, how much more do you understand it – what it is to be the one who is the stranger, the spurned – than one who has experienced that personally? So I think that what Jews of Color bring is vitally important to this conversation.

AP: Are you comfortable sharing if there were times you personally felt less loved by the Jewish community, if not by God?

AB: Sure. I would say that in those moments when I felt completely rejected by the Jewish community, there were a few people – rabbis and teachers – who felt like God's angels along the way. And had they not embraced me, accepted me, in specific instances when I felt discounted, I'm not sure I could have stayed in it.

I remember I was in a particularly hard place while I was still in college, and I went on a walk with an Orthodox rabbi and just asked him plainly, "Do you think I'm a Jew?" And he explained why his answer was 100% yes and then said, "Angela, don't ever doubt it."

It felt so important –to have this Orthodox, male rabbi, whom I thought was the most learned and charismatic teacher I'd met up until that point, affirm my Jewishness. So to all those dismissive people in my college Hillel who were rejecting me, I wanted to say, "Well, guess what? This wise rabbi thinks I'm a Jew."

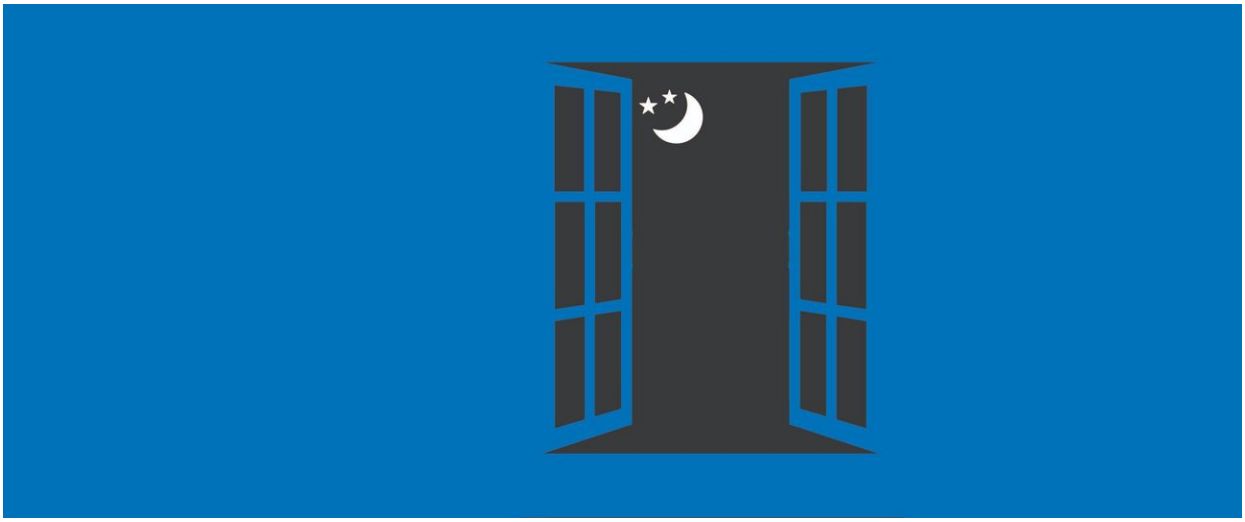
And another rabbi I met a conference when I was 21 – I asked him about conversion and patrilineal descent, and it was the conversation that enabled me to feel ready to have a conversion.

I had rejected the idea for years, feeling like it would be a cop-out and would negate all of my Jewish life before, but it was the moment when he said, "We see this rite of passage as the highest affirmation of your Jewishness. Conversion is a Christian term; it sounds like you're converting from something you were to something completely different. But Jews have always seen this as affirming the Jewish soul that you always had in you."

Suddenly, when he said that, I felt, "Yes. I'm just affirming the Jewish soul I always had." It's not about saying that in the 21 years of my life before that, I was not really a Jew. And when he helped frame that for me – thank God for that.

So there have been people who expressed God's love and God's acceptance into this peoplehood in a way that enabled me to be here and become a Jewish leader. It made all the difference.

What if we don't believe that God exists (but really wish we did)?



When I embarked in March on a project asking rabbis and scholars to help me unpack common questions about God, I started by making a list of those questions that I hear most often from friends and readers, in synagogue and seminars, in my own head and heart.

Does God love us?

Is God good?

Is God less visible now?

I also invited each of my interview subjects to frame their own question. Rabbi Jason Rubenstein, chaplain and senior rabbi of the Hillel at Yale University, emailed me back right away: "What should we do if, in our heart of hearts, we don't believe that a being like God exists, but really wish we did?"

I had not considered that category: non-believers who wished they believed. This despite the fact that I'm a believer married to a non-believer who has often said that deep faith is appealing to him – but that he can't manufacture it.

I'd reached out to Rubenstein at the Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale – the campus Hillel whose board invited me to join its leadership two years ago – because I'd been a fan of Rubenstein's refreshing teaching years before he moved to New Haven. I had gotten to know him when he was on the faculty of Hadar, an independent institute of learning on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where I would occasionally go for lectures.

Rubenstein did not give me some easy elevator pitch to sell God to the non-believer. If I had to distill my takeaway from our conversation, it's this: a life of religion lies in the hope we hold deep in our hearts, even though we can't defend or even explain it.

That felt awfully slippery to me at first: the idea that non-believers who want to believe can find God in a stubborn dream for utopia.

The Talmudic text Rubenstein chose to help explain his approach is from Pesikta de-Rav Kahana (Mandelbaum) 19). It likens stalwart optimism to a lover's faith. It's a story from ancient Rabbinic commentary about a romantic marriage that takes an abrupt turn when the husband leaves the wife without explanation.

The wife is despairing. After years of absence, every friend tells her to give up on her husband, but instead she re-reads his love letters and his marriage vows, and regains her faith in him. One day he suddenly returns home and says, "I can't believe you waited for me."

Our conversation is below, edited for clarity and length.

'The evidence is on the side of the skeptics'

Abigail Pogrebin: How does your love story relate to our question?

Rabbi Jason Rubenstein: So, too, the Jewish people and God.

AP: You mean the wife is the Jewish people and the husband is God? In other words, God might disappear for a while, but really never leaves us and always returns?

JR: God brought us out of Egypt, God was there at Sinai, God fed us manna in the desert, God gave us the kings in Palestine, and then God disappears, right?

AP: Yes. God seems gone when both Temples are destroyed, when the Jews are exiled, when generations are persecuted…

JR: It's a long time being Jewish with a lot of suffering – many people died for being Jewish. And some people could say, "Look, it's not working. Assimilate. Leave it. Stop having this hope."

But we go back and we read the Torah and are able to hold out hope, and eventually when God comes back, the first thing God will say is, "I can't believe you waited for me."

AP: So faith is the belief that God comes back, that the story can have a buoyant ending?

