



TORAH in MOTION

Does God Talk to Us?: Maimonides, Heschel and Divine-Human Communication

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Jacob's Dream

1) He dreamt of a ladder resting on earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and angels of God ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying...I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it. *Genesis 28*

2) Everyone who ascends does so climbing up this ladder, so that he necessarily apprehends Him who is upon it, as He is stably and permanently at the top of the ladder. Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed, I.15.

Is Divine Human Communication Possible?- Maimonides

3) There is no relation in any respect between Him and any of His creatures. For relation is always found between two things falling under the same species...If things fall under two different genera, there is no relation between them in any respect...There is no relation between 100 cubits and the heat which is in pepper... the latter belongs to the genus "quality" and the former to the genus "quantity." There is no relation either between knowledge and sweetness or between clemency and bitterness...How then could there subsist a relation to between Him and any of the things created by Him give the immense difference between with regard to the true reality of their existence, than which there is no greater difference. Maimonides, Guide, 1:52

4) Glory then to Him who is such that when the intellects contemplate His essence, their apprehension turns into incapacity; and when they contemplate the proceeding of His actions from His will, their knowledge turns into ignorance; and when the tongues aspire to magnify Him by means of attributive qualifications, all eloquence turns into weariness and incapacity! .. The most apt phrase concerning this subject is the dictum occurring in the Psalms, *Silence is praise to Thee*. Guide, 1:59

5) As for someone who thinks frequently and mentions God, without knowledge, following a mere imagining or following a belief adopted because of his reliance on the authority of someone else, he... does not in true reality mention or think about God. For that thing which is in his imagination and.. in his speech does not correspond to any being at all and has merely been invented by his imagination. Guide, 3:51

6) Considered from the perspective of the philosophical doctrines of the Guide, conventional prayer would seem to be a meaningless and even improper activity. Praise of God is impossible, because we have neither the language nor the knowledge to speak about Him in any meaningful way...The ideal praise of God may well be, as Maimonides suggests, wordless praise..but how can this ideal be realized in actual human lives? Our dependence on language is deep. We cannot conceptualize without language, although we are fully aware that our conceptions are defective and our language inaccurate with respect to God. Marvin Fox, Interpreting Maimonides, 1990.

Is Divine Human Communication Possible?- Heschel

7) The God of the philosophers is all indifference, too sublime to possess a heart or to cast a glance at our world. Abraham Joshua Heschel, Man is Not Alone, 1951.

Our goal is to ascertain the existence of a Being to whom we may confess our sins, of a God who loves, of a God who is not above concern with our inquiry and search for Him; a father, and not an "absolute." Abraham J. Heschel, God in Search of Man, 1955.

8) Our radical amazement responds to the mystery, but does not produce it...We do not create the ineffable, we encounter it...Subjective is the *manner*, not the *matter*, of our perception [of the larger world and the mystery beyond that]. What we perceive is objective in the sense of being independent of and corresponding to our perception. Our radical amazement responds to the mystery, but does not produce it. You and I have not invented the grandeur of the sky nor endowed man with the mystery of birth and death. We do not create the ineffable, we encounter it. Heschel, Man is Not Alone.

9) Awareness of the divine begins with wonder..Wonder or radical amazement is...a prerequisite for the authentic awareness of what is. What *is*, is more than what you see; what *is*, is far off and deep. We are amazed at seeing anything; amazed not only at particular values and things but of the unexpectedness of being as such, at the fact that there is being at all. Abraham J. Heschel, God in Search of Man.

10) For those of us who have not been visited by angels..transcendence can only be experienced in second hand or fairly muted ways...I have long thought that the signals we find in ordinary, everyday life are of decisive importance: The recurring urge of human beings to find meaningful order in the world...the redemptive experiences of play and humor; the ineradicable capacity to hope; the overwhelming conviction that

certain deeds of inhumanity merit absolute condemnation...the sometimes searing experience of beauty, be it in nature or the works of man; and many others. Each of these, though quite ordinary in many cases and almost never perceived as supernatural, *points toward* a reality that lies beyond the ordinary. Peter Berger, *A Far Glory*, 1992.

11) Beyond our reasoning and beyond our believing, there is a preconceptual faculty that senses the presence of the divine. We do not perceive it. We have no knowledge; we have only an awareness of something that can neither be conceptualized nor symbolized...Concepts are *second thoughts*...The living encounter with reality takes place on a level that precedes conceptualization, on a level that is responsive, *immediate, preconceptual and presymbolic*...The prophets had no theory or "idea" of God. What they had was an *understanding*... an intuitive grasp of hidden meanings, of an unspoken message...Our belief in the reality of God is not [to use Kant's phrase] "first having the idea of a hundred dollars and then claiming to possess them on the basis of an idea. [What we have here] is first the actual possession of the dollars and then the attempt to count the sum. There are possibilities of error in counting them, but the [dollars] themselves are there. Abraham J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man*.

12) One of the dangers of beginning with human experience is that perhaps one is always only talking about just that - human experience, and nothing more. Human beings may sense or feel that they are interacting with something objectively real, but we must always be open to the idea that what we encounter is merely our own projection... Heschel's portrayal of how the religious person thinks is very moving, but as an argument for why the experience of should be trusted by someone who has not had it, it avoids the question by re-asserting a feeling. One cannot successfully respond to an epistemological challenge to an experience simply by reaffirming the intensity of the experience itself. The intensity of the experience is no guarantee of its truth. In the end, Heschel does not address that fact that subjective experience, no matter how vigorous, will never be fully persuasive to one who is not **on some level already persuaded**. Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence*, 2013.

