

JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTIONS OF GOD

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“ ‘Face after face [did the Lord speak with you]’ (Deut 5:4). R. Levi said: God faced them in many guises. To one He appeared standing, and to one seated; to one as a young man, and to one as an old man. How so? At the time the Holy One, blessed be He, appeared on the Red Sea to wage war for His children... He faced them as a young man... And when the Holy One, blessed be He, appeared on Mount Sinai to give the Torah to Israel, He faced them as an old man... In regard to God’s guises, R. Hiyya bar Abba said: If a whoreson should say to you, ‘They are two different gods,’ quote God as saying in reply: I am the One of the sea and I am the One of Sinai.” – *Pesikta Rabbati*¹

Nietzsche rightly warned that “only something which has no history can be defined”². Jewish philosophical conceptions of God have a history of more than a thousand years – nourished by the soils of a great many philosophical traditions, formed within disparate cultural and scientific milieus, and guided by diverse spiritual and existential visions. There is, therefore, no single Jewish philosophical conception of God, and the bustling array of competing conceptions does not lend itself to easy systemization. Nonetheless, it is the quixotic aim of this chapter to provide an overview of this theological cacophony.

To this end I propose to sketch some maps of this unruly conceptual terrain, so as to provide at least some initial orientation amidst the diversity, without distorting it by artificial neatening. In doing so I have adopted Ludwig Wittgenstein’s method of elucidating ‘messy’ words and concepts by means of laying out a series of carefully chosen ‘centres of variation’ for the use of the word or concept in question³. In this case, *God* as conceived of by Jewish philosophers. These centres of variation are not meant to be exhaustive⁴. Rather, the selected examples are intended to locate only the conceptual terrain’s most significant landmarks, and thereby to provide the beginnings of a guide to the terrain as a whole. With this orienting map in hand, the reader should be able to fill it out by bringing further examples and considering

¹ *Pesikta Rabbati*, Vol I, trans. William G Braude, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1968, pp. 421-2 (21:6).

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 53 (II:13).

³ See, for example: “[I]f we were asked about the essence of punishment, or about the essence of revolution, or about the essence of knowledge, or of cultural decay, or of the refined sense for music, – we should not now try at all costs to give something *common* to the entirely different cases... but instead, examples, as it were centers of variation” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, MS:152, in his *Wittgenstein’s Nachlass: The Bergen Electronic Edition*, Charlottesville, InteLex, 2003, pp. 16-7; my translation); and see also his *The Blue and Brown Books*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1958, p. 28.

⁴ Compare: “I give a centre of variation. If a wall had merging colours I could point to *pure* parts of the field. So I can point to *one simple use*; I don’t use this as a paradigm. Your bringing other cases is a contribution, not a contradiction; as when you say ‘pink’ you haven’t contradicted my pointing out red, white in the pure parts” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures on Philosophical Psychology*, ed. PT Geach, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988, p. 25).

how they relate to the landmarks already marked out. Some of these additions will fall somewhere between the landmarks I provide, others will extend the map out into wider ground.

Jewish philosophical conceptions of God are sufficiently complex that they cannot be covered by a single map. Rather, each aspect of the concept will need a map of its own. For the purposes of this chapter I have picked seven such aspects, each of which will receive its own set of centres of conceptual variation.

Thus, in §1 I will provide a map of how Jewish philosophers have thought of the role and status of conceiving of (or cognizing) God in the first place. In §2, a map of what Jewish philosophers have understood to be definitive of the divine, i.e. what they take it to be that makes God *God*. In §3, a map of Jewish philosophical conceptions of God's oneness. In §4, a map of Jewish philosophical conceptions of God's transcendence or immanence. In §5, a map of Jewish philosophical conceptions of God's personhood or lack thereof. In §6, a map of Jewish philosophical understandings of why God created (or caused) a world. And in §7, a map of Jewish philosophical understandings of God's relationship to the Jewish people. Finally, I will conclude – in §8 – with some brief remarks on what Jewish philosophers have made of the immense foregoing diversity of theological conceptions.

Of course, not only will each map be incomplete, but this list of mapped aspects is incomplete too. Many other aspects of Jewish philosophical conceptions of God could have been included, such as conceptions of: God's degree and kind of perfection (or lack thereof), God's means and modes of providence (or lack thereof)⁵, God's means and modes of communication and revelation (or lack thereof), God's means and modes of creation, and many others, each of which have been of great importance in Jewish philosophical discussions of God. The following, however, will have to suffice as a start.

A full conception of God can be constructed by taking a position regarding multiple different aspects, and combining them to fill out one's concept ever more completely. Particular positions in one aspect sometimes seem to have affinities to, or implications for, particular positions in other aspects. To the degree that this is the case, full conceptions of God would end-up clustering in a number of fairly predictable ways, for the conceptual routes between aspects would be somewhat fixed. However, which positions in one aspect bear affinities and implications for which positions in another aspect, is itself often hotly contested by Jewish philosophers. And as a result of these meta-debates, different thinkers have combined positions across the aspects in quite different ways, thereby producing an vast array of complete conceptions of God⁶. Unfortunately, I will not be able to deal with questions of cross-aspect entailment in this chapter, so our discussion will largely be limited to the various ingredients of full conceptions of God, rather than the full conceptions themselves.

Finally, I should note that often a single philosopher can seem to be committed, in different places, to distinct – and sometimes seemingly contrary – positions, which could enable them to plausibly be located at more than one centre of variation. Thus on the one hand, it should not be assumed that the appearance of a philosopher to illustrate a particular centre of variation gives a complete picture of their position on the issue in question. And on the other hand, I have occasionally felt free to draw on the different strands of a single philosopher's thought to exemplify multiple – even seemingly contrary – centres of variation.⁷

⁵ For a discussion of Jewish philosophical conceptions of providence, see Chap ?? in this volume.

⁶ This is part of the reason why phrases such as 'the rationalist conception of God', 'the mystical conception of God', and the like, can sometimes be more misleading than helpful – as they tend to cover over a great deal of diversity, ambiguity, and overlap.

⁷ Given the brevity of my engagement with each of the philosophers whom I use to illustrate a given position, I will not be able to set out the details that I take to ground my particular – and no doubt sometimes contestable – interpretations. Often, where the reader disagrees with my understanding, they may be able to substitute a different thinker to fill the relevant position. And if not, then as long as the interpretation that I offer is one that has been taken

1. META-THEOLOGY: MAPPING JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL ATTITUDES TO COGNIZING GOD

Before we investigate Jewish philosophical conceptions of God, it will be helpful to get some sense of the diversity of Jewish philosophical attitudes towards the very project of conceiving of – or cognizing – God.

One centre of variation is that COGNIZING GOD IS THE HIGHEST MODE OF RELATION TO THE DIVINE. Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) writes that “it is clear that after apprehension, total devotion to Him and the employment of intellectual thought in constantly loving Him should be aimed at... [Y]ou should take great care during these precious times not to set your thought to work on anything other than that intellectual worship consisting in nearness to God and being in His presence”⁸. Contemplating God – or sometimes, knowing Him – is thus taken to be the highest form of worship. Indeed, for Maimonides, contemplating God is the form that loving Him takes. It brings the highest aspect of ourselves (our intellects) into contact with the highest that there is (God). Sometimes this is also considered the most pleasurable thing we can do, as Levi Gersonides (1288-1344) says: “[K]nowing is pleasurable to the knower; and whoever knows more things and things of a superior sort has greater pleasure and joy... Accordingly, our ancient sages (of blessed memory) have said that... our greatest joy is in what we know of God”⁹. More significantly, this intellectual contemplation of the divine is often taken to be the route to true communion – or even union – with God (and, thereby, to a form of immortality as well). Since, as Maimonides says, “intellect is nothing but the thing that is intellectually cognized”¹⁰, it follows that if we can cognize God in the right way, then our intellects will unite with the divine, and thereby participate in His perfection and eternity: “[O]ur Sages said: ‘In the future world... the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads enjoying the brightness of the divine presence.’ The intent of their remark, ‘Their crowns on their heads,’ is the immortality of the soul in the intellectual sphere and the merging of the two into one, as described by the renowned philosophers”¹¹.

A centre of variation seeming to sit at the farthest extreme from this one, is that COGNIZING GOD IS ACTIVELY DESTRUCTIVE OF THE HIGHEST (OR PERHAPS EVEN ANY) RELATION TO THE DIVINE. One simple reason for this could be that God is such that He is impossible to cognize – or conceive of – at all. In that case, to attempt to relate to Him cognitively would be to profoundly miss the mark, and to fail to relate to Him altogether. Instead, God must – and indeed can only – be related to in a non-cognitive manner. Thus Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903-1994) writes: “God... is not conceivable in terms of any attributes and is analogous to nothing whatsoever... Man’s faith in a God who eludes all predication of attributes and the love he bears for a God who cannot be imagined can only mean the readiness of man to serve God by observing his Torah and its precepts”¹². Along similar lines Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810) writes that “one must cast aside all wisdom, and worship God with complete innocence and simplicity... For in truth there... is no wisdom and no understanding in relation to Him (may He be blessed). And the essential thing is that the Merciful One

up within the tradition as one reasonable reading of the philosopher in question, that strikes me as itself giving it a place within the arena of Jewish philosophical positions.