JR: Everything runs counter to that, right? The evidence is on the side of the skeptics – the people who say, "This isn't worth it. This doesn't make sense. It's not a grown-up, responsible, clear-headed way to live." Giving up on God would have been the rational thing to do. The world as interpreted by a reasonable person living in it would not lead you to religion.

AP: So in the midst of so much hard history and disappointment, what leads a Jew to faith?

JR: It's actually against the disenchanted, broken-hearted backdrop of all the suffering that religious institutions and Judaism have a purpose, which is to be the kind of place that enables people to hope for something that they can't defend and maybe can't even explain, but is the most important dream of theirs.

'It's the dream of the hopeless romantic'

AP: Judaism helps us maintain hope in an unlikely dream? Can you make that more concrete?

JR: This is actually how I think about prayer – especially the second paragraph of the *Amidah* when we say God is healing the sick, raising up the downtrodden; or thanking God for restoring our souls to us after our deaths, with the hope of eternal life with those we love.

I don't recite those things because I think they're factually true about the world. I say them because they are the set of things that I dream of and long for, and I worry I might lose my ability to hope for them. So I try to repeat them every day.

AP: So people who don't believe in God but would like to – they can hold both the knowledge that the ideal isn't true and a faith that the ideal is possible.

JR: It's the dream of the hopeless romantic – to keep on being that hopeless romantic. Believing in the world as it should be. As you thought it would be. Because the world is going to take that away from you.

AP: It's like you're saying God is found in an insistent, almost childlike optimism that life experience can steal away.

JR: This Talmudic story captures being in a situation where you have a hazy memory of a halcyon time – maybe a pre-verbal memory of the world being a different place, back where your parents could pick you up and swing you around, answer every question and have superpowers.

AP: Our younger lens, when things seemed softer and solvable.

JR: Right. When you were young and you saw something wrong, you would say to yourself, "This is not the way things have to be. It's not the way they ought to be. I know that." There was a gut sense of injustice.

AP: But then you grow up and you realize those ideals and mini-outrages are a little naive.

JR: So how do you live with that? It's really hard because you could say, "Well, that was unrealistic. I was a Socialist in my 20s, and then I realized that's dumb. There's always going to be oppression and inequality. That's how human beings are."

AP: Or you could resolve to try to do something about those injustices.

JR: Well, that line of thinking is very influential in Jewish circles – the idea of saying, "I'm going to fix the world myself, or we are going to do it together. We are gonna get unemployment down to zero, we're going to decrease inequality."

AP: I get the sense you think that's the wrong approach – to think we have a role to play in balancing the scale?

'We're vulnerable. That's just how we are.'

JR: I do think it's important and we can each do a lot – humanity has done amazing things. But I also know that people often burn out. We actually *can't* fix it. Organizers and chaplains…we burn out.

So how can you go around the world – mostly as an operating, functional adult who cares about people – and say both?: "No, this is not the world as it should be and I'm going to try to fix it," and also: "I realize that maybe our collective powers aren't enough to remake the world into what it should be." And I just walk around with a sense of longing for a better reality that I maybe can't even fully imagine.

AP: And that longing is God? I'm not sure that's a selling point for Judaism. It's pretty grim. You're basically saying that God is in the place between the world we want and the world we have.

JR: Well, there is something grim about it. But I want to say something about the grimness, because I think it's important.

Often in psychological counseling, they teach you that people try to make sense of their bad situations by claiming a false sense of agency. For example, the reason I got mugged is because I turned down that alley, but if I had done something different, it would have been okay.

The idea that we really could control the world if we just did things differently is very comforting, but it's also not true. We're vulnerable. That's just how we are. We can't always make the right choices because we don't know what alley people are in.

And I think that there's something similarly misguided in our focus on improving the world as the primary mandate of Judaism; it's this reach for agency. Which is an attempt to deny or refute a deeper fear that maybe we really can't fix the world.

AP: So religion is that space for fantasy (the world as we wish it) and also reality (we can't fix the world). That rings true to me, even though it's a lot to download.

Just so I understand where you sit personally: can you tell me who or what is the God you believe in?

JR: I would say that my religious life happens in the chasm between the God I believe in and the God I dream of. One of the main ways that I turn to Judaism is to help me hold that chasm open against all the forces of this world – of loss and of rationalism – that wear away at me to give up the dream or fantasy as childish, unrealistic, or not helpful.

AP: And God appears to you in that chasm you keep describing?

JR: It's the voice that we hear when we're really in the brokenness, and also at weddings and births – the voice that makes audible and maybe visible the unbridgeable gap between the world as it is and the world as it could be.

Is God good?

Is God good? The question alone can feel like heresy. I've learned enough about Jewish theology to know that God's goodness is a tent pole for believers. And God is explained not only as being good, but as demanding good –from us.

Deuteronomy tells us to *do* good: we have to offer food to the stranger, the fatherless and the widow; "open our hands" to the poor; not shut our hearts against the needy; pursue justice.

But I also know the barriers to a belief that God is good. These hurdles exist not only in the tragedies, illnesses or injustices that hurt "good" people (which many believers contend God controlled). They also exist in our foundational text – the Torah itself.

Many struggle to find God's goodness in Genesis when God destroys all of humanity in a flood and zaps Aaron's sons when they offer the wrong kind of worship fire. In Exodus, three thousand Israelites are ordered killed because they built the Golden Calf.

I know it's simplistic to say that because God punishes harshly in the Torah, God's character is in question. And there's rabbinic thinking – ancient and current – that God evolved from such scorched-earth tactics, once it was clear the people learned right from wrong.

I have long believed personally in God's goodness; I see it in my daily blessings, our tradition's orientation towards gratitude, and the way the Torah and prophets remind us that piety is useless without doing good for others. But I have found it difficult to defend God when some ask that perennial question: if God is good, why do so many awful things happen?

Rabbi Adam Kligfeld started our interview on the subject by saying it helps to make it less absolute. "One of the ways I think of this question is not whether or not God is all good or all wretched," he explained, "but what is the Torah trying to tell us about the malleability of us and of God – the willingness to see one's own frailties and move through them?"

Kligfeld and I met on an educational trip to Israel in 2018, where we were in the same five-person discussion group. I admired then and since his almost Zen-like handling of hard questions: he pushed me intellectually – without being pushy.

As senior rabbi at Temple Beth Am in Los Angeles, a traditional Conservative synagogue, Kligfeld, 48, has introduced new modes of prayer, including niggunim – songs without words – meditation.

When I asked him to pick a text to help me understand his approach to God's goodness, he selected three:

God is good to all, and God's mercies are upon all of

God's creations. [Psalms 145:9]

Give thanks to God for God is good. [Psalms 136:1]

It is not good for a person to be alone. [Genesis 2:18]

Our conversation is below, edited for clarity and length.

'Goodness is the defeat of loneliness'

Abigail Pogrebin: When you talk about malleability, you're saying even God trips up – has moments of non-goodness – and learns, from humans, to "move through them," as you put it?

Rabbi Adam Kligfeld: For all of the Torah examples that you gave – where God seems to be ruthless, unloving, and uncaring, there are human interventions that show that the human condition can impact the divine condition.

