Disenchantment and Enchantment of the Universe

The Two Gods of Judaism

The theology of Maimonides and poetic imagery of the Kabbalah offer Jews two different pathways to God. Is it possible to embrace them both?

To this day,” wrote Mordecai Kaplan in 1937, “there is no intellectually formulated conception which has acquired authoritative recognition in Judaism as the only true idea of God. The inevitable conclusion to which we are led . . . is that the Jewish civilization cannot survive without the God-idea as an integral part of it, but it is in no need of having any specific formulation of that idea authoritative for all Jews.”

By JOEL HECKER
In making his bold observation, Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist movement, touched on one of Judaism's fundamental paradoxes: while the faith needs an idea of a God in order to exist, this idea can be taken in many different directions. In our tradition, the multiple forms in which God was described all sought to construct a divinity who could convincingly command, love, communicate, reward and punish, as well as be present throughout all of reality. The different understandings of God may often appear to be contradictory, but their co-existence constitutes an invigorating element in Judaism.

Two Sets of Stars

“The Many Gods of Judaism” is the glibly blasphemous title I chose for an adult-education course I once gave on different conceptions of God in Jewish history. I aimed to demonstrate that while God was a moving target, Jewish discourse about God is crucial. Ultimately, I argued, Judaism is unknowable without God and yet God remains unknowable. Therefore, it is left up to us to continue to posit models, using language that reassures and yet strains our imagination, to strive for the Font of Existence that eludes comprehension.

Medieval Jewish discourse has bequeathed us a rich legacy of debate and argumentation on the nature of God and its impact on our life and faith. In the Middle Ages, God-talk was a serious endeavor. It went beyond pure theology and served as the basis of all talk of holiness, purity, ethics, and the spiritual life. In the discussion that follows, I will contrast two very different medieval constructs of God: the rationalist thought of Maimonides and the effervescent visions of Kabbalah. These two conceptions continue to serve as important poles for orienting ourselves to the abiding concern of thinking about God today.

At a certain point in my early adulthood, theological models that I had internalized began to feel unsophisticated and stale. In rabbinical school, I became enthralled by Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed, as it offered a philosophical vision of God and of divinity’s relationship to the universe, as well as a religiosity liberated from God’s relentlessly watchful eyes. Maimonides (1135-1204) staked out territory that was sanitized of superstitious, magical, and fantastic beliefs. He made me feel that I could stand proudly, maintaining liberal values while practicing a counter-cultural version of traditional Judaism.

Judaism is unknowable without God and yet God remains unknowable.

At the same time, while engaged in the intensive study of the laws of meat and milk - interesting material, but not the stuff that makes for great theology - I began to read about Kabbalah. The lushness of the kabbalistic system - its view of God as immanent in the created world, the masculine and feminine aspects of the Godhead, the notion that human beings may influence and enhance the power of the Divine - served as a powerful challenge and antidote to Maimonides’ often cold intellectualism.

Several tensions emerge from the consideration of the Maimonidean and kabbalistic world-views. The first tension relates to God’s accessibility; that is, to what extent can we have an experience of God and the holy, and to what extent is God an ideal to which we can direct ourselves while it remains eternally elusive? The second tension has to do with religious symbols and metaphors: when we talk about holiness in this world, are we using God-language in the course of religious practice, or are we talking about supernatural essences that run like electrical currents through the natural world?

The answers that Maimonides and the kabbalists offer to these questions are strikingly different. The former aims for philosophical clarity - a purity and simplicity of conception.
The latter find the truth of divinity in lush imagery that morphs from one symbol-cluster to another. The kabbalists, rejecting Maimonides’ radical insistence on absolute transcendence, conceived of ten sefirot - divine emanations - which enable a bridging of the chasm between God and humanity.

If we hold both conceptions simultaneously as separate theological constellations that occupy the same universe, we are forced to adopt one of three possible approaches: (1) accept them as contradictory systems that occur in the flux of Jewish history; (2) harmonize them (just as kabbalists through the centuries insisted that Maimonides “converted” once he understood the truth of Jewish mysticism); (3) recognize the values and deficits of each of these options, using both sets of stars for navigation. The third of these options, I believe, is potentially the most rewarding.

