

Images of God Texts

Group 1: God as Watchmaker

What did Aher see that made him go wrong? It is said that once, while sitting and studying in the valley of Gennesar, he saw a man climb to the top of a palm tree on Shabbat, take the mother bird with the young, and descend in safety. At the end of the Shabbat, he saw another man climb to the top of the same palm tree and take the young, but let the mother go free; as he descended, a snake bit him and he died. Elisha exclaimed: It is written, "Let the mother go and take only the young, that you may fare well and have a long life" (Deut. 22:7). Where is the well-being of this man, and where is the prolonging of his life? (Sefer Haggadah, 244).

Group 2: Divine Intervention: God is Involved with Everything. *Hashgacha Pratit.*

"Near the city of Danzig lived a well-to-do Hasidic Rabbi, scion of prominent Hasidic dynasties. Dressed in a tailored black suit, wearing a top hat, and carrying a silver walking cane, the rabbi would take his daily morning stroll, accompanied by his tall, handsome son-in-law. During his morning walk it was the rabbi's custom to greet every man, woman, and child whom he met on his way with a warm smile and a cordial, "Good morning." Over the years the rabbi became acquainted with many of his fellow townspeople this way and would always greet them by their proper title and name. Near the outskirts of the town, in the fields, he would exchange greetings with Herr Muller, a Polish *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic German).

'Good morning, Herr Muller!' the rabbi would hasten to greet the man who worked in the fields.

'Good morning, Herr Rabbiner!' would come the response with a good-natured smile. Then the war began. The rabbi's strolls stopped abruptly. Herr Muller donned an S.S. uniform and disappeared from the fields. The fate of the rabbi was like that of much of the rest of Polish Jewry. He lost his family in the death camp of Treblinka and, after great suffering, was deported to Auschwitz.

One day, during a selection at Auschwitz, the rabbi stood in line with hundreds of other Jews awaiting the moment when their fates would be decided life or death. Dressed in a striped camp uniform, head and beard shaven and eyes feverish from starvation and disease, the rabbi looked like a walking skeleton. 'Right! Left, left, left!' The voice in the distance drew nearer. Suddenly the rabbi had a great urge to see the face of the man with the snow-white gloves, small baton, and steely voice who played god and decided who should live and who should die. He lifted his eyes and heard his own voice speaking:

'Good morning, Herr Muller!'

'Good morning, Herr Rabbiner!' responded a human voice beneath the S.S. cap adorned with skull and bones, 'What are you doing here?' A faint smile appeared on the rabbi's lips. The baton moved to the right – to life. The following day, the rabbi was transferred to a safer camp.

The rabbi, now in his eighties, told me in his gentle voice, 'This is the power of a good-morning greeting. A man must always greet his fellow man.' (*Chasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, 109-110)

Group 3: Free Will: We Matter to God but Our Choices are Own.

"Free will is bestowed on every human being. If one desires to turn toward the good way and be righteous, he has the power to do so. If one wishes to turn toward the evil way and be wicked, he is at liberty to do so. And thus it is written in the Torah, 'Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil' (Gen. 3:22) – which means that the human species has become unique in the world— there being no other species like it in the following respect, namely, that man, of himself and by the exercise of his own intelligence and reason, knows what is good and what is evil, and there is no one who can prevent him from doing that which is good or that which is evil. And since this is so, there is reason to fear "lest he put forth his hand... " (Mishneh Torah 77).

Group 4: I Do Not Believe in God.

"Though I believe that a void stands where once we experienced God's presence, I do not think Judaism has lost its meaning or its power. I do not believe that a theistic God is necessary for Jewish religious life... I have suggested that Judaism is the way in which we share the decisive times and crises of life through the tradition of our inherited community. The need for that sharing is not diminished at the time when we speak of the death of God. We no longer believe in the God who has the power to annul the tragic necessities of existence; the need religiously to share that existence remains." (Richard Rubenstein, *Central Theological Responses*, 95).

Group 5: I don't know.