And just as we're supposed to imitate God and we're commanded to love God – even before we necessarily see God loving us – there are instances of humans influencing God. Abraham, Moshe and others put a mirror up to God and say, "This is what you currently look like, God. Is this how you want to be?"

AP: So God and humans school each other in what it means to be good.

AK: If we see Torah as a core, human, anthropological text, with divine stuff in it, it could be a way of introducing us to a God that aims for goodness, that grows in God's own understanding of what is good – *tov* – and what is just and right, and both chastises humanity when we fail, and accepts chastisement from humanity when God's self is not where God ought to be.

AP: So what, very basically, is *tov*? What does it mean for God to be "good"?

AK: *Tov* is, among other things, an antidote to loneliness. In the second chapter of *Bereishit* [Genesis], we get to a wonderful verse, which seems to describe what *tov* might be: "*Lo tov heyot ha'adam levado*"; "It is not good for a person to be alone."

If we read it that way – that God's response to seeing Adam alone is to provide a companion – then the absence of that companion is not *tov*. Goodness is the defeat of loneliness.

AP: I might put that on my fridge: "Goodness is the defeat of loneliness."

AK: "*Lo tov*" – it is not *tov* to be alone means that it is *tov* to be with another. Or maybe even better: It is tov to help someone *else* be with another. And so perhaps when we say the verse in Psalms, "Give thanks to God, for God is good," another way of translating that is, "Give thanks to a God who is so committed to none of us being lonely."

AP: Does that mean God is a divine matchmaker?

AK: One of the ways that we embody God's tov is to make *shidduchim* [matches] and great friendships, bonds and partnerships. And also, in our relationship with God, we are existentially less lonely, because if we have a prayer-relationship, a study-relationship and a searching-relationship with God, then it may keep at bay and assuage some of the profound loneliness of what it means to be a human being.

AP: Before you go on, are you comfortable saying personally if your prayer life – or faith life – keeps loneliness at bay for you?

'I expect most from myself'

AK: I'm definitely comfortable answering, "Sometimes." I pray all the time. I get theological, philosophical and existential comfort from praying *sometimes*. And I'm okay with that.

I'll make it personal: I am married all the time. And I get direct, immediate benefit from that bond some of the time. That's not in any way an insult to my wife or my marriage. It's the fact that we engage in ongoing, long-term behaviors to make a relationship that produces, over time, a tremendous bulwark against loneliness. But it doesn't mean that every individual attempt is ecstatic.

So I expect nothing more from my God than from my wife and my marriage, and nothing more from my wife and my marriage than I expect from God. I expect most from myself: to offer the prayers, the kiss, the obedience, and for that to be my contribution to a

relationship that hopefully, over years, will be so much better than not having been in it.

AP: So to address this current moment, if I'm your congregant coming to you and asking, "I don't know if God's hand is in the virus or is in George Floyd's death."

Can you help us understand God's hand, or God's goodness, in these painful things?

AK: I don't see God's hand in the individual encounter between that officer and George Floyd. I definitely reject what I sometimes call a "football theology" – where the wide receiver catches the touchdown in the last second of the game to win, and in the post-game interview, he thanks God for being with him so he could make the catch.

That makes me want to say, "Does that mean that God was against the cornerback who was trying to block the guy from catching the ball?"

It's too convenient. I am not willing to pray to a God who preferred the wide receiver wearing the green uniform over the defender wearing the red. That's not my divinity. And since I can't see God in those mundane moments, I also don't see God directly – God's hand, God forbid – on the neck of George Floyd.

What I want to say to someone who feels that God is absent in the world is the age-old answer given by millions of sages: go exemplify God's goodness and God's God-ness in the way that you respond to these events. Don't look for cues from the heavens.

Listen with your ear close, and your heart closer, to the voices of goodness in your tradition, identify those voices of goodness as godliness and go make it more real and visible in the world.

That, to me, is where God comes in. God comes in by listening to the loftiest and most beautiful sounds from religious tradition and reifying that in the world around you.

AP: Is that also how you talk about God to a family that loses someone too soon and feels somehow betrayed?

AK: I tell every family who is dealing with grief that when you hear the news that your loved one dies or you get to the funeral and we tear the ribbon, we're going to say a blessing. We're going to bless God, which is totally counterintuitive to what you're feeling. We're going to bless God – *Baruch dayan ha'emet*– "Blessed is the true judge."

And what I say to them is that I don't believe our tradition has an overly romantic view of God – that God is only with us when things are great and absent when things are bad.

The Talmud says explicitly: Just as you bless and invoke God when things are good, you must bless and invoke God when things are difficult – not blaming God. Acknowledge and invoke God's presence in that moment, so that the moment is more pregnant with divine possibility.

So if we see that a baby taking his or her first breath is a moment that defies description, full of mystery, if that's a "God Moment," then it's also a "God Moment" when someone takes their last breath, which also defies understanding and is mysterious.

It's sad, but that's a God moment, too. We ask ourselves, "How are God people supposed to react to this moment?" Not, "Why did God take my loved one?" God didn't take my loved one. Humanity is mortal. My loved one was born, my loved one died.

What are God-Persons supposed to do in that moment?

'I don't believe that God does'

AP: So if all events are God Moments, and our labor is in the response – even to hard things, what is God's labor these days?

AK: Going back to one of my earlier comments that God's goodness is the antidote to loneliness, there's a beloved Talmud text that says since the beginning of time, all God has been doing is making *shidduchs* – lining up people to be with each other.

It's obviously a very heteronormative text, and a little bit fanciful, but I like the idea of God being present in people finding one another and being able to share lives with other people.

At the same time, I don't mind my saying that even though I'm a rabbi and I'm a pretty traditional, conservative rabbi and a rabbi of faith and action, I don't believe in, or pray to, a God who *does*. I believe that *I* do as a result of what I believe *in*. Belief in God stirs me to do the right and the good. That, to me, is belief.

What does God believe about us?

Rabbi Rachel Timoner, a leader known especially for her outspokenness on persistent inequalities, tells me that in these times especially, the more pressing question – rather than our take on God – is God's take on us.

It had not really occurred to me before to think about how God views humanity. In a nutshell, Timoner laid out an approach to the divine in which God is a mirror-check on our behavior – individually and collectively.

I've known Timoner since 2015, when she became Senior Rabbi at Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn – I was included in a small welcome-to-New-York-City dinner for her – and our Reform synagogues have collaborated on some social justice initiatives together. (I'm a member of Central Synagogue.) I approached her to be part of my months-long project interviewing rabbis and scholars about God, which I began at the start of the pandemic – a time when many are questioning everything afresh. I asked each thinker to tackle an individual question many Jews have about God, and to bring to the conversation a single text to help ground the discussion.

Timoner sent me these lines from Genesis with her translation (2:7): *"Then Adonai formed the human of the dust of the earth. God blew into its nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being."*

Her question, which as she puts it, is maybe "the most interesting question that we never ask" – is "What does God believe about us?"