Maimonides’s God-talk emphasizes God’s absolute transcendence. For Maimonides, the entire purpose of the Torah is to educate the Jewish people in the knowledge that there is a God who is utterly transcendent, and that all anthropomorphic statements in the Torah are to be understood figuratively. As he states in the third of his famous Thirteen Principles of faith, enumerated in his commentary on Tractate Sanhedrin of the Mishnah:

We are to believe that He is incorporeal, that His unity is neither potentially nor actually physical. None of the attributes of matter can be predicated of Him, neither motion, nor rest, for example . . . That is why our sages . . . said: “On high there is neither sitting nor standing, neither want nor weariness” (BT Hagigah 15a) . . . Whenever Scripture describes Him in corporeal terms like walking, standing, sitting, speaking, and the like, it speaks metaphorically. Thus our sages said, “The Torah speaks in human Language.” (BT Berakhot 31b)

For Maimonides, positing anything about God is an act of theological hubris. He carefully limits the occasions in which one might describe God in language: during the reading of the Torah or reciting rabbinically sanctioned prayers, but not beyond these. The Psalmist seems to have captured Maimonides’ idea precisely: “To You, God, silence is praise.” (Psalms 65:2)

For Maimonides, and for other rationalist medieval philosophers, the very notion of divine perfection required that there be no direct connection between God and the material world - a world containing good things, to be sure, but also consisting of sickness and death, mutability and mortality, corruption and cruelty. By insisting on God’s utter remove from our world of experience, God is liberated from any diminishment and protected from the banalities commonly ascribed to divinity in popular religious proclamations. Describing God’s features, actions, or even His greatness, then, becomes largely a pursuit of fantasy, appearing in Maimonidean eyes as petty, literalistic, and childish.

Flames and Fringes

The extreme extent to which Maimonides pushed his argument may well have played a role in the abundance of imaginative and highly metaphorical modes of description of God in the kabbalistic literature produced later in the 12th and 13th centuries. In the Zohar, the canonical masterpiece of Kabbalah, the mystical companions of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai discuss two apparently contradictory verses from chapter 4 of Deuteronomy. Verse 24 reads: “For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God.” And yet, in verse 4, the Torah says: “You, cleaving to the Lord your God, are alive every one of you today.” How can someone cleave to a devouring fire? The Zohar expands on the nature of the divine flame:

The word has been discussed among the Companions: There is a fire devouring fire,
devouring and consuming it, for there is fire fiercer than fire, as they have established. But come and see: Whoever desires to penetrate the wisdom of holy unification should contemplate the flame ascending from a glowing ember or a burning candle. For flame ascends only when grasped by coarse substance. Come and see! In a flame ascending are two lights: one, a white light, radiant; the other, a light tinged with black or blue. The white light is above, ascending unswervingly, while beneath it is the blue or black light, a throne for the white, which rests upon it, each embracing the other, becoming one. This black light colored blue, below, is a throne of glory for the white—here lies the mystery of the thread of blue. This blue-black throne is grasped by another
substance below, so it can flame, arousing it to embrace the white light. Sometimes this blue-black turns red, while the white light above never wavers, constantly white. (Zohar 1:50b-51a, translated by Daniel Matt)

Whereas Maimonides sought to divorce divinity from humanity, the kabbalists entwine the human and divine. Contemplating a burning candle, they interpret the manifold colors and characteristics of the flame as sources of mystical secrets. White, at the tip of the flame, represents God’s lovingkindness, divinity’s purest and unchanging nature, stable illumination rising above fire’s destructive potential. Red reflects the aspect of God experienced as Judgment, fire’s potential to burn unchecked. The blue and black, consuming the wax of the candle, draw on “another substance below,” the lower realms of Creation. Miraculously, the nation of Israel is able to cleave to the “devouring fire” - red-hot and annihilating - because of the ultimately protective and illuminative qualities of the white flame.

Holiness is not something that one possesses, but rather that one strives for.

In this beautiful passage, the Zohar links the imagery of the burning candle with the performance of mitzvot, religious commandments. The “mystery of the thread of blue” refers to the ritual wearing of tsitsit, fringes. In Numbers 15, the Israelites are commanded to make “fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations,” and to “put upon the fringe of the borders a thread of blue,” so that they “may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them.” For the kabbalists, wearing the blue thread meant direct access to divinity, as the same blueness is the point of connection to God, whether on the corner of one’s garment or at the base of the flame. In the zoharic imagination, the familiar ritual of tsitsit is tied to a divine mystery - the flame that both embraces and devours.

The Divine in the Human

For the medieval kabbalists, mitzvot are a way of cleaving to the Divine. For Maimonides, by contrast, the religious commandment behaviorally conditions the practitioner to be conscious of his or her spiritual and social goals. In Maimonides’ austere religious vision, features of religiosity such as holiness and purity do not signify aspects of the divine realm that have been translated into the material world. That kind of transmutation from realm to realm would transgress the inviolability of God’s transcendence. Holiness is not something that one possesses, but rather that one strives for.