The focus of Judaism is on the practical law rather than strict dogmatic interpretation. " They have deserted Me and have not kept My Law" (Jeremiah 16:11). God says, "Would that they had deserted Me and kept My Law, for it they had occupied themselves with the law, the leaven which is in it would have brought them back to me." (Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, XV)

In other words, Judaism historically has centered on action rather than on faith, and Conservative Judaism does so likewise... Since many Jews simply assume that freedom of thought is inherent in Judaism, it may be helpful to contrast Judaism with Christianity... Both Judaism and Christianity assert a set of beliefs and expect that adherents will live out those beliefs in some form of action, but the emphasis in the two religions is different: in Judaism it is on action, with wide-ranging freedom of thought as a result, while in Christianity the stress is on belief, with comparatively little specificity as to the actions which Christians must perform to demonstrate their faith.

Images of God Discussion guidelines

Group 1: God as watchmaker

Discussion leaders: The watchmaker perspective says that God created the laws of science and like a watchmaker makes a watch, allows it to run based on these laws.

- a. ~~Why did you choose to be in this group?~~ (*Ask for a short response.*)
- b. What do you think the phrase "God is a watchmaker" means?
- c. This concept implies that God does not have a direct influence on everyday life. Why do you think that you identify with this concept?
- d. In what way do you think that this idea affects your practice of Judaism?
- e. The discussion leader should have the text "God as Watchmaker" read.
- f. After the text has been read, the discussion leader should ask the campers: "How do you understand this text?"
- g. **Discussion leaders:** It is important to point out that this paragraph is NOT talking about reward and punishment, but rather randomness. It seems to suggest that man is own his own, regardless of the Torah laws or the Mitzvot of God. The fact that one's own actions can lead to either good or bad suggests that God is not involved. Rather, God allows life to take its course.
- h. In what ways does this text support some of your own beliefs in God?

Group 2: Divine Intervention: God is Involved with Everything. *Hashgacha Pratit.*

- a. The discussion leader should ask each camper "Why did you choose to be in this group?" (*Ask for a short response.*)
- b. What do think the idea of divine intervention, *hashagacha pratit* means?
- c. How do you think that *hashgacha pratiti* affect your idea of what Judaism is?
- d. How do you think the concept of *hasgacha pratit* has an effect on the idea of free will?
- e. The text of "Divine Intervention" should be read.
- f. Following the text reading, the discussion leader should ask: "What do you think this story has to do with a personal God?"
- g. Was this incident just random or is this an example of divine intervention?

Group 3: Free Will: We Matter to God but Our Choices are Our Own.

- a. ~~Why did you choose to be in this group?~~
 - a. How do you think that God can be understood as all-powerful if we make our own decisions?
 - b. How do you think that the concept of God who grants free will affect your understanding and practice of Judaism?
 - c. The text of Free Will should be read.
 - d. Following the reading of the text materials, the discussion leader should ask: How do these ideas support your ideas and beliefs in God?

Group 4: I Do Not Believe in God?

- a. ~~Why did you choose to be in this group?~~
- b. How do you integrate Judaism with the concept that there is no God?
- c. Are you still obligated to Judaism and *Halachah* if you don't believe in God? Are you missing the point of Judaism if you do not believe in God?
- d. How has the focus of Judaism been moved from God to community within this concept of God?
- e. If there is no God, how does the world function? What is science's role? Fate? Destiny?
- e. The text of "I Do Not believe in God" should be read.
- f. Following the reading of the text materials, the discussion leader should ask: How does this text support your lack of belief in God?

Group 5: I Don't Know.

- a. ~~Why did you choose to be in this group?~~
- b. What doubts do you have that make it hard for you to make a decision in regard to your belief in God?
- c. What would help you to become more certain about your beliefs in God? What kind of proof of God's existence would help you? (An explanation of theodicy -when bad things happen to good people?)
- d. Does Judaism resolve any of these issues for you or help make things clearer?
- e. How do you think that your understanding or practice of Judaism is affected because you are unsure of your belief in God?
- f. In what way do you think that you might be missing a main point of Judaism by not believing in God?