⁸ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed (Vol II)*, trans. Shlomo Pines, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1963, pp. 621 & 623 (III:51).

⁹ Levi Gersonides, *The Wars of the Lord: Volume Three*, trans. Seymour Feldman, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1999, p. 173 (Bk V, Pt III, Chap XII).

¹⁰ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed (Vol I)*, trans. Shlomo Pines, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 164 (I:68).

¹¹ Moses Maimonides, *Maimonides’ Commentary on the Mishnah: Tractate Sanhedrin*, trans. Fred Rosner, New York, Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981, p. 144 (chap 10).

¹² Yeshayahu Leibowitz, ‘The Reading of Shema’, in his *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. Eliezer Goldman, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 44.

wants the heart”¹³. Emil Fackenheim (1916-2003) provides a slightly different explanation as to why attempting to cognize God undermines the very possibility of relating to Him: “If there is a God, and if He is *God*, He embraces man’s existence with such totality as to make objective detachment altogether impossible... A God who can be an *object* is not God. Because a God who is subjected to man’s objective judgment is not God... If God is God, He is not an object, but *the Subject*”¹⁴. For Fackenheim, rather than seeking to submit God to our knowing (and thereby to fail to relate to the unobjectifiable God at all), we must instead submit ourselves to His total sovereignty¹⁵. According to these thinkers, attempting to relate to God intellectually, can lead us not just epistemically astray, but also existentially and spiritually.

A third centre of variation falls somewhere between the previous two. Namely, that COGNIZING GOD IS IRRELEVANT TO THE HIGHEST RELATION TO THE DIVINE – neither identical to it, nor definitively destructive of it. One way into this position is simply by denying that the intellect is our highest faculty. In that case it will therefore neither be taken to be the highest mode of relation to the divine nor to be the route to immortality. According to Chasdai Crescas (c. 1340-1410), “some of the sages of our nation have stumbled... [T]hey all agree that... eternal happiness resides in the acquired intelligibles... [But t]hese... views destroy the Torah and uproot the tradition”¹⁶. Rather, “that which is essential to the perfection of the soul is something distinct from intellection, namely, love. It is evident with respect to love that it engenders attachment to God”¹⁷. Indeed, “the degree of strength or weakness of the love of the good should correspond to the degree of good in that which is loved. And the degree of good in the one loved who is God is infinite”¹⁸. Since love is both a loftier and a more fundamental capacity than intellect, the best way to relate to God is by loving Him in accordance with His worthiness of love – namely, infinitely. Martin Buber (1878-1965) stakes out a different alternative to the intellective route when he writes: “Religiosity is... man’s urge to establish a living communion with the unconditioned; it is man’s will to realize the unconditioned through his deed, and to establish it in his world. Genuine religiosity, therefore, has nothing in common with... the clever mental exercises of a practiced intellectuality. Genuine religiosity is doing... For God does not want to be believed in, to be debated and defended by us, but simply to be realized through us.”¹⁹

The boundary-line between the second and third centres of variation will often be ambiguous or indeterminate. More surprising is the possibility of apparent interaction or overlap between the first and second centres of variation, despite their seeming mutual exclusivity. This could happen, for example, by holding the highest relation to God to be a fluctuation between intellectual and non-intellectual modes. Thus Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (1740-1809): “[T]here are people who worship the Creator (blessed be He) with their intellect... and there are people who, so to speak, gaze upon the [Divine] Nothingness... And in truth, when a person is at that level at which God helps him to gaze upon the [Divine] Nothingness, then his intellect is annulled in this reality... And in truth, afterwards, when a person returns to the essence of

¹³ Nachman of Bratslav, *Sefer Likutei MoHaRaN Tinyana*, in his *Sefer Likutei MoHaRaN*, Jerusalem, Hotza’at Keren R. Yisra’el Dov Odesser ZaTzaL, n.d., p. II-26b (Bk II, §44); my translation.

¹⁴ Emil Fackenheim, ‘Self-Realization and the Search for God: A Critique of Modern Humanism and a Defence of Jewish Supernaturalism’, in his *The Jewish Thought of Emil Fackenheim*, ed. Michael L Morgan, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1987, p. 51 (sec IV).

¹⁵ Fackenheim, ‘Self-Realization’, pp. 52-3 (sec IV).

¹⁶ Ḥasdai Crescas, *Light of the Lord (Or Hashem)*, trans. Roslyn Weiss, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 210-1 (II:VI:1).

¹⁷ Crescas, *Light*, pp. 220 (II:VI:1).

¹⁸ Crescas, *Light*, p. 224 (II:VI:1).

¹⁹ Martin Buber, ‘Jewish Religiosity’, in his *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum N Galtzer, New York, Schocken Book, 1995, pp. 93-4.

the intellect, then he is filled with [Divine] overflow... and with all goods"²⁰. Here, there is seen to be a fruitful dialectical movement back and forth between intellectual worship of God and a mode of communion that is beyond the intellectual. A different way in which the first and second centres of variation could be – in some sense – combined, would be by understanding the cognition of God in what might otherwise be considered a non-cognitive manner. Thus, for example, Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1995) writes: "Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision... The knowledge of God which we can have... receives a positive meaning from the moral 'God is merciful', which means: 'Be merciful like Him'. The attributes of God are given not in the indicative, but in the imperative. The knowledge of God comes to us like a commandment, a *Mitzvah*. To know God is to know what must be done"²¹. For Levinas, attempting to know God in the regular – indicative – manner, would be thoroughly religiously destructive. But as long as our knowledge of God takes a special – imperative – form, then that will indeed be the highest mode of relating to God.

Here, therefore – as in the rest of the chapter – the positions that I stake out are focal points from which numerous variant positions can be derived, and these will often be complex hybrids of two or more of the centres of variation presented.

2. IDENTIFYING GOD: MAPPING JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTIONS OF WHAT MAKES GOD GOD

There are two levels on which we might seek to understand Jewish philosophical conceptions of God. We might want to study the various aspects of their conceptions of God's complete nature. Or we might want to know something more specific and fundamental. Namely, which part of those fleshed-out conceptions of God is it that they take to be definitive of Him *as God*? Which aspect do they take to make a given conception of God count as a conception *of God*? Some philosophers may take all aspects of God's nature to be equally fundamental to Him, and therefore jointly definitive of Him as God. Others, however, may single-out a particular quality as that which is constitutive of divinity. Importantly, sometimes that single definitive quality will also be taken to be the epistemic foundation from which the philosopher can then derive knowledge of much of the rest of God's nature: namely, whatever further qualities are entailed or implied by that fundamental one.

One centre of variation is that GOD IS DEFINED AS THE (ABSOLUTELY) PERFECT. Thus, Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) writes: "[B]y God we understand a supremely perfect and absolutely infinite Being", and he calls this a definition²². Or: "[A]n absolutely infinite or perfect Entity; that is, God... [H]is essence excludes all imperfection and involves absolute perfection"²³. Whatever is absolutely perfect – according to Spinoza – will thereby count as God, regardless of what else may or may not be true of It. Chasdai Crescas offers a similar characterization: "[I]t is known that God is the source and origin of all the perfections, and... His perfection... is His essence"²⁴. Here Crescas mentions God's role as origin of everything else, but nonetheless focusses specifically on His perfection as His defining characteristic. Though two philosophers

²⁰ Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, *Sefer Kedushat Levi haShalem*, Brooklyn, Register Lithographers, 1991/2, p. 60a (penultimate entry in 'Pekudei'); my translation.

²¹ Emmanuel Levinas, 'A Religion for Adults', in his *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 17.

²² Baruch Spinoza, *The Letters*, in his *Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Michael L Morgan, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2002, p. 762 (Letter 2).

²³ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, in his *Complete Works*, p. 223 (I:P11s).

²⁴ Crescas, *Light*, p. 218 (II:VI:1).

may both consider nominally the same quality to be definitive of divinity, they may nonetheless differ radically in their understandings of the nature of that quality, and therefore of what they take it to entail. Thus, from very different conceptions of perfection, Spinoza and Crescas arrive at very different conceptions of God: for Spinoza, a perfect God means chiefly a God with infinite reality and therefore with infinite attributes²⁵; whereas for Crescas, a perfect God means chiefly a God who loves the good infinitely²⁶. These kinds of diverse upshots from abstractly similar starting points will apply across almost all the centres of variation set out in this chapter, making for considerably more diversity even than is indicated by the profusion of centres of variation.