Accordingly, Maimonides contends that the hereditary priestly classes - the Kohanim and Levites - are not necessarily holier than other Jews:

Not only for the Tribe of Levi, but each and every individual human being, whose spirit moves him and whose knowledge gives him understanding to set himself apart in order to stand before the Lord, to serve Him, to worship Him, and to know Him, who walks upright as God created him to do, and releases himself from the yoke of the many foolish considerations which trouble people - such an individual is as sanctified as the Holy of Holies, and his portion and inheritance shall be in God forever and ever. God shall grant him adequate sustenance in this world, the same as He had granted to the priests and to the Levites. (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Sabbatical Year and Jubilee, 13:13).

The priests and Levites lost their superior socio-political status with the destruction of the
Second Temple. Without a Temple, their cultic positions have become symbolic. Maimonides transforms a lineage-based system into a meritocracy: what seemed to be metaphysically-endowed positions have become behavioral goals. The office-bearers once perceived as God’s representatives now signify the religious virtue to which all worshippers should aspire.

The kabbalists took a different tack, developing sophisticated descriptions of the ways in which holiness comes down into the world. Maimonides insists on a rigid separation between God and humanity. The kabbalists strive to overcome the barriers on the way to unification with Him.

In the Zohar (2:94b), we read that Rabbi Yose greets Rabbi Hiyya (in Caesarea) and proclaims, “How happy I am to see the face of Shekhinah [the Divine Presence]!” Elsewhere, Rabbi Elazar encounters three other rabbis and declares that they are called “the face of the Shekhinah,” because “the Shekhinah is hidden within them. She is concealed and they are revealed.” (2:163b) In another story, “Rabbi Pinhas came forward and kissed Rabbi Shimon. He said, ‘Let us kiss the mouth of God, perfumed with the fragrances of its garden.’” (3:201b)

Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, commonly known as Rashbi, is the hero of the Zohar (and its alleged author.) He does not acquire his status through any exalted lineage; his holiness resides within him by dint of his great kabbalistic insight, his ability to plumb the mystical depths of the Torah, and his closeness to God. While the zoharic texts do not speak explicitly of the incarnation of God in human form, they push in that direction, a position that would be anathema to Maimonides, and certainly, in his circles, would have been cause for excommunication or worse. Rashbi is extolled throughout the Zohar as a paragon of humanity, the pinnacle of human ability to manifest divinity in this world.

In modern times, Hasidim often feel an aura surrounding their rebbes, men who have a legacy of mystical leadership, deep piety, and humility. These leaders carry real-world political power as well, but the insularity, intense traditionalism, pronounced non-conformity with Western beliefs, and practices of Hasidic communities make their foreignness unapproachable to most Western Jews. In contrast, when the Dalai Lama appeared in New York’s Central Park, hundreds of thousands of
people attended - many Jews, one imagines, among them. In his presence, according to reports, one experiences a sense that the Dalai Lama is endowed with something profound and that he is liberated from human foibles in a way that elicits admiration. His formal title, “His Holiness,” does not seem to faze the Western, liberal mindset, perhaps because he has no political power and does not issue religious directives.

Enchantment and Disenchantment

The poetry of the Zohar uses a plethora of images to induce an experience of God in the world, but its shape-shifting lyricism confounds our ability to fully grasp its subject. At the same time, Kabbalah grounds divinity in human experience and behavior. Human performance of commandments not only creates holiness in the individual, but has an impact on the divine realm. For example, in Sefer Ta’amei ha-Mitzvot (“The Book of Reasons for the Commandments”), the kabbalist Joseph of Hamadan discusses the significance of eating matzah on the night of the Seder:

According to the way of the kabbalah . . . since that night is protected from agents of destruction, [we eat the matzah] in order to uproot the agents of destruction and the evil inclination from the world, and in order to inculcate the good inclination in the body. The matzah symbolizes the Shekhinah so that the blessed holy One will cause His Shekhinah to dwell there . . .

Statements like this assume a sympathy between the upper and lower domain - a symbiosis so strong that one region has an immediate effect upon the other. This approach to the commandments pervades the kabbalistic system; indeed a significant proportion of kabbalistic writing deals with this topic. In this way, Kabbalah imbues the world with enchantment.