Timoner's verdict is pretty reassuring: God thinks we're always capable of doing better. No sin or misstep disqualifies us from grace or blessing.

That surprised me slightly, because I'd pegged her as someone who is often disappointed by people who *could* act to right wrongs and don't. Not that she's judgmental; more impatient. As if to say: you have a chance to save someone; why are you still standing there?

"I was a radical lesbian in my 20s living in San Francisco trying to bring about out some kind of revolution," Timoner said to describe her younger self before she turned to explore her religion deeply. She graduated Hebrew Union College rabbinical school in 2009 where she earned multiple honors – for Scholarly Writing, Excellence in Bible, Outstanding Service to a Small Congregation – and has maintained a fearless focus on criminal justice reform and dismantling racism in America. But as we talked about God, I heard a different kind of radicalism: one that is sure God never gives up on us or our ability to be good and do good.

Our conversation follows, edited for clarity and length.

'There is endless opportunity for us to turn'

Abigail Pogrebin: You said you chose that verse from Exodus because of the Talmudic discussion of its first word, *vayyitzer*, which means "he formed."

Rabbi Rachel Timoner: Yes. Look closely at *vayyitzer*. The word really should have one *yud* [the letter that looks like an apostrophe in the Hebrew]. But here it has two yuds. The Rabbis say that the two yuds are because we have two inclinations – to good and to evil: *yetzer hara* and *yetzer hatov*. On the one hand, we have impulses to help, care, love, give, support, engender peace. But we also have impulses to take, harm, lust, dominate, kill. And in that same verse there's that idea that we're made of the dust of the earth, and also made of the breath of life – which comes directly from God. This dualism – we are creatures of the earth, animals like other animals, *and* we also stand upright, between heaven and earth, made of the divine image, possessing a soul. We have both things happening: good and evil, earth and heaven.

AP: So God believes we have both a selfless and a selfish inclination, an earthly and divine aspect. Which does God believe wins out?

RT: The main thing that Judaism tells us God believes about us is that no matter what we do and what we've done, no matter how we've fallen short of that ideal of justice, peace, love and compassion, no matter in what ways we've closed our hearts and failed to see how we're harming others, how we've erred, there is endless opportunity for us to turn. God absolutely believes that human beings can endlessly improve ourselves, that there is no end to the learning curve, no limits on our capacity to become righteous.

AP: That's a very moving summation of God's opinion of us: that we have a bottomless capacity to right the ship.

'I believe in the divine quality within humans'

RT: If we turn our hearts – even just a half-turn, if we open ourselves even slightly, then God is always ready to receive us. No matter how much intentional wrong we've done, if we feel remorse and want to be better, God is endlessly ready to receive us, without limitation, believing in our capacity for good. That is fundamentally what God believes about us. We're not perfect; we're deeply flawed…and we're endlessly capable of transformation, healing. I believe in that more than I believe in anything else.

AP: What do you mean "more than anything else"?

RT: More than I believe in any particular idea about God, I believe in humans. I believe in the divine quality within humans, and the faith that God has in us and our capacity to continually better ourselves. To reach for and achieve good.

AP: So when we look at the number of times God gave up on us in our Torah, how do we square that with this potential God believes we have?

RT: Here's the thing: God also isn't perfect. God created us because God is also needing to learn – from us. When God created humans, God created two humans – and the second human was there to help, to be a counterpoint, like a *chevrutah* [study partner], to challenge the first human to stretch and grow. Similarly, God created humans to be that for God. God is looking to also be better. And you're going to see that in so many encounters – when God gets angry, impatient, is destructive, petulant; God relies on humanity to remind God of God's best self. That's what the 13 Attributes are.

AP: You mean the liturgy we sing on Yom Kippur – where we list God's good traits. *"God, God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, And granting pardon."* Exodus [34:6]:

'It's all a work in progress'

RT: Yes. God is asking of us: 'Remind me– am I really good? Who am I again? Oh right. I am endlessly patient. I am loving, I am compassionate, I care about truth, but I also know to balance truth with compassion.' We provide that for God. So while God is a model, God is

also not a perfected model of these things. It's all a work in progress. The whole thing. And we are, too. Our liturgy is built around that; everyday in the *Amidah* prayer we're asked for forgiveness and we're wanting to change ourselves. We name the way we've fallen short and strive to do better.

AP: Since God ostensibly had the choice as to how to create the human, why intentionally give us a destructive impulse?

RT: I'm so glad you asked that, because I just left it as "bad" and "good," and that's way too simplistic. The "ra" in *yetzer hara* means chaos. This impulse will lead to chaos: wanting more for ourselves, wanting other people for ourselves, wanting certain people to have power over others, anger that can lead us to be violent.

But the Rabbis are very clear that it's not "bad," as in, you should want to eradicate it. It's bad in that it can be harmful, but it's also actually necessary and is part of the design.

Yes, it is intentional that we are created with both of those things because as the rabbis say, if we didn't have a *yetzer hara*, then no one would build a house, no one would make a family – you need some lust to be able to have relationships with people that create offspring. You need to have some amount of greed to want things for yourself. And you *should* want things for yourself.

The issue is not that we have *yetzer hara*. The issue is when it's out of balance. And the challenge is not to try to remove it; it's a necessary part of us. We should even love it. We just have to recognize it and keep it in check.

All these qualities that I was holding out as good qualities – love, peace, justice. None of those in Judaism are considered to be absolute – like you want them 100%. All of them are understood to be in balance with something else. It's all about balance and moderation.

'The voice in me that's harsh? That's self-generated.'

AP: And so for you personally, when you consider what God thinks about humanity, do you view God as rendering a judgment about you – judging the imbalance of your impulses?

RT: I don't feel judged as in, there's an outside being looking at me, shaking its finger with its brow furrowed or a judge with a gavel. The voice in me that's harsh? That's self-generated. That's not about God. And that's actually the way I *know* it's not about God. The voice in me that's harsh is just from the wounds of my life.

As human beings, we have so many ways that we judge ourselves, and expect others to judge us. We project that onto religion and expect that God or religion is going to tell us that we're wrong, and certainly there have been a lot of expressions of religion in God's name that have told people that they're wrong. But I do not hear God that way. Ever. Sometimes I hear the conscience within me telling me that something I'm doing is wrong. But it's not that I'm wrong *in my core*.

AP: So finally: when you said that God is ready to accept us, no matter how we've transgressed, that made me feel oddly relieved, even hopeful. I do so much self-flagellating when I know that I've misstepped, it's hard not to keep replaying it. But your phrasing didn't feel Jewish somehow; when you said that "God is always ready to receive us," my first thought was, "That sounds like a Christian frame."

RT: I can't believe how many things that are the most beautiful things we have we've decided are actually Christian things. They're ours. They are also Christian, but they came from us. Isaiah 44:22: "I've erased your sins in the haze and your transgressions as a vanished cloud. Return to me, for I will rebuild you." Midrash Tehillim 120:7: "My hands reach out to the one who does teshuvah [repentance.] I turn back no one who gives me their heart. If they come to me, I walk towards them to heal them." That's us. That's us.

