

How to Know God

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Abstract: Judaism gives us not one but many ways to think about God, to know God. At the same time, and remarkably so, Judaism consistently articulates a profound humility about what humanity can ever truly know about God.

In anticipation of the festival of Shavuot next week, when we celebrate God's revelation at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah, the focus of my teaching tonight is "How to know God."

There is no single, monolithic Jewish view of God. In fact, there are many different Jewish views of God. Biblical Judaism speaks of a supernatural, transcendent God. A creator God who is superior to and separate from nature. A God who is pure intellect, pure mind. The Torah also knows of an anthropomorphic God. A parent God who loves and cares, but who also gets angry and punishing, just like a human person.

The successor to biblical Judaism was rabbinic Judaism. The Rabbis embraced both views of God, the transcendent and the anthropomorphic. This combination is enshrined in our liturgy. Think of the famous prayer *Avinu malkeinu*. God is *malkeinu*, our king – the transcendent sovereign of the universe. God is simultaneously *avinu* – our loving parental father.

The successor to rabbinic Judaism was medieval Judaism. The medieval Jewish theologians rejected the anthropomorphic concept of God. They believed it was insulting to conceptualize God as human-like in any way. God was utterly unique and incomparable. The medieval Jewish theologians argued that to compare God to anything, especially to something as material and finite as a human being, was much too limiting a view of God.

Existing simultaneously with medieval Judaism was mystical Judaism. In contrast to the biblical concept of a transcendent God, the mystics speak of an immanent God, a God who is embedded within nature and whose presence pervades all reality. In contrast to the biblical concept of an anthropomorphic God, the mystics speak of an impersonal God that is all being itself, the source that animates all life.

For the mystics, God is neither a person nor an intellect. God is the process that drives human evolution as well as the evolution of the universe. God is the big bang.

So here we have three different Jewish views of God. And each view articulates its own limitation.

In one of the most celebrated passages in the Torah, biblical Judaism teaches that no human being can see God's face and still live. Only God's back can be seen. That is, no human being can experience God directly. We can know of God only indirectly. Medieval Judaism teaches that God's true essence and nature is ultimately unknowable to the finite and limited human mind. Mystical Judaism teaches that God's true nature is hidden.

Judaism gives us not one but many ways to think about God, to know God. At the same time, and remarkably so, Judaism consistently articulates a profound humility about what humanity can ever truly know about God.

Judaism also gives us not one but many pathways to know God. We can know God through the study of Torah, through prayer, through doing good for others, through communing with nature.

How did our biblical ancestors come to know God? The ancient Israelites experienced God at Mount Sinai. Sinai instructs that one way to know God is through wilderness – on the mountaintop, by the ocean, in the redwood forest.

But it's not just physical wilderness, physical wide open spaces, that make possible knowing God. We know God when our minds are wide open. We know God when we are wide open and not closed down by distractions or preconceptions, when we can get access to our souls and to our deepest and innermost selves.

According to tradition, when God gave the Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai, it was completely quiet. Sinai teaches us that another way to know God is through moments of complete silence, moments of utter solitude.

So if you truly want to know God what do you do? You need to make moments when you can be as quiet as it was on top of Mount Sinai. You need to make moments when you can be as open and free as the wide open spaces of the wilderness.