From the 18th century onward, it became fashionable for “enlightened” people to imagine that religion would be outpaced by science and that the hard reality of human autonomy would emerge. Vestiges of the past, including angels and demons, would be swept aside by the light of reason. The modern era would be characterized by its disenchantment of the world, and, among Jewish thinkers, Maimonides would be the undisputed star of the new orientation towards Judaism.

Maimonides rid the world of the mystical channels connecting God and humanity, leaving human beings autonomous and morally responsible for their own actions. God’s radical otherness demands humility, inasmuch as it erases the cosmic significance of human behavior. Maimonides issues a powerful warning, cautioning us to attend to our own actions, to be reflective of how we are acting in the world, and to beware of lurking narcissism. The disadvantage to this approach is that God is utterly removed from our existence, serving as a signpost, but not as a caring or supportive deity. The God of the Bible, who actively rewards right living, becomes largely illusory. Maimonides’s religion risks becoming, for the majority, abstract or elitist. The disenchantment that his teachings demand may free people of childish relationships with God, but in doing so they may give up on any relationship at all.

In sharp contradistinction, the world of the kabbalists, in all its beauty and complexity, is a veil through which the truth about God may be perceived by those who know how to look. Kabbalistic God-talk is aesthetically lush, in deference to the experience of God’s presence everywhere. In kabbalistic literature, symbols pile upon each other trying to expand, rather than contract, the realm of God’s blessing.

Kabbalah thus offers the possibility of feeling intimately and broadly connected to the world at large. The potential for thinking environmentally becomes obvious. Community
is strengthened when people recognize the latent image of God within the other. Yet the dangers of such enchantment are precisely those against which Maimonides cautioned. Hubris looms large when one can imagine oneself intimately connected to God. This God is so seemingly accessible that one runs the risk of fetishizing religious objects - attending more to the ritual or the object than to the holiness and ethics they are intended to inspire.

Hubris looms large when one can imagine oneself intimately connected to God.

In Kabbalah, religious metaphors participate so fully in the object they represent that they converge with it. The symbol becomes embedded in its physical counterpart; thus the radiant face of a beloved friend may be perceived as the face of the Shekhinah, and kissing that friend is tantamount to kissing Divinity itself. Skeptical views of religious symbols, such as in the thought of Maimonides or Protestant Christianity, keep reminding us that these symbols are stand-ins, not the things themselves.

Like Bertolt Brecht pulling back the curtain to remind the audience that there are workers pulling the strings and moving the props, Maimonides goes to great lengths to expose metaphors at work, lest we confuse them for divine reality. God is not really a king or father; God does not actually speak or see; nor does He have an outstretched hand. This is why Maimonides cautions against using God’s praises in the liturgy as a springboard for any further discussion of divine traits. On the one hand, his religious philosophy insists on a rigorous approach to reality; on the other, it can denude Judaism of its poetic pull.

The poetry that I am referring to lies in the profusion of images that kabbalistic literature, and the Zohar in particular, provides. God’s feminine presence, the Shekhinah, is described as garden, earth, moon, apple orchard, field, rose, throne, speech, blue light, Tree of Knowledge, and Oral Torah. Her masculine counterpart is characterized as fountain, sun, beauty, compassion, harmony, voice, white light, Tree of Life, and Written Torah. This sample of terms is a small fraction of a storehouse of symbols that create word-pictures for contemplating a divine reality.

In the end, both the kabbalists and Maimonides want to know the unknowable. In the Maimonidean view, one arrives at true theological understanding through the methodical stripping away of biblical and rabbinic embroidery of the unvarnished truth of God’s ultimate simplicity. In the Zohar, one overcomes the temptation to perceive this world as the true reality through an overflow of images, the very multitude of which signifies God’s ultimate mysteriousness. Language and symbols are not distancing mechanisms, but rather invitations to action and experience: meditation on a candle, creative biblical exegesis, wearing tsitsit. Kabbalah’s rich complex of associations offers a powerful balance for the theological rectitude of Maimonides. At the same time, Maimonides’ commitment to what he would consider truth continues to resonate today as a powerful counter-force to the unfortunate enlistment of Kabbalah in support of xenophobia and misogyny, and its appropriation by charlatans, harmless or not.

The enchanted kabbalistic world-view provides religious incentive and speaks to a level of religious experience that Maimonides’ puritanical theology cannot. Keeping both sets of aims in mind can help construct a living theology that is responsive to the lived religious life and the demands of intellectual integrity. For Jews in the 21st century, embracing the two sets of God-talk enables honest self-reflection and responsibility, while allowing for the seduction that only poetry can provide.