Is Jewish survival proof of God?

It feels like an untouchable idea: that God, whom no one can see or prove, is the reason the Jewish people have endured, despite centuries of persecution. If God indeed had the power to ensure our survival, why wasn't that power sufficient to stop the persecution in the first place, or at least rescue Jews from their slaughters sooner?

But what if it's God's force within us – not so much God's orchestration of events but a kind of inner fortitude inspired by God – that enabled Jewish survival against all odds. That was the narrative posited by Rabbi Sholom Lipskar, spiritual leader of a huge Chabad congregation in Surfside, Fla., known simply as The Shul.

I sought Lipskar out for this project, Still Small Voice: 18 Questions About God, for a number of reasons. He's Haredi, with a deep, devoted following among the thousands who belong to The Shul, which he founded in 1981. He spent his earliest childhood in a German Displaced Persons camp. And he was one of the first high-profile rabbis in the United States to be hospitalized with Covid-19, and went public about the diagnosis when others chose not to.

Lipskar, who is 74, recounts the litany of history's attempts to wipe us out – from the Babylonians to the Crusades to the pogroms in Europe and the Holocaust. The list is long and the upshot hard to ignore: so many other cultures and religions folded, but not the Jewish people.

Is that a miracle or something else at work?

My conversation with Rabbi Lipskar, edited for clarity and length, is below.

'There's something that drives us'

Sholom Lipskar: There should be none of us left, and yet we are here. And not only are we here, but we somehow rose to the top of the pinnacle. In finance politics, diplomacy, law, and medicine, we're at the top – just one generation away from the Holocaust.

You know, I'm not trying to diminish anything that's going on with other groups in America, but we never had affirmative action. Nobody ever gave us a chance.

We came out of the Holocaust losing a third of us. I lived in a DP camp for the first four years of my life – from the time I was born, 1946, until 1950, because no other country would receive us. The Nazis had taken away our homes, we lost multiple members of our family. But nobody opened up their doors and said, 'We have to have a bell curve here because the Jewish people were just destroyed –a third of them – so open up Yale or Harvard.' Nothing like that ever happened.

Abigail Pogrebin: You're saying that despite centuries of persecution, Jews have not only survived, but succeeded – even without society's help?

SL: Yes. And how do you explain that? What is that? There's something about that which speaks to the existence of a very powerful force. It says that there's something that drives us. And what is the most common element?

AP: God or some divine strength?

SL: Look at Jewish history from the beginning of time: in every instance we were persecuted. Harassed. There was an Inquisition. We were thrown out of countries. We had to find places to go.

You know there's a joke – "How come Jews are such great violinists? Because it's an instrument that you can carry with you." The Jews were always packed, ready to go. So many generations. We Jewish people should have been given a chance somewhere, somehow. But we were never given an opportunity. We had to start from the bottom.

AP: And you believe that there's some divine energy that allowed the Jewish people to push through?

SL: My parents came from Europe and my father worked three jobs to make a living. One was taking chickens to the kosher slaughterer. He did it in order to feed us and to send us to a Jewish school. My mother worked behind the counter in a bake shop just to make a few dollars so that we would have a better life.

What drives that? It's not just the social environment. There's a *drivenness* that comes from some divine origin that's part of our existence. That's the reality, and history tells you that story, confirms that reality. To deny that is just to be looking for some kind of excuses.

'To accept God is to accept authority'

AP: So if this divine force is inside the Jewish people by birth, how do you explain the number who don't – or choose not to – believe in God?

SL: You know, a very famous child psychiatrist at Harvard said that all children start out believing in God, *every child*. But when we grow up, we stop believing – not because we suddenly have intellectual questions, but because of *behavioral* patterns.

To accept God is to accept authority and a way of life. And because we don't want to have those kinds of restrictions – keeping kosher or keeping the Sabbath or other restrictions – maybe our minds get in the way of our hearts and our souls. It's not that a person came to some kind of intellectual conclusion that it's hard to believe in God. The person came to a behavioral pattern that makes it easier for them to reject that kind of authority.

AP: I can hear the skeptics saying that they don't embrace Jewish behavior because they don't feel a connection to God or Judaism.

SL: Unfortunately, that's because most of American Jewish society was not raised Jewish. They were raised like non-Jews. They just have this smattering of Jewish culture.

Having a Bar Mitzvah was just an event in their life. They didn't have any kind of commitment to it, no element of Jewish thinking. They live like non-Jews, eat like non-Jews, dress like non-Jews. That's why there's a high number of assimilation that continues to rise. So you're dealing with a community that has lost any conscious touch with their Jewishness.

AP: And you're positing that if one follows the restrictions of Jewish law and submits to the authority of God, faith will follow?

SL: The key here is not your intellectual or emotional understanding of God; that comes after the fact. The key is your behavioral pattern, and we know today that the most powerful level of impact on a human being is behavior.

AP: In other words, first you act, then you feel.

SL: The world should not be based on emotion and intellect; the world is based on what you *do*.

AP: I can hear those who will say that your prescription for divine connection rejects the rational.

SL: Look at the Ten Commandments. Why is "Do not murder" part of the Ten Commandments? Any human

being who has any sense of decency or morality knows that you're not supposed to murder.

But rationality is not good enough. Because in our own generation we know that the Nazis were the most rational nation of the world. They had Kant, Feuerbach and Hegel – the most sophisticated philosophers and thinkers. They developed the most extraordinary machines. They were at the top of the game when it came to their intellect. They *rationalized* the extinction, the murder of about 7 million Jews and other peoples – including 1 million children. So the Ten Commandments says don't rely on your rationality alone. You have to subject yourself to a higher authority.

'Whether in prison or in a penthouse'

AP: So as we do the work of Elul – the month when we're supposed to prepare for atonement and judgment – how should we think about how much we control versus God?

SL: From a Hasidic point of view, we have no controls over almost every aspect of our life – whether you're going to be born male or female, black or white, beautiful or hideous, bright or not, born to a wealthy family or to a poverty-stricken one. Divine providence put you there.

The only control you have is how you behave at that moment: whether you will do right or wrong. And in order to determine right and wrong, you need an objective standard. The objective standard that we have found to be the safest is the word of God, which we believe to be the Torah.

Whether in prison or in a penthouse, there is a right and wrong in everything we do. That's the difference between what is predetermined and what is directed by God.

AP: Can you give a practical example of where you saw both divine providence and then your own free choice in response?

SL: I was the first Covid patient at University of Miami hospital on March 15th. It had not hit the United States yet with any vengeance. And I was standing in the hospital with high-level physicians – people I respect and continue to respect, they were all dressed in masks talking to each other, *not even knowing what to say*.