A second centre of variation is that GOD IS DEFINED AS THE CREATOR. Abraham Miguel Cardozo (c. 1626-1706) spells out this position particularly clearly: “The Torah, Prophets, Writings, and the ancient Jewish sages... say that... the *Creator Himself* is God. We recognize Him as such, not on account of His inherent properties, but on account of His Creation. It will follow from this that the world’s Creator, *whoever He may be*, is God”²⁷. Cardozo’s position was complicated by the fact that he considered that *our* God would be whomever created *our* world – even if that was not the First cause of all existence. But in this he was an unusual outlier. The overwhelming majority of Jewish philosophers who shared Cardozo’s general approach – that God is defined by being the Creator – held that God is defined not as our proximate creator, but as the fundamental creator of all. It is this position that is at work in Samuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865) when he uses the creation-criterion of Divinity to argue that Spinoza – while he claimed to believe in God – actually did not: “[H]e never said: ‘There is no God’, and he always uses the word ‘God’ with respect and awe; but his God is not The Creator, rather, it is the totality of creatures... And whoever denies intention and wisdom in the creation of creatures, he has no God... And this was Spinoza’s creed”²⁸. Thus, according to Luzzatto, God is defined as the creator (or, rather, a particular kind of creator: a wise and intentional one), and whatever lacks that (or those) attribute(s), cannot count as God at all.

A third centre of variation is that GOD IS DEFINED AS HE WHOM (OR THAT WHICH) REDEEMS OR SAVES US. Judah haLevi (c. 1075-1141) seems to be leaning towards something like this position when he voices the following credo through the character of the sage, in his book, *The Kuzari*: “I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles; who fed them in the desert and gave them the land, after having made them traverse the sea and the Jordan in a miraculous way; who sent Moses with His law, and subsequently thousands of prophets... In the same way God commenced His speech to the assembled people of Israel: ‘I am the God whom you worship, who has led you out of the land of Egypt,’ but He did not say: ‘I am the Creator of the world and your Creator.’”²⁹. That said, it’s unclear from this whether haLevi’s point is a definitory or an epistemic one. Perhaps he takes God to be defined as creator, but is pointing out here that we come to know Him first as our redeemer, and therefore that His redemptive role is experientially – and religiously – primary. We can find a more clear-cut example of this centre of variation in Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), when he says that “God is the Power that makes for

²⁵ See Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 217 (I:D6).

²⁶ See Crescas, *Light*, pp. 218-9 (II:VI:1).

²⁷ Abraham Miguel Cardozo, *This is My God and I Will Praise Him*, in his *Selected Writings*, trans. David J Halperin, New York, Paulist Press, 2001, p. 219 (chap XII).

²⁸ Samuel David Luzzatto, ‘Neged Spinoza’, in his *Mechkarei Yahadut (Vol I)*, Warsaw, Dfus HaTzfirah, 1912/13, pp. 201-2 & 205 (secs 1 & 2); my translation.

²⁹ Judah Hallevi, *Kitab al Khazari*, trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld, London, George Routledge & Sons, 1915, pp. 44 & 46, (Pt I, secs 11 & 25).

salvation”³⁰, and talks of this as “defining the God idea”³¹. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) seems to say something similar. Though he insists that “[w]e have neither an image nor a definition of God”³², he nonetheless provides a criterion for divinity: “How do we identify the divine? Divine is a message that discloses unity where we see diversity, that discloses peace when we are involved in discord. God is He who holds our fitful lives together... If in the afterglow of a religious insight I can see a way to gather up my scattered life, to unite what lies in strife; a way that is good for all men as it is for me – I will know it is His way”³³. These are not intended merely as characterizations of the divine, but as identificatory criteria. Heschel is saying that whatever it is – at bottom – that grants peace and unity to what lies in strife and discord, that, by definition, is God.

Of course, a philosopher could well take God to have all the qualities mentioned in this section, and may even take each quality to entail the others. In that case they may take all three to be simultaneously definitive of God. But equally, they could hold that God has all three of these qualities – even in a mutually entailing manner – while nonetheless taking only one of them to be the quality that is definitive of God’s Divinity.

3. MAPPING JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTIONS OF GOD’S ONENESS

Jewish philosophers seem to be in universal agreement regarding both the claim that God is *one*, and the meta-claim that God’s oneness is central to Jewish conceptions of God. But there is much diversity in their understandings of what exactly God’s oneness amounts to – so that philosophers who count themselves as believing in the oneness of God may nonetheless be denied to do so by others with competing conceptions of the nature of oneness. In this section I will lay out four centres of variation for how God’s oneness has been understood. Some of them – at least on some interpretations – are mutually compatible and perhaps even mutually entailing, whereas others are not. Thus, a single philosopher could potentially take God to be *one* in more than one of these ways. Partially for that very reason, it’s illuminating to recognize the conceptual distinctions between the different kinds of oneness, as they can often be run together.

One centre of variation is that GOD IS ONE IN THE SENSE OF BEING NUMERICALLY UNIQUE/SINGLE. This is perhaps the most straightforward of the conceptions: there is only one God. Thus Bahya Ibn Pakuda (c. 1050-1120) writes: “When I searched for the most important pillar of our religion and the main root, I found this basic principle in the pure assertion of the unity of our Creator. This is the first article of the Law. This assertion is the chief truth of religion. This is what distinguishes between faith and polytheism”³⁴. And in a similar vein, Maimonides: “The foundation of foundations and the pillar of all fields of study is to know that there is a Primary Being. And He brings into being every being... Anyone who entertains the possibility that there is another god apart from this one, transgresses a negative commandment, as it states: ‘You shall have no

³⁰ Mordecai M Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, ,Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1994, p. 60 (chap II).

³¹ Mordecai M Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers*, New York, Reconstructionist Press, 1972, p. 128 (chap II).

³² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, New York, Farrar Straus & Young, 1951, p. 97 (Chap 12).

³³ Heschel, *Man is Not Alone*, p. 109 (Chap 12).

³⁴ Bahya ben Joseph ibn Pakuda, *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, trans. Menahem Mansoor, Sara Arenson, & Shoshana Dannhauser, Oxford, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004, p. 109 (Chap 1).

other gods before Me' (Exod 20:3), and he has denied a fundamental principle, for this is the great principle upon which everything depends"³⁵.

A second centre of variation is that *GOD IS ONE IN THE SENSE OF BEING CATEGORICALLY UNIQUE*. Not only is there only one God, but He is utterly unlike anything else that there is. So much so, that He could not be coherently classed with anything else. That is, God is in a qualitative category of His own. Thus, Abraham ibn Daud (c. 1110-1180) writes: "The meaning of His, may He be exalted, being one [is that]... with respect to nothing being like Him He is not pluralized with other things. An example is that Reuben is one and he with Simeon, Levi, and Judah are many. But when you say 'God, may He be exalted, angels, and creatures,' He is not pluralized by them. [The reason for this is] that He is not in [any]thing of them"³⁶. Hermann Cohen (1842-1919) seems to have meant something along these lines by his stress on the centrality – for Judaism – of God's *uniqueness* over His *oneness*: "It is God's uniqueness, rather than his oneness, that we posit as the essential content of monotheism. Oneness signifies only an opposition to the plurality of gods. It is questionable whether this idea was the primary idea of monotheism, whether it by itself was capable of prevailing against polytheism... [T]he uniqueness of God consists in *incomparability*. 'To whom then will you liken Me, that I should be equal?' (Isa. 40:25)... The incomparability points as much to nature as to every other concept of God"³⁷. Thus, 'oneness' is Cohen's term for what I have classed as the first centre of variation, and 'uniqueness' is his term for the second. For Cohen, that God is unique means that He is utterly distinct from anything else – both from other gods and from the world. For this reason, while Cohen sees *oneness* as standing opposed to polytheism, he sees *uniqueness* as standing opposed to pantheism and panentheism (according to which God and world are not radically set apart). Others agree with Cohen regarding God's categorical uniqueness, but do not take it to have this anti-pantheistic or anti-panentheistic ramification (in fact, for some, God's categorical uniqueness may even be part of an argument for some form of panentheism).

A third centre of variation is that *GOD IS ONE IN THE SENSE OF BEING INTERNALLY SIMPLE*. Not only is there only one God, but that God is uncomposed and indivisible. He is wholly unified within Himself. Consider Maimonides: "God [is] One by virtue of a true Oneness, so that no composition whatever is to be found in Him and no possibility of division in any way whatever"³⁸. Some philosophers take God's indivisibility to entail merely that He has no spatial or material parts, and is therefore – of necessity – not a material being. But others understand indivisibility far more strictly. Thus, Maimonides continues by saying: "He, may He be exalted, has in no way and in no mode any essential attribute, and that just as it is impossible that He should be a body, it is also impossible that He should possess an essential attribute"³⁹. On this conception, God is not simple merely in the sense of having no material parts, but rather, He is simple even in the sense of having no logical or conceptual parts. This kind of absolute divine simplicity is often seen as having radical ramifications, such as that God cannot have any positive properties (since for God to positively have a property would be to introduce a conceptual distinction within God – between Himself and His properties – and God would thereby no longer be absolutely simple). It is therefore often a commitment to God's absolute simplicity that prompts so many Jewish philosophers to claim that all that can properly be said of

³⁵ Moshe ben Maimon (Moses Maimonides), *Sefer Mishneh Torah*, eds. Yochai Makbili, Yechiel Karah, & Hillel Gershoni, Haifa, Miphal Mishneh Torah, 2009, p. 34 (*Sefer haMadda, Hilchot Yesodei haTorah*, chap 1, §§1 & 6); my translation.