13) Heschel [attacked] the way Rambam talks about God (or, maybe, makes talking about God impossible). Heschel agrees that theology has to emphasize God's otherness, but an exclusive focus on divine otherness, such that we can say nothing at all about who God is, leaves us without a God who can be said to care for the oppressed— and this, for Heschel, represents a complete abandonment of the God of the Bible.

At the deepest level there is no give and take. Heschel disputes the notion that one can arrive at a synthesis between scriptural, covenantal religion, on the one hand, and abstract philosophical monotheism on the other. I often imagine Heschel and the Rambam exchanging barbs— the Rambam accuses Heschel of being an idolator ("What

do you mean, God cares?") and Heschel retorts that the Rambam flirts with atheism. For the Rambam the enemy was idolatry, and just as Moses shattered external idols, the Rambam will shatter internal pictures of God we have in our mind.

For Heschel, in contrast, the enemy is indifference, the disregard of other people's pain and suffering. I think the question about Heschel's God— the God who is outraged and wounded by every act of oppression by the strong against the weak— is not whether it's Jewishly defensible, but whether it's metaphysically believable in this day and age. Shai Held, Interview, November 17/2013.

Does God Talk Back?

17) How does God become real for people? How are sensible people able to believe in an invisible being who has a demonstrable effect on their lives? And how can they sustain that belief in the face of what skeptical observers think must be inevitable disconfirmation? It ought to be difficult to believe in God. God is invisible. You cannot shake God's hand, look God in the eye, or hear what God says with your ears. God gives none of the ordinary signs of existence.

And yet of course people do believe in God. According to a Gallup poll, roughly 95 percent of Americans say that they believe in the existence of "God or a higher power," a percentage that has remained steady since Gallup began polling on the eve of the Second World War. In 2008 the Pew Foundation conducted a quite extensive representative survey. In its sample, two-thirds of Americans completely or mostly agreed that angels and demons are active in the world today, and nearly one-fifth said that they receive a direct answer to a specific prayer request at least once a week.¹ Many Americans not only believe in God in some general way but experience God directly and report repeated contact with the supernatural.

Faith asks people to consider that the evidence of their senses is wrong...Faith is hard because it is a decision to live as if a set of claims are real, even when one doubts: these are not intellectual judgments on the same order as deciding how many apples you should buy at the market. This is why Kierkegaard could describe the decision to believe as a leap in the dark, as a choice founded not on evidence but on the way we choose to live in the face of inadequate evidence. The fact of human uncertainty about the ultimate, and the stakes of our decision in the face of that uncertainty, are also why one can argue that no one is an adult until he or she has seriously considered the question of God.

The deep puzzle of faith is not why someone should believe in God. The puzzle is how: how sensible, reasonable people, living in more or less the same evidential world as the skeptic, are able to experience themselves as having good evidence for the presence of a powerful invisible being who has a demonstrable effect on their lives and are able to sustain a belief in that presence despite their inevitable doubts..The problem [for believers] is...how to maintain belief despite skepticism: not the puzzle of why we all believe to some extent in the supernatural when we are thinking quickly, automatically, superstitiously, but the problem of how to commit to what the Bible says is true in the face of the contradictions they experience in their world.

They believe—or want to believe—that the world is fundamentally good or was at least created by a fundamentally good power that is still present and responsive. Yet they see around themselves a world of great injustice. They believe, or they think that they should believe, that God loves them—and yet they don't really experience themselves, in their heart of hearts, as loved and lovable. Or they know that God wants them to love their spouse, but they can't seem to behave in a loving way. Or they sit down to pray, but they cannot persuade themselves that anyone is listening. Or they believe in God, but what they interpret as God's will has just been flatly contradicted by someone they know and trust, and now they are bewildered and confused. They believe in some abstract, absolute sense that God exists, but they struggle to experience God as real in the everyday world. They want to know *how* to hang on to their convictions in the face of so much evidence to the contrary, and it is sometimes very difficult for them to do so.

So how, in the face of doubt and uncertainty, does God become real for someone? Particularly in our modern—or postmodern or late modern—American society, with all its exposure to scientific explanation, where the supernatural is often treated as entertaining fantasy, how does some- one become confident that there is a supernatural God present in the everyday world? How does a living God become real to modern people?

It is a fragile process, because what they are doing is so hard, because it violates so much of what we take for granted. It takes an enormous amount of work. People must learn to see differently, and think differently, and above all feel differently, because for most people it will be a lifelong challenge to believe—to really feel as if they know in their heart of hearts—that God loves them as they are. When people build their understanding of God out of their own experience, they shape what they know of God's love out of the way they have experienced their mother's and father's love. But sometimes parents are not so loving, and always the love of a parent falls short of unconditional acceptance. The challenge is being able to remap your own interior world from the way in which you learn to imagine God—and if it is hard to learn to

experience yourself as truly in relationship with an invisible presence, it is harder still to experience yourself as feeling the love, tolerance, kindness, and forbearance you would feel if you truly, deeply, genuinely felt loved by the creator of the universe. T.M. Luhrman, When God Talks Back, 2013.