And the thing that concerned me most was not the fact that I had this virus – I have faith, so whatever happened, happened. What concerned me was the fact that the doctors knew less than I did. And I said to them, "You know something, gentlemen, you're all scientists, but there is one area – something else that is operating in the universe that is beyond us."

'I know that there's a reason I stayed alive'

AP: You went public with your diagnosis at a time when many people were worried about the stigma and might have made a different choice.

SL: I got my results March 15. Up until that point, everybody was moving through their routines like nothing was happening. I decided to put out an email to my entire community, thousands of people, saying that I have Covid, it's very serious, and we would like everybody to quarantine.

And the *entire community* went into quarantine at that moment. And thank God nobody was afflicted in our community at that time. So people were saying, "You know, Rabbi, you saved the community." I don't accept that kind of credit, but there was a reason that I got it and not somebody else in the community. Because if anybody else would have gotten it, it would not have impacted the community in the same way, and they would not have listened in the same way.

I lost many dear friends to this pandemic. At the same time, I know that there's a reason that I stayed alive.

AP: So are you comfortable saying that God had some role in this pandemic?

SL: There's no question that HaShem has a role in everything.

It's happened three times in history that the entire world *stopped*. Even during the World Wars, the entire world didn't stop – not in America, New Zealand, Central China, Siberia. But during this pandemic, the entire world stopped. It stopped only twice before –

the first during the flood with Noah, the second during Revelation [when the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai]. The third time is right now. And each time that the world stopped, there was a reset button.

It's time to reconsider our priorities, our lifestyle. The world had been moving in a maelstrom, a downward structure, in a very significant way, even though this was the most modern, technologically advanced society. It's a moment when God says, "Why don't you take some time to reconsider your life? See how you live with yourself. Who are you?"

Because outside there's so many diversions. When we feel bad, we go shopping, have dinner with friends and we party a little bit and we get lost.

You know, before the pandemic, the darkest moments here in South Florida were early in the morning, in South Beach, when suddenly the lights went off in the bars at 3 o'clock in the morning, and everybody had to leave this topsy-turvy, dancing, frivolous, no-limits kind of space where everybody was laughing and jumping, and go home. And there was a certain loneliness, waiting for the next moment when it opened up again.

So suddenly HaShem says, "It's not opening up for a while." You've got to spend some time with yourself and figure it out. And know: what's your value in this world? Are you making a difference? Are you only here to take from the universe what it has to offer, or are you also here to make the place a better place, a holier, happier, more constructive place?

So all of this is, in my opinion, the silver lining in the dark cloud. It gives us an opportunity to go to the next level. And as we know, the darkest moments are just before daybreak.

Does God need us?

I both believe it and resist it – the idea that God is acting through us or needs us.

It feels presumptuous to think we could be adequate to God's tasks, skilled or wise enough for God to enlist us. I've also seen how the concept of being God's soldiers can be bastardized by those who do destructive things in God's name.

At the same time, during this pandemic, I've been witnessing acts that feel Godly to me. Tiny gems of generosity and rescue, gestures of game-changing deliverance or relief. Covid doctors who sleep in tents outside their own home to keep their children safe from possible infection. Young students who fashion face masks out of yarmulkes for the homeless in Houston. An elderly husband who borrows a cherry picker to get close enough to his sick wife on the high floor of a nursing home.

I've heard it so many times – that we are God's hands in the world and it's up to us to figure out how to help end suffering, to complete God's creation.

But what does that mean –to be God's extra helpers? And where's the evidence that God relies upon us?

Laura Shaw Frank, 52, is Modern Orthodox, has a law degree, just completed a PhD in American Jewish history, and just recently became Director of the American Jewish Committee's (AJC's) Contemporary Jewish Life Department. Before that, she held

educational and administrative roles at SAR High School – the Orthodox day school in the Bronx that was an early epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in New York. She was also director of admissions and placement at Yeshivat Maharat, the groundbreaking seminary for Orthodox women clergy.

In preparation for our conversation, Frank sends me the Exodus text that recounts how Miriam helped save her brother Moses. As soon as I reread the verses, I understand where Frank is headed: God acted through Miriam to save the Jewish people. Miriam was, as Frank puts it, one of God's "agents on the ground."

When we spoke, I felt myself warming to her contention that we're supposed to be God's actors on earth. Our Biblical ancestors didn't wait for the miracle or the savior. They somehow knew that deliverance required them. Maybe this international crisis is a stark reminder that we're supposed to stay involved.

The conversation below has been edited for clarity and length.

'This little girl, Miriam, is this magical creature'

Laura Shaw Frank: I love Miriam because I think that she represents the epitome of that idea that God wants and must partner with human beings in order to bring about redemption and transformation.

Abigail Pogrebin: Is that your personal take or also the ancient rabbinic perspective?

LSF: The Rabbis definitely promote this idea that human beings act as partners of God, which I think is really important. You could assume that religious leaders are those who are going to sit back and wait for God to reveal God's self. But in fact, that's not what the rabbis are transmitting at all; they believe we are integral to God's work.

AP: Where do the rabbis talk about Miriam's actions specifically? I know the Exodus text recounts how she watched over Moses in the basket and made sure their mother was recruited to essentially be his caregiver, but is there more of a backstory to her 'interventions?'

LSF: Yes, in the Gemara – the second part of the Talmud – in the tractate of Sotah, the Rabbis tell a story about Moses and Miriam's father, Amram. They say that when Pharaoh decreed that every son who was born would be cast into the river to die, Amram essentially said, "Oh my God, I can't stay married to my wife. Suppose we give birth to a son?"

AP: You mean he panicked about possibly conceiving a son because every boy born would be killed?

LSF: Yes. So Amran left his wife. And because he was a leader of the children of Israel, all the other men got up and divorced their wives, too. And Miriam said to him, "Father, your decree is worse than Pharaoh's decree, because Pharaoh is only killing the boys, and you are killing the girls and the boys because now there won't be any children born."

AP: By "killing," you mean halting births.

LSF: Correct. And she convinces her father to go back with his wife, Yocheved, and that's how Moses is conceived and born. So from the very beginning, this little girl, Miriam, is this magical creature. The Rabbis say in the Talmud that Miriam knew that her mother was going to give birth to the redeemer of the Jewish people.

AP: Miriam foresaw the peril if her father botched God's plan.

LSF: Yes, Miriam says to herself, "I've got to make sure that the child is born. I have to help God's hand here. My brother can't be born without my help." And so this little girl convinces them to come back together. It's an amazing thing.

AP: Amazing, too, because Miriam doesn't traditionally get top billing in the Passover story, but you're telling me she's a crucial reason Moses came into being and that the Passover story even happens.