³⁶ Abraham ibn Daud, *The Exalted Faith*, trans. Norbert Samuelson, ed. Gershon Weiss, Rutherford, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986, p. 145 (chap 3, pp. 130b-131a).

³⁷ Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan, New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1972, pp. 35 & 44 (chap 1, secs 1 & 14).

³⁸ Maimonides, *The Guide (Vol I)*, p. 111 (l:50).

³⁹ Maimonides, *The Guide (Vol I)*, p. 111 (l:50).

God is some combination of: (i) that He is Himself, (ii) what He is not (or rather, what He categorically could not be), and (iii) what He does – rather than being able to say anything about what He Himself actually is⁴⁰. That we cannot say what God is, is therefore not taken to be due merely to the shortcomings of finite human language or cognition; rather, it is taken to derive from the fact that – given God’s absolute simplicity – there cannot be anything that God is, for to be anything or anyway at all would entail internal complexity. God is therefore taken by these thinkers to be fundamentally ineffable and inconceivable. That said, as widespread as these radical commitments are amongst Jewish philosophers, not all Jewish philosophers understand God’s simplicity in this extreme way. And if His simplicity is not taken to stretch all the way to ruling out logical or conceptual divisibility, then many of these strong apophatic ramifications will be avoided.

A fourth centre of variation is that *GOD IS ONE IN THE SENSE OF BEING ONTOLOGICALLY ALONE/EXHAUSTIVE*. Not only is there only one God, but that one God is all there is. The one God does not stand opposed merely to the existence of other gods, but to the existence of anything else whatsoever. He is the one and only. Thus Menachem Mendel Schneersohn of Lubavitch (the ‘Tzemach Tzedek’, 1789-1866) writes: “[I]n explaining the matter of oneness... it is that literally ‘there is nothing else [beside Him]’ (Deut 4:35) – even amongst the created beings. And that is to say that, in truth, the creatures are not of the category of ‘existence’ or ‘thing’ as they seem to be to our eyes. For this is just from our point of view, because we do not see the Divine vitality. But from the point of view of the Divine vitality – which sustains us – we have no existence, and are literally of the category of ‘nothingness’... And therefore there is absolutely no existence at all, apart from His existence (may He be blessed) – and this is the absolute oneness”⁴¹. There are many ways in which Jewish philosophers have arrived at this remarkable – ‘acosmic’ – conclusion. But one way would be by taking it to be entailed by God’s simplicity. If God is absolutely simple, then He cannot be limited in any way, for limitation would entail logical complexity (a positive nature along with the limit thereon). And if God is utterly unlimited, then no ontological ‘room’ remains for anything besides Him. This conception has profound ramifications for religious life – a fundamental aim of which will often then be for each person to come to recognize their own non-being in the face of the divine plenitude (or at least, for such a recognition to be one significant moment within the back-and-forth dialectic of religious life).

This field of potential positions becomes even more complicated once one takes into account that each centre of variation could receive multiple interpretations. Thus, while two philosophers may consider themselves committed to the existence of a numerically single (or a simple) God, one may consider the other’s conception of singleness (or of simplicity) to be, in fact, multiple (or complex). Isaac bar Sheshet Perfet (1326-1408), for example, once recounted the following critique of the kabbalists, in the name of an unidentified philosopher: “The idol worshippers [i.e. the Christians, are] believers in the [Divine] Trinity; and the kabbalists [are] believers in the [Divine] Decad”⁴². This is a reference to the kabbalistic doctrine of the ten emanatory manifestations of the Divine (i.e. the ten ‘Sefirot’), which the philosopher took to entail a tenfold division of God, and therefore a radical betrayal of either God’s singleness or His simplicity. In the face of critiques like this, the kabbalists vigorously insisted that – and sought to explain how – the doctrine of the Sefirot in no way contravenes God’s oneness. But due either to this philosopher’s different

⁴⁰ See, for example: Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, Treatise II (trans. Samuel Rosenblatt, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976); Bahya ibn Pakuda, *The Book of Direction*, Chap 1, Sec J; and Maimonides, *The Guide (Vol I)*, Pt I, chaps 50-60; and many others.

⁴¹ Menachem Mendel (Schneersohn) of Lubavitch, *Sefer Derech Mitzvotcha, hiy Sefer Ta’amei haMitzvot*, Brooklyn, Kehot Publication Society, 2006, p. 123 (chap ‘Mitzvat Achdut haShem’, sec 3, p. 62a); my translation.

⁴² Isaac bar Sheshet, *She’elot veT’shuvot*, ed. David Metzger, Jerusalem, Mechon Or haMizrach, 1992/3, p. 165 (responsum §157); my translation.

understanding of their theological commitments, or due to his different understanding of the nature of uniqueness and of simplicity, he considered the kabbalists to fall far short of strict oneness. There are therefore many kinds of oneness in relation to God, the variety of which is multiplied still further by the fact that what counts as falling under each, is itself often an essentially contested matter.

4. MAPPING JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTIONS OF GOD'S TRANSCENDENCE OR IMMANENCE

The question of God's transcendence or immanence is that of whether, how, and to what degree, God is beyond the world or present within it. Presence, however, can take many forms. Here are just two: God could be present in the world Himself, in His very being or essence (in a range of senses). I will call this 'ontological immanence'. Or He could remain beyond the world in Himself, while being present in the world by means of His influence or activity. I will call this 'effective immanence'. It might be thought that these two categories are sufficiently different such as to demand two distinct conceptual maps: one map focusing on God's being in relation to the world, and the other focusing on God's causal relations to the world. This could indeed be an illuminating approach. But in practice it is actually often very difficult to draw sharp dividing lines between these two forms of presence, as they appear in the writings of Jewish philosophers. This is at least partially because – at the boundaries – these categories can seem to collapse into one another, as we shall see. In this section I will lay out four centres of variation, but because of the difficulty in making sharp distinctions, they will be somewhat tentative and blurry.

One centre of variation is that GOD IS BOTH WHOLLY ONTOLOGICALLY AND WHOLLY EFFECTIVELY TRANSCENDENT. Though this is perhaps one of the most fraught aspects of Maimonides' philosophy, one strand of his writing seems committed to God's radical transcendence in every possible way: "There is, in truth, no relation in any respect between Him and any of His creatures. For relation is always found between two things falling under the same – necessarily proximate – species... If, however, two things fall under two different genera, there is no relation between them in any respect whatever... How then could there subsist a relation between Him, may He be exalted, and any of the things created by Him, given the immense difference between them...?"⁴³ Maimonides argues that by dint of God's radical ontological difference from everything else, it is impossible that there should be any relation at all between the Divine and the non-Divine, since relations can only obtain between things that are of the same ontological kind. If this is the case, then God cannot be present in the world in any way – neither in Himself nor in His influence or actions, each of which would involve relations of some sort. That said, in this very passage Maimonides describes all things other than God as "His creatures", which seems to imply at least some kind of generative relation between them. And indeed, elsewhere Maimonides writes that "the world derives from the overflow of God"⁴⁴ (even though he insists that "we are not capable of finding the true reality of a term that would correspond to the true reality of the notion. For the mental representation of the action of one who is separate from matter is very difficult"⁴⁵). Thus, though Maimonides sometimes seems committed to the most rigorous possible Divine transcendence (i.e. the logical impossibility of any relation whatsoever between God and world), at other times he seems to walk that back – however self-confessedly unintelligibly. In truth, I do not know of a Jewish philosopher who straightforwardly embraces God's absolute transcendence. Rather, it seems that if this centre of variation is inhabited at all, it is usually inhabited only partially: as one 'moment' in a wider, conflicted, dialectic of transcendence and immanence. Consider, for example,

⁴³ Maimonides, *The Guide (Vol I)*, p. 118 (I:52).

⁴⁴ Maimonides, *The Guide (Vol II)*, p. 279 (II:12).

⁴⁵ Maimonides, *The Guide (Vol II)*, p. 279 (II:12).

Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), who addresses the radically absent God, saying: “Grant, then, awakening – O God – to he / whom Your Nothingness has pierced. / Thus alone are You manifest / in the time that has rejected You. / Your Nothingness is the only experience / that he may have of Thee”⁴⁶. God is so absent from the world as to be nothing at all. And yet, that very nothingness is so present as to be piercing. And so God’s nothingness becomes a mode of His manifestation. There is here a sense of God’s radical transcendence in every respect; and yet even in affirming that radical transcendence, His imminence – at least in some sense – cannot quite be escaped.

A second centre of variation is that GOD IS ONTOLOGICALLY TRANSCENDENT, BUT EFFECTIVELY IMMANENT IN DISCRETE ACTIONS. According to Saadia Gaon (882-941) “the Maker of every body that we can see and think of... Himself transcends this [physical universe]”⁴⁷. Indeed it is the very fact that the world – everything other than God – was created by God *ex nihilo*, that sets Him ontologically apart from and beyond it. Having been created, Saadia takes the world to run – of itself – in a regular fashion. But periodically God intervenes in its natural running. Thus, “all things that exist ordinarily retain their character, and... their Master does not alter them”⁴⁸, but “monotheists... believe that the Creator is capable of changing the ordinary laws of nature”⁴⁹. Indeed He has done so on many occasions, such as with “all the... miracles that are mentioned by the Scriptures”⁵⁰. Thus, while God ontologically transcends the world, He is periodically effectively present in it by means of His actions. Variants to this position will be produced as a result of differing understandings of the mechanism of God’s action (and of its ubiquity). If, for example, God’s action is taken to be something that happens through righteous or sacred human action – or is taken to be enabled by human self-purification and self-elevation in various ways (e.g. the purification of the intellect to combine with the Active Intellect, or the like) – then it will be through discrete human acts or events that God will become effectively present in the world. To fully spell out all the options clustered in and around this centre of variation would demand its own map, with multiple centres of variation⁵¹.

A third centre of variation is that GOD IS ONTOLOGICALLY TRANSCENDENT, BUT EFFECTIVELY IMMANENT IN PERVASIVE INFLUENCE. Consider the following examples. David Nieto (1654-1728) writes that: “God causes the wind to blow; God causes the rain to fall; God causes the dew to descend. Whence it is to be inferred, that God performs all that moderns term Nature; so there is no Nature. Thus what is Providence they call Nature”⁵². And Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888): “Once He created, formed and arranged it all, He blessed it with the blessing of continued preservation and continued development. Not only was everything brought into existence by Him, it also continues to exist through Him... He, Who created, formed, arranged and blessed, He effaced Himself, invisible like the soul in the body, withdrew and concealed Himself – like a soul – in His creation, continuing to act invisibly for its preservation and evolving development”⁵³. Similarly, Judith

⁴⁶ Gershom Scholem, ‘With a Copy of Kafka’s *The Trial* – A Poem’, in his *The Fullness of Time: Poems*, trans. Richard Sieburth, Jerusalem, Ibis Editions, 2003, p. 101; I have used my own translation.

⁴⁷ Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, p. 92 (II:Ex).

⁴⁸ Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs*, p. 149 (III:IV).

⁴⁹ Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs*, p. 411 (Appendix, VII:I).

⁵⁰ Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs*, p. 411 (Appendix, VII:I).

⁵¹ This would essentially be a map (or at least a partial map) of Jewish philosophical understandings of God’s providence and His causal interaction with the world (for a discussion of which, see Chap ?? in this volume).

⁵² David Nieto, *On Divine Providence*, trans. EH Lindo, 1853, pp. 5 & 79-80 (unpublished manuscript at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion: HUC MS Spanish 1, Klau Library, Cincinnati); I have used Matthew Goldish’s transcription.

⁵³ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters About Judaism*, trans. Karin Paritzky & Joseph Elias, Jerusalem, Feldheim Publishers, 1995, p. 30 (Letter Three).

Plaskow (b. 1947) writes of how she came to “no longer look... to a God enthroned above me in the sky but God(dess) all around and in me, in the firm ground beneath my feet that allowed me to walk upright”⁵⁴. Indeed, “[a]s a tree draws up sustenance from the soil, so we are rooted in the source of our being that bears and maintains us even as it enables us to respond to it freely”⁵⁵. In all these thinkers there is still a distinction between Creator (or Source) and creature – but the interrelation between them is intricate, intimate, and continuous. On the one hand there are philosophers who believe (like Saadia) that once the world was created it could then continue to exist of itself, but who think (unlike Saadia) that rather than just periodically acting in the world, God’s influence is constantly at work in everything – moving it, shaping it, and animating it. On the other hand, there are those who think that God’s constant and pervasive influence is necessary, not just to animate the world, but even to sustain it in mere existence. It is not always easy to tell which of these two nodes a given thinker inhabits. Moreover, once the very *being* of the world is taken to demand God’s inherent and continual influence, it can come to seem that perhaps God must be considered not only effectively immanent, but also ontologically so. If so, some of these positions potentially begin to blur-over into those of the next centre of variation. Joseph B Soloveitchik (1903-1993) highlights how subtly the question of ontological immanence can shift: “Seen from th[e] perspective [of substance], God is at an infinite distance from His creation. The latter is not enclosed by God, but finds itself outside of Him. Yet shifting the categorical approach from substantia to existentia, from matter and content to ontic modality, the whole perspective changes. The world suddenly makes the great leap and discovers itself within Him, enveloped by the infinite”⁵⁶.

A fourth centre of variation, therefore, is that GOD IS ONTOLOGICALLY AND EFFECTIVELY IMMANENT (IN THAT THE WORLD EXISTS ENTIRELY ‘WITHIN’ GOD), BUT HE IS ALSO ONTOLOGICALLY TRANSCENDENT (IN THAT GOD’S BEING ‘EXTENDS BEYOND’ THE WORLD WHICH IS INCLUDED ‘WITHIN’ HIM). Those who hold positions of this kind take the world to be wholly ontologically subsumed within God – such that God Himself suffuses the world in its entirety, while the world does not exhaust God. In other words: Panentheism. This kind of position comes in multiple versions, due to the different ways of fleshing out what ‘within’ or ‘subsumed’ actually amount to when it comes to the inclusion of a spatio-temporal entity (the world) within a non-spatio-temporal reality (God).

Consider Solomon Maimon’s (1753-1800) account: “God is the *Ein Sof*: the unlimited”⁵⁷ which acts as “the matter – that is, the subject – which receives the form of the world”⁵⁸. He explains this as follows: “All things besides God are necessarily dependent on Him, in both their essence and their existence. Thus, the creation of the world can be conceived neither as bringing forth something *out of nothing*, nor as the formation of something independent of God, but only as a bringing forth *out of God Himself*. And because beings are of different degrees of perfection, we can only suppose to explain their genesis as restrictions of different degrees of God’s Divine Being”⁵⁹. For Maimon, the infinite and unlimited God is something like unformed prime matter, comprising absolutely all reality (*in potentia*, at least); and the finite world is produced by the imposition of restrictive forms on that undifferentiated plenitude. In other words, the

⁵⁴ Judith Plaskow, ‘Finding a God I Can Believe In’, in Judith Plaskow and Carol P Christ, *Goddess and God in the World: Conversation in Embodied Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2016, p. 115.

⁵⁵ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1991, p. 165 (chap 4).

⁵⁶ Joseph B Soloveitchik, ‘Immanence and Transcendence: Comments on *Birkat Yotzer Or*’, in his *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, ed. Shalom Carmy, New York, Toras HoRav Foundation, 2003, p. 127 (sec. ‘Ontic Unity, not Unity of Substance’).

⁵⁷ Solomon Maimon, *The Autobiography of Solomon Maimon*, eds. Yitzhak Melamed & Abraham P Socher, trans. Paul Reitter, Princeton, Princeton university Press, 2018, p. 58 (chap 14); I have tweaked the translation.

⁵⁸ Solomon Maimon, *Ma’aseh Livnat haSapir* (chap 7), in his *Cheshek Shlomoh*, p. 138 (unpublished manuscript at The National Library of Israel: MS 8o6426); my translation, based on Yitzhak Melamed’s transcription of the original.

⁵⁹ Solomon Maimon, *The Autobiography*, pp. 57-8 (chap 14); I have tweaked the translation.

world is 'made out of' the Divine unlimited, and in that sense has its being 'in' God. (On this account, perhaps the world can be said to be 'in' God in something like the sense in which the bust of that important person is 'in' stone).