LSF: And she did more than reunite her parents so they could produce Moses. When Moses is born, the Rabbis tell us the whole house was filled with light. And Miriam's father, Amram, says, essentially, "Oh, Miriam was right! She really must be a prophetess!" He kissed her on her head and said, "My daughter, your prophecy

has been fulfilled." But then when Moses is put into the basket down the river–

AP: You mean once Moses is sent down the Nile, with a real chance he won't survive–

LSF: Yes, Miriam's father got up and he hit his daughter across the head. How quickly his faith dissipated! He said to her, "Where's your prophecy now? You said this baby was going to redeem us and now he's going to die in the river." And Miriam must have been standing there thinking, "Oh ye of little faith." What does she do? She goes down to the river and waits there to see how this redemption is going to happen, because she believes that it will. She wants to be there and be ready to partner with God to see it.

'We don't have prophets anymore'

AP: So Miriam seemed to know her assignment. How do we figure out ours?

LSF: It's hard. We can't hear God's voice. We have to intuit what God's voice is and we have to have faith that God wants what is right and best for humanity.

AP: Do you hear God's voice?

LF: I wouldn't say that I hear God's voice. But I feel God's presence very powerfully. There are there particular moments in my life – emotional or miraculous – in which I very much feel God's hand and presence. But I am very leery of ever saying that I hear God's voice. And I am also very leery of others saying that they hear God's voice, because I think that we can't have that hubris today. We don't have prophets anymore. And we can't have the hubris to say that we know precisely what God wants.

I always think of the example of that guy years ago who said that Hurricane Katrina destroyed New Orleans because they had a gay-pride parade. He thinks *that* was the message that God was sending. I fundamentally disagree with that in every cell of my being. And I think that you can get yourself into a lot of trouble in this world today thinking you know exactly what God wants.

'God was going to escort him now'

AP: When you say that there were times where you've felt God's presence, were those the most joyful moments or also the most painful?

LSF: Maybe the holiest moment of my life was when my father died. He died on Rosh Hashanah. He'd had brain cancer for two years and was at home in hospice and we were all there – the dining room had been converted to a hospital room – and I felt so powerfully the presence of God in that place.

It was staggeringly sad, but also staggeringly holy. I felt in that moment that we had turned him over to God and God was going to escort him now.

AP: That's beautifully described. Can you give any examples of where you've seen God's partners acting during this global crisis?

LSF: I see it all the time. Some of the things that have made me cry the hardest and touched my soul the most have been the video of an Arab nurse singing *Ma Nishtanah* to the Jewish patients of a Covid ward on erev Seder in the hospital in Israel; and there was a still photograph of an Arab nurse putting tefillin in on an elderly Jewish man in the hospital. When we talk about seeing every person as being in the image of God, that's it; that is the epitome of it.

Or the stories of these doctors who – I'm going to start crying – but they print out these pictures of themselves and hang them on their PPE. It's like those doctors are saying, "I know that you can't see me, but this is what I look like. I don't want you to be scared. I have a face and you have a face and we're both human beings." To me, that little act is an act of partnering with God to bring about redemption.

'I don't think we get to know why'

AP: What do you say to those asking why God let this pandemic happen?

LSF: I don't think we get to know why. I think that all we can do is say, "What now? How am I going to believe in a future that will be better? And how can I then help bring about that future?"

AP: Why do you believe we don't get to know why?

LSF: For me it feels chutzpadik and dangerous. Trying to understand the will or mindset of the divine, if one

could even use the words “mindset” and “will” to talk about the divine, is impossible because of our limitations as humans.

AP: One of the texts you sent me to prepare for this conversation is the Talmudic commentary that when Miriam left Egypt, she brought along her timbrels – her tambourines. Despite the fact that the Israelites were running for their lives, she made sure to pack her tambourine.

LSF: Right. She believed in God’s redemption that much, that she brought along her tambourine to celebrate it on the other side.

Think about Miriam in the moment that she’s leaving Egypt: Pharaoh’s army starts to chase them once they’ve left and she has no idea what’s going to happen to them. Where are they going to go? Where are they going to lay their heads at night? How are they going to get food? Is there really a land of Israel? And they’re supposed to believe that some ineffable, unseeable God is going to save them?

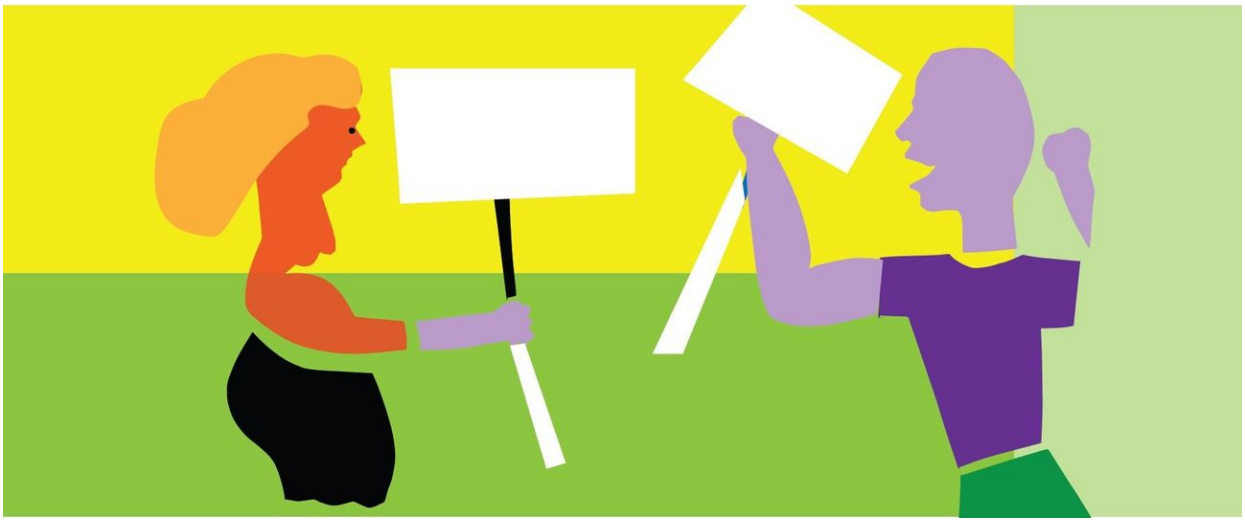
In that moment of abject terror, complete lack of knowledge of the future, Miriam basically says, “I have faith that God is going to redeem us, and therefore I will be ready; I’m packing my tambourine.” It’s amazing.

‘I’ll be ready with my tambourine’

AP: And you’re suggesting we can take a page from Miriam now – have faith there will be a better day and do our part to get us there?

LF: We’re in this moment of such horrible anxiety, when everything is so bleak. People are dying, sick, unemployed, poor. I’ve never lived with such a lack of surety about the future ever in my life. And I guess the only way to march forward is to say, “I have faith that we will be redeemed from this.” And I have to think about how I’m going to partner with God to bring about that redemption. What can I do to protect the vulnerable? What can I do to bring about justice? What can I do to remember that each person is created in the image of God? And if I use my time to advance those principles, then the redemption will come and I’ll be ready with my tambourine.

Does God hear us?



When I ask Rabbi Sandra Lawson to address whether God hears us, she basically flips the question. Do we hear God? And by extension, each other?