The nature of the 'restriction' or 'limitation' of the Divine unlimited which results in a world is often taken by Jewish philosophers to be merely perceptual: it is a limitation in our perception of the Divine fullness that allows for the seeming existence of a finite world in the midst of the plenitude. A crude analogy might be the way in which you could seem to see a particular, finite, figure – even when looking at a vast expanse of undifferentiated colour – if you were looking through shaped glasses which blocked out your vision of everything but the small figure in question. The figure exists, jointly constituted by the undifferentiated coloured background along with your limited view of that background. Analogously, the world could be taken to exist, jointly constituted by God's unlimited being and our limited ability to see it. Thus, Chaim of Volozhin (1749-1821) writes: "His will decreed... to conceal the light of the unity of His essence (may He be blessed) in this place to a degree which establishes all the worlds and creatures by means of a tremendous concealment, to thereby bring about... that there will appear and seem to be this reality of innumerable worlds and forces... Even so, it is certain that even where all the worlds and creatures are, everything is full – even now – only of His essence (may he be blessed), just as [it was] prior to creation..."⁶⁰. This explains how the world could exist entirely within God, while God's reality nonetheless goes far beyond merely that of the finite world. That said, on this account the world's existence is a merely 'virtual' upshot of our limited perception, so – in some sense – has no real being at all (note the overlap between this position and that of the fourth – acosmic – centre of variation regarding God's oneness).

A fifth centre of variation is that GOD IS WHOLLY ONTOLOGICALLY AND EFFECTIVELY IMMANENT, IN THAT THE WHOLE OF GOD EXISTS WITHIN THE WORLD AS A PROPER PART. A rather rarer position takes it that God is actually a part or aspect of the world – its highest or most valuable part or aspect. In this case, God is entirely ontologically immanent – though not necessarily throughout the world. Thus, Mordecai Kaplan: "[W]e select, out of the infinite processes in the universe, that complex of forces and relationships which makes for the highest fulfilment of man as a human being, and identify it by the term *God*"⁶¹. Even a God as immanent as this might still be considered transcendent in *some* senses – for example, He may be taken to transcend humanity in its everyday non-ideality (by being the complex of forces making up humanity's best potential), or He may be considered to transcend the system of natural laws (by being that irreducibly creative aspect of the universe, not limited by regularity). But even granting these forms of transcendence, on Kaplan's account God is nonetheless taken to be wholly *ontologically* immanent, for "[t]here is only one universe within which both man and God exist"⁶². And as a result, God will inevitably also be wholly *effectively* immanent, for He is taken to be an active force at work only within the world.

There is a somewhat different sense of 'presence' which hovers in the background of many of these discussions. Namely, God's presence to our awareness. If God is ontologically or effectively present, but not recognized to be, then there remains a sense in which He is absent nonetheless: absent *to us*. Bringing out a recognition of God's ontological or effective presence – making His presence manifest to ourselves and others – is therefore a way of making Him present, in this additional sense. Thus, Heschel writes: "The presence of God... is retained in moments in which... we try to be present in His presence... The meaning of redemption is to reveal the holy that is concealed, to disclose the divine that is suppressed. Every man is

⁶⁰ Chaim of Volozhin, *Nefesh haChaim*, ed. Yissachar Dov Rubin, Bnei Brak, 1988/9, pp. 164-5 (III:7); my translation.

⁶¹ Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, p. 103 (chap II).

⁶² Mordecai M Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Towards a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1994, p. 316 (chap XXIII); this whole sentence is italicized in the original.

called upon to be a redeemer”⁶³. Or as Melissa Raphael (b. 1960) puts a similar idea: “God’s presence, as one who creates, loves, orders and sustains the world, is revealed in the act of welcome. The transcendent God is immanent in the aperture made between the one seeing and opening to the other. That is the redemptive moment”⁶⁴.

5. MAPPING JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTIONS OF GOD’S PERSONHOOD OR NON-PERSONHOOD

The Biblical and Rabbinic corpora seem to be replete with descriptions of a thoroughly personal God: a distinctive character who desires, cares, knows, feels, and acts, and who can be moved by human behaviour. Given this background, Jewish philosophers have almost universally spoken and conceived of God – to some extent – in personal ways. But what exactly that ‘personhood’ has amounted to, and how intrinsic to God it has been taken to be, has varied greatly.

One centre of variation is that *GOD IS PERSONAL IN A PASSIBLE AND MUTABLE MANNER*. Consider Heschel: “To the Jewish mind, the understanding of God is not achieved by referring in a Greek way to timeless qualities of a Supreme Being, to ideas of goodness or perfection, but rather by sensing the living acts of His concern, to His dynamic attentiveness to man”⁶⁵. What is the nature of this dynamic attentiveness? It is that “man’s deeds may move Him, affect Him, grieve Him or, on the other hand, gladden and please Him. This notion that God can be intimately affected, that he possesses not merely intelligence and will, but also pathos, basically defines the prophetic consciousness of God”⁶⁶. After all, “[i]s it more compatible with our conception of the grandeur of God to claim that He is emotionally blind to the misery of man rather than profoundly moved?”⁶⁷. Similarly, Eliezer Berkovits (1908-1992) writes: “That God cares is no mere allegory, but a statement of fact”⁶⁸. Indeed, since “[r]eligion cannot forgo the love and the mercy of God, or even his justice and anger”, these must be taken to “express... positive aspects of [God’s] being”⁶⁹. Both Heschel and Berkovits take their conception of a dynamic and pathos-filled God to be in sharp contradistinction to the ideas of Maimonides, and other philosophers, whom they describe as betraying God’s genuine affectability by transferring all talk of His passions from His essence to His actions⁷⁰. We will see below, however, that these attacks on Maimonides might belie a more complex reality, and it will even become unclear whether this first centre of variation is unambiguously inhabited at all.

A second centre of variation is that *GOD IS PERSONAL IN AN IMPASSABLE AND IMMUTABLE MANNER*. Here is Moses Mendelssohn’s (1729-1786) description of the Deity: “God is a being with a supremely perfect will... The supremely perfect will presupposes the most perfect intellect and demands the most perfect might. That will consists, furthermore, in the inclination to every possible good and aversion from every possible evil, according to the standards of their goodness or evil. From this follows justice, benevolence, and wisdom.

⁶³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, New York, Harper & Row, 1955, pp. 312-3 (chap 30).

⁶⁴ Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 41 (chap 1).

⁶⁵ Heschel, *God in Search*, p. 21 (Chap 1).

⁶⁶ Abraham J Heschel, *The Prophets*, New York, Harper & Row, 1962, p. 224 (chap. 12).

⁶⁷ Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 257 (chap. 14).

⁶⁸ Eliezer Berkovits, *God, Man, and History*, ed. David Hazony, Jerusalem, Shalem Press, 2004, p. 65 (chap 7).

⁶⁹ Berkovits, *God, Man, and History*, pp. 66-7 (chap 7).

⁷⁰ For Heschel, see *The Prophets*, pp. 247-57 (chap 14). And for Berkovits, see *God, Man, and History*, pp. 56-7 (chap 6).

Since God possesses all these perfections without limits, he is infinite and, consequently, singular. Since no finite thing can be the reason for his existence and no infinite thing exists outside him, he has the reason for his existence in himself; therefore, he is independent and necessary⁷¹. Since this list includes multiple attributes central to personality – such as will, benevolence, and wisdom – it seems reasonable to call this a conception of a personal God. But if so, God’s personality is very different from human personality – and not just for having each of these personal attributes to a supreme degree. Rather, as Mendelssohn says elsewhere, God is such that His “perdurance is... a timelessness, an unchanging eternity, that in its essence can have neither beginning nor forward progress nor end”⁷². In other words, God is outside of time. So to the degree that He has personal attributes, He must have them in impassable and immutable forms – for change cannot apply to Him. On this conception, then – for example – while God necessarily wills the best, He does so without pathos, without any affective engagement, and without reacting to anything that happens. Thus, while He may have some personal-like attributes, He certainly does not have them in anything like the way that a living personality does. Anyone who seeks to inhabit this centre of variation will therefore need to confront the question of whether genuine, intrinsic, personal attributes are really compatible with this kind of atemporality.

A third centre of variation is that GOD AS IT IS IN ITSELF IS NOT PERSONAL, BUT (IN SOME SENSE) PERSONALITY EMERGES AT THE INTERFACE OF GOD’S INTERACTIONS WITH US. According to Maimonides, God has no positive attributes whatsoever: “God, may He be honored and magnified... cannot have an affirmative attribute in any respect”⁷³. If God has no affirmative attributes at all, then He certainly has none of the affirmative attributes that constitute personality. And yet, this utterly ineffable God impacts us. And Maimonides acknowledges that in reacting to the impact that God has on us, it begins to make sense to use personal epithets when we talk of God – for we experience God’s impact on us in ways analogous to the ways we experience interactions with people. Thus, while “God, may He be exalted, is said to be merciful... It is not that He, may He be exalted, is affected and has compassion. But an action similar to that which proceeds from a father in respect to his child and that is attached to compassion, pity, and an absolute passion, proceeds from Him, may He be exalted... [but] not because of a passion or a change”⁷⁴. God undergoes nothing, and change is inapplicable to Him, but effects emerge from Him of a kind that we usually associate with certain characteristics and emotions when those kinds of effect emerge from human beings – so we apply to God whatever attribute-terms we would tend to apply to humans who caused such effects. (For example, as a result of God the world is sustained in existence. If a human helped to sustain me in existence I would call them compassionate – indicating that they had the intrinsic positive property of compassion, and that they were moved by it to act. Therefore I use that same term of God, but without implying anything about how God intrinsically is, or that He is moved by anything). The personal attributes of God are therefore not positive attributes of His essence, but rather are called by many Jewish philosophers, ‘attributes of action’ (and even ‘action’ is applied to God only in this analogical manner, for strictly speaking they are merely attributes of His *effects*). One way to put this is that we experience God’s impact in personal ways, and so we talk of Him in personal terms.

Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746) explains the kabbalistic concept of ‘Sefirot’ using exactly this mechanism: “[W]e cannot conceive anything of the Emanator (blessed be It) as It is in Itself, [rather] only

⁷¹ Moses Mendelssohn, ‘On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences’, in his *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Daniel E Dahlstrom, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 279-80 (Third Section).

⁷² Moses Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours, or, Lectures on the Existence of God*, in his *Last Works*, trans. Bruce Rosenstock, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2012, p. 82 (Lec XI).

⁷³ Maimonides, *The Guide (Vol I)*, p. 135 (I:58).

⁷⁴ Maimonides, *The Guide (Vol I)*, p. 125 (I:54).

in terms of Its actions”⁷⁵. When “compassion, anger, justice, graciousness, [and] knowledge [etc]... are in man’s soul, they are characteristics inhering in it intrinsically. But with the Master (may He be blessed) we cannot speak thus... Rather... the Master’s compassion (may He be blessed)... is just... an action that He performs. And so too anger, and graciousness, and knowledge of things, and so too every other attribute which we ascribe to Him in accordance with His actions...”⁷⁶. Each ‘Sephirah’ is therefore simply a particular mode of Divine activity or governance, which gets called by its corresponding characteristic – without implying the inherence of that characteristic in the Divine in any intrinsic way. Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) summarises this approach to God’s personality by saying that “[t]he personalistic understanding of the Godhead” should be seen as the “outer clothing” donned by the “far greater” impersonal reality of the Unlimited Divine⁷⁷. In essence God is impersonal, but God appears to us in personal guise due the impact God has on us.

To illustrate the pull of this centre of variation, it turns out that despite all of Heschel’s and Berkovits’ protestations against Maimonides, their own positions – at least in places – actually seem to collapse into this one. Thus, at the very end of his long book about God’s pathos, Heschel concedes: “[W]e must not think that we reach God’s essence... Only one aspect of His Being, His directedness to man, is known to man... It is an interpretation, not of divine Being, but of the divine interaction with humanity”⁷⁸. And Berkovits writes that “no attempt is made to describe God in his absoluteness... The attributes of the God of religion are, of necessity, relational attributes”⁷⁹.

Buber puts forward a similar position, with a slight difference of emphasis: “Of course we speak only of what God is in his relation to a man... The description of God as a Person is indispensable for everyone who... means by ‘God,’ as I do, him who – whatever else he may be – enters into a direct relation with us men... and thus makes it possible for us to enter into a direct relation with him. This ground and meaning of our existence constitutes a mutuality, arising again and again, such as can subsist only between persons. The concept of personal being is indeed completely incapable of declaring what God’s essential being is, but it is both permitted and necessary to say that God is *also* a Person”⁸⁰. God’s inner nature is indescribable, and therefore cannot be said to be personal. But since that ineffable Divinity relates to us in a way that invites relationship, we cannot but say that in addition to His indescribable essence, God is also a person. Though we might think that applying particular characteristics to the ineffable unlimited, is to place limitations on it, for Buber this aspect of personality that emerges in our mutual relation must actually be considered “an augmentation of divinity”⁸¹ – i.e. an enrichment (rather than a limitation) of His pure, ineffable, inner being.

Consider one final example – perhaps the most (in)famous Jewish ‘impersonalist’. According to Mordecai Kaplan: “As the power that makes for the world order and personal salvation, God is not a person but a Process”⁸². God is an impersonal force or power. Yet even Kaplan grants that “our experience of that Process is entirely personal”⁸³. For Kaplan, the intrinsically impersonal power that is God, becomes personal

⁷⁵ Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Sefer Kinat haShem Tzeva’ot*, in his *Sefer Ginzei Ramchal*, ed. Chaim Friedlander, Bnei Brak, Sifriyati, 1983/4, p. 79 (Pt I, sec ‘Inyan haSefhirot’); my translation.

⁷⁶ Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Klallim Rishonim*, §1, in his *Da’at Tevunot [&] Sefer haKlallim*, ed. Chaim Friedlander, Bnei Brak, Sifriyati, 1988/9, p. 247; my translation.

⁷⁷ Abraham Isaac haKohen Kook, *Shmoneh Kvatzim (Vol I)*, Jerusalem, 1998/9, pp. 20-1 & 322 (I:65 & II:92); my translation.

⁷⁸ Heschel, *The Prophets*, pp. 483-5 (chap. 28).

⁷⁹ Berkovits, *God, Man, and History*, p. 57 (chap 6).

⁸⁰ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1958, pp. 134-5 (Postscript, §6).

⁸¹ Martin Buber, ‘Spinoza, Sabbatai Zvi, and the Baal-Shem’, in his *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, ed & trans Maurice Friedman, Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press International, 1988, p. 92.

⁸² Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, p. 105 (chap II).

⁸³ Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, p. 105 (chap II).

through us: “*God is the Process by which the universe produces persons, and persons are the processes by which God is manifest in the individual.* Neither term has meaning without the other. So to conceive of God is to regard Him as personal, in the sense that He manifests Himself in our personality, in every effort of ours to live up to our responsibilities as human beings”⁸⁴.

We could arrange the positions which cluster around this centre of variation as follows: at one end are those for whom God’s manifestations deeply *demand* to be described in personal terms and approached in a personal manner; and at the other end are those who are able to use personal descriptions to describe God’s manifestations, but for whom doing so is entirely voluntary and could easily be dropped. If the application of personal descriptions could truly be abandoned with little loss, then we might consider that position to belong to a separate – fourth – centre of variation. Namely: GOD IS ENTIRELY IMPERSONAL (THOUGH IT MAY BE POSSIBLE TO LOOSELY APPLY PERSONAL LANGUAGE TO GOD IN SOME ATTENUATED SENSE OR OTHER, IF WE WANT TO).

6. MAPPING JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTIONS OF WHY GOD CREATED/CAUSED THE WORLD

‘The creation (or causation) of the universe’ – when understood in a suitably broad sense – might be taken to name the only thing that God has ever done (or effected). To understand why He undertook (or effected) such a thing – if indeed for any reason – would therefore be to understand something very important about the God who did so.

One centre of variation is that GOD CREATES (OR CAUSES) THE WORLD BECAUSE OF HIS GOODNESS, OR IN ORDER TO BESTOW HIS GOODNESS. Chasdai Crescas writes that “God is, by intention and will, the true agent of all existents, and... He sustains their existence by the constant overflowing of His goodness”⁸⁵. And Moshe Chaim Luzzatto writes: “Why did the creator (blessed be He) want to create creatures? ... What we can understand of this matter is that God (may His name be blessed) is certainly the epitome of goodness. And indeed, it is of the nature of the good to bestow goodness, and this is why He (may His name be blessed) wanted to create creatures, so as to bestow good upon them, for if there is nothing to receive goodness there is no bestowing of goodness”⁸⁶. One question arising from these positions is whether there is a distinction between God creating (or causing) others so as to satisfy the impulse inherent in His goodness, as compared with God creating others so as to benefit them. If this is a genuine distinction, then it might lead to questions about whether this generosity in any way compromises God’s perfection and independence, by giving Him a need whose fulfilment makes Him dependent on others. Perhaps ‘need’, however, is not the right category under which to conceive this impulse of benefaction. Relatedly, if it is of God’s nature – as the perfectly good – to bestow goodness upon others, then this also raises questions regarding whether the existence of the world follows necessarily and eternally from the eternal nature of God.

A second centre of variation is that GOD CREATES (OR CAUSES) THE WORLD IN ORDER FOR HIM TO EXIST IN FULL PERFECTION. Consider what Isaac Luria (1534-1572) is reported to have taught: “[T]he reason for the creation of the worlds... is that it was necessary that He [God] (may He be blessed) should be complete [*shalem*] in all His actions and powers, and in all His names of greatness and stature and glory. And if He did not bring

⁸⁴ Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, p. 103 (chap II).

⁸⁵ Crescas, *Light*, p. 117 (I:III:5).

⁸⁶ Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Da’at Tevunot*, §§16 & 18, in his *Da’at Tevunot [&] Sefer haKlallim*, ed. Chaim Friedlander, Bnei Brak, Sifriyati, 1988/9, p. 4; my translation.