She doesn't do this explicitly, but it becomes clear, as we discuss her vision of the divine, that God is about paying attention – to what is expected of us and whom we could help.

It's a timely take, considering the time when Lawson and I speak: after the weeks of Black Lives Matter protests spurred by the killing of George Floyd. The country's racial reckoning has caused us to look at our own culpability, and particularly our own house: how differently Jews of color are treated in our communities, and how rarely they hold leadership positions in our organizations.

Lawson, 50, is Associate Chaplain for Jewish Life at Elon University in North Carolina, and has written that one of the reasons she went to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College "was so that others could see that one could be Black, Queer, and be a Jewish leader." But she admitted that she has grown somewhat weary of this season's well-intentioned emails and calls from white colleagues and friends seeking wisdom and advice.

Still, she was grateful that so many finally cared enough to ask. And yes, it was a keen example of Lawson's frame on God: her fellow Jews were essentially saying, "We're ready to hear."

Our conversation is below, edited for clarity and length.

'That was definitely God moving through the protestors'

Abigail Pogrebin: Obviously we're in a time where many are turning to the Black person they know and asking what they need to learn. Is that inspiring or exhausting for you?

Sandra Lawson: Both. I actually had an email exchange with a Black person with influence in Hillel and he wrote asking some of us if we're getting inundated with calls. Several Black people work for Hillel, and we know each other. We all agreed that this moment is too important to ignore requests, but we're also trying to support each other to manage the requests.

AP: Do you think it's too much of a leap to say that God was in the response to George Floyd's death? God was in the reckoning?

SL: That was definitely God moving through the protestors. The young people who were in the streets, particularly the young Jews, were using their Jewish values to articulate why this matters, which I think is really beautiful – how God shows up.

I've seen a lot of Christians do the same. We're in this awakening, when people want to learn and know. They're saying, "I always thought our country was equitable, and now I'm seeing it's really not. Or maybe I always knew that it wasn't, but I didn't want to hear it, but now I have to –because George Floyd's death was in front of me on the screen."

AP: You talk about God moving through the protestors, but many Jews of color or gay Jews might have trouble seeing themselves in Jewish texts. Do you feel you have to work harder to make Torah relevant to those whom the story leaves out or diminishes?

SL: The people who wrote these texts and commentaries were men with the biases of their century; I see them more as representative of the time period in which the rabbis were living. And some of our texts, even though they make us uncomfortable, you can still see the Rabbis trying to be more respectful to women, or worried about procreation and the survival of the Jewish people.

Because of my background, I'm going to have different views from an Orthodox man who has no exposure to gay people and is worried about producing more Jewish children.

'I certainly don't think of God in anthropomorphic terms'

AP: Can you say a little more about your faith personally?

SL: For me, God didn't enter the picture until my second or third year of rabbinical school. It's interesting – a Sufi came to teach one of our classes, and I said to her, "I'm not really in search of God." And she said, "We're always on a journey of searching, whether we realize it or not." That stayed with me.

AP: For many of the rabbis I'm talking to, God is not a being, but a presence, a force for compassion and responsibility,

SL: I certainly don't think of God in anthropomorphic terms, that God is a person. When we say God is a "being," it limits what God is. Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan described God as a force for salvation.

AP: Your colleagues also suggest that God is in the things that are magnificent or have power beyond their scientific fact set.

SL: Yes. The fact that the sun and the moon come up, all the things that happen with no explanation – that I can talk to God and get clarity.....

AP: You can talk to God and get clarity?

SL: I do. I used to hear my Christian friends say, "Just give it up to God and it will be fine!" I never liked that. But sometimes there are moments in our lives when we need to get out of our heads. So that phrase, "Giving it up to God," or "Letting God work through me" to guide me through something – it sometimes frees us up, to look with clarity.

AP: You're saying there's guidance gained by trying to think less and let God take the lead a bit?

SL: Because I have that trust, I can work on a problem for a long time, and I can then say, "I need help." So I do feel heard.

AP: Have there been times when you didn't? When you said essentially, "God, where are you?"

SL: Not really. I do have times when I have been hurt – in relationships or jobs. But I have had the trust that this job or relationship was not where I was supposed to be. It doesn't take away the pain when it's happening. But then I say to myself, "Obviously there's something better for me, and I just have to figure out what that is."

'I was heartbroken'

AP: Can you give a personal example of where you had to essentially "give it up to God," as you put it?

SL: I was asked to apply for a pulpit job and it was a really good fit and a really good search committee, but the way that racism showed up when I didn't get the position was very hard. The candidate they hired was clearly not the right fit and the rabbi and community realize that now. But I was heartbroken, because I'd felt, "This is where I'm supposed to be." Obviously that community wasn't ready for me. It made me question things.

AP: I imagine it could shake your sense of Jewish values – to have a community invite you to apply and then say it won't work.

SL: It was difficult. But now I'm definitely in a much better place here at a university as the Associate Chaplain for Jewish Life. I'm also the only Black chaplain, so a lot of students come to me who are not Jewish – people of color.

The Black students who seek me out usually have a question or challenge around their faith and don't feel they can talk to the chaplain who represents their own religion. This is why it's so beautiful to have five chaplains.

For Black students on campus who are Catholic, their chaplain is a white male, which can be hard for them. I may not be Christian, but I have their lived experience. And I'm also a person of faith. I can help them with their issues around belief.

AP: Again, it gets to your idea of who is listening and how attentively. You're making me think that my question of whether God hears us should be: How closely are we listening?

SL: There's a midrash that says the burning bush had been burning for a long time and most people ignored it, and then Moses comes along, sees it, and he turns – that's when God calls to him and he turns.

Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?"

When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am."
-Exodus 3:2

AP: Which reminds us that we have to pay attention. God might have been calling and we were too busy to hear it.

SL: It reminds us that God can be in the ordinary.

AP: A bush on fire isn't ordinary.

SL: A thornbush is. God doesn't always appear in some extraordinary place.

'If you see God in the everyday'

AP: The midrash you cited suggests the thornbush was used intentionally: it's an unexciting plant, which proves that God's power is in the mundane.

SL: If you see God in the everyday, if you wake up in the morning and instead of saying, "This day sucks," or "I'm not happy," you greet the world with joy.

Our liturgy reminds us to wake up and say "Modeh –or Modah– ani" – thank you, God, for restoring my soul, you've given me another day. Thank you for my breath, my body's ability to go to the bathroom. All of the morning liturgy is around gratitude, and by the time you get to your call to prayer, you have this sense of blessing.

It's almost as if whoever wrote these texts, knew that before you could be open to calling to God, you needed to be filled with appreciation.

AP: It's a poignant note to end on – that God gives us breath. It brings us back to those whose breath was cut short.

SL: You watch what happened in Georgia with Ahmaud Arbery, and then you listen to a 911 call with Breonna Taylor, and then you watch what happened to George Floyd – he was the cannon, the overflowing of water.

AP: Maybe there will be a new kind of listening now.