His actions and powers into practical actualization, then He could not (so to speak) be considered complete – neither in His actions, nor in His names, nor appellations... [T]hus... with regard to the appellations, such as ‘Merciful’, ‘Gracious’, ‘Tolerant’ [etc], He could not be called by them unless there were creatures in the world... When the worlds were created, then His actions and powers (may He be blessed) were actualized, and He became considered complete... with no lack whatsoever (Heaven forefend)⁸⁷. One way to understand this is that without the possibility of enacting His mercy and graciousness (etc), God could not count as merciful or gracious (etc) at all – for it could plausibly be considered a logical impossibility to have a virtue which one never has nor ever will actually enact. Thus, the creation of others to actually receive God’s mercy and graciousness (etc) is a necessary condition for God to actually attain to those virtues which He would otherwise have only *in potentia*. If actually attaining those virtues is necessary for full perfection, then creatures will be necessary for God to be fully perfect.

Or consider a somewhat different example from Abraham Isaac Kook: “[T]he absolute perfection is the necessary existent, and it has nothing [merely] potentially, but rather, everything [in it] is actual. But there is the perfection of the *addition of perfection*, which cannot be in Divinity, for the absolute unlimited perfection does not leave room for addition [to it]. And to this end – that the [process of] *addition of perfection* would not be lacking from existence either – the existence of the world had to come about... to go always onwards and upwards to absolute elevation”⁸⁸. According to Kook, absolute actuality is not fully perfect, for though it seemingly includes everything that it could, it lacks one final thing: growth, which is itself a virtue. Therefore, only the union (in some sense) of fully actualized perfection along with a process of growth and improvement, is *truly and fully* perfect (or perhaps, both are equal manifestations of the trans-perfect Divinity) – and we can think of this as the union of the traditional philosophical God with the ever-evolving world. On this conception, the world is therefore an integral and eternal aspect of the Divine when conceived fully – and our own lives, struggles, and growth, thus become integral to the Divine perfection too. As with the previous centre of variation, these positions raise the question of whether the existence of the world follows necessarily and eternally from the eternal nature of God’s perfection.

A third centre of variation is that GOD CREATED THE WORLD BECAUSE HE WANTED TO – WHETHER FOR SOMETHING HE WOULD GAIN THEREBY, OR FOR NO REASON AT ALL. Consider the following remark of Martin Buber’s (in the name of the Kabbalah): “God contracted Himself to world because He, nondual and relationless unity, wanted to allow relation to emerge; because He wanted to be known, loved, wanted...”⁸⁹. If we take this at face value, the following picture emerges: without a world, God could not be known or loved by another. But God desired relationship, and so He created others with whom to have such relationships. Note that it’s possible for this position to collapse back into either the first or second centres of variation: if the reason that God wants to be known and loved by others is because that would be their greatest good, this collapses back into the first centre of variation; or if relations of certain sorts with creatures are what allows for God’s full perfection, this collapses back into the second centre of variation. But if neither of those are the case, then this is simply a matter of God creating the world so as to attain something that He desired.

A somewhat different variant of the ‘desire to create’ position insists that there is nothing that God seeks to gain from creation. Rather, He simply, freely, *wanted* to create. As Isaiah Horowitz (c. 1555-1630) writes: “[S]ince He [God] (may He be blessed) acted and made the creatures voluntarily and not by necessity, therefore one should not give a reason as to why, for there is no reason when it comes to the will. For if you provide a reason and explanation as to why a person wants this thing more than that, then

⁸⁷ Isaac Luria, as reported by Chaim Vital in his *Sefer Etz Chaim (Vol I)*, Jerusalem, haRav Tzvi Michel Videbsky, 1987/8, pp. 24-5 (Heichal Adam Kadmon, Shaar Rishon [Drush Iggulim veYosher], Anaf Alef); my translation.

⁸⁸ Kook, *Shmoneh Kvatzim (Vol I)*, p. 144 (l:443); my translation.

⁸⁹ Martin Buber, ‘Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement’, in his *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, ed. & trans. Maurice Friedman, Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press International, 1988, p. 119 (Pt I).

that reason moved his will so as to choose this rather than that. And if you ask for an explanation for the will of the Omnipresent, you are asking if there is a reason that is higher than Him which will prompt Him to do this”⁹⁰. In this way, God’s independence and perfection are protected from any particular aims or values to which He would then count as being beholden. That said, we could still wonder whether a desire – however brute it may be – might nonetheless entail some kind of lack or imperfection.

Many other centres of variation could be added to these. And of course, it should go without saying that there are also Jewish philosophers who have held that whether or not God has a reason to create the world, we are not in a position to know what it would be. Maimonides could be seen holding a view like this: “[T]here is no incongruity in our saying that the existence and nonexistence of all these acts are consequent upon His wisdom, may He be exalted; we, however, are ignorant of many of the ways in which wisdom is found in His works”⁹¹.

7. MAPPING JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTIONS OF GOD’S RELATION TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Just as understanding Jewish philosophical conceptions of why God would create (or cause) a world is integral to understanding Jewish philosophical conceptions of what God is like, so too Jewish philosophical conceptions of God’s relation to the Jewish people will reveal a great deal about how God Himself is conceived by these thinkers.

As with some of the previous sections (especially the section on God’s oneness), a number of the centres of variation which I will lay out here are mutually compatible, and may sometimes even be taken to bear explanatory relations to each other. Thus, while some philosophers may be committed to only one of the positions laid out here, others may well be committed to a number of the positions in combination.

One centre of variation is that GOD HAS A SPECIAL METAPHYSICAL BOND WITH THE JEWISH PEOPLE. Judah haLevi writes that “the children of Jacob... differ from the [other] children of Adam by virtue of the special divine distinctiveness, which made them as though they were a different species and a different, even angelic, substance”⁹². This heritable divine distinctiveness⁹³ is then taken to metaphysically enable the members of the Jewish people to relate to the Divine in ways that are impossible for those lacking this special capacity or preparation⁹⁴. Or consider this passage by Shabtai Sheftel Horowitz (c. 1565-1619): “It is known that the souls of the Israelite nation are ‘a portion of God from above’ (Job 31:2), which is alluded to by the verse ‘For the portion of God is His people’ (Deut 32:9). That is to say, literally a portion – like a part which is separated from some thing which is identical and similar in its nature to that thing which was separated from it... Thus there is no distinction or difference between the soul and Him (may His name be elevated and blessed), other than that He (may He be elevated and blessed) is the whole... and the soul is a part...”⁹⁵. Note that this ontological participation of the soul in God is said to apply only to the souls of Jewish people. Horowitz clarified, however, that he did not mean that Jewish souls are parts separated from the unlimited

⁹⁰ Isaiah Horowitz, *Sefer Shnei Luchot haBrit haShalem (Vol I)*, Jerusalem, Oz veHadar, 1992/3, p. 16 (Hakdamat Toldot Adam, Chap ‘Beit haShem’, §12, Note); my translation.

⁹¹ Maimonides, *The Guide (Vol II)*, p. 506 (III:25).

⁹² Hallevi, *Kitab al Khazari*, I:103; I have used the translation from Ehud Krinis, *God’s Chosen People: Judah Halevi’s Kuzari and the Shī‘ī Imām Doctrine*, trans. Ann Brener & Tamar Liza Cohen, Turnhout, Brepols, 2014, p. 202 (chap 10).

⁹³ See, for example, *Kitab al Khazari*, I:95.

⁹⁴ See, for example, *Kitab al Khazari*, I:41-3 & I:95-103.

⁹⁵ Shabtai Sheftel Horowitz, *Sefer Shefa Tal Livracha*, ed. Y Boker, Jerusalem, 2006/7, p. 1 (chap ‘Hakdamah Ben Me’ah Shannah’); my translation.

Divine essence (the *Ein Sof*) – which is indivisible, making this an impossibility – but rather, that they are parts of the immediate emanatory manifestations of the Divine (the ‘Sefirot’)⁹⁶. For philosophers who take Jewish people to have a unique inherent metaphysical connection to the Divine (or some variant thereon), there can be all manner of upshots – ranging from prophetic powers unique to Jews, to possibilities of righteousness and sanctity unique to Jews, to a particular Divine providence unique to Jews.

A second centre of variation is that GOD HAS A SPECIAL AFFECTIVE BOND WITH THE JEWISH PEOPLE. In particular, that God loves the Jewish people in a unique way. Consider the position of Michael Wyschogrod (1928-2015): “[T]here are those whom God loves especially, with whom he has fallen in love, as with Abraham... God... turns to Abraham with an election that is not explained because it is an act of love that requires no explanation. If God continues to love the people of Israel – and it is the faith of Israel that he does – it is because he sees the face of his beloved Abraham in each and every one of his children as a man sees the face of his beloved in the children of his union with his beloved”⁹⁷. For Wyschogrod, love that is not exclusive “does not meet the individual in his individuality but sees him as a member of a species”⁹⁸, and is therefore not full love at all. If God is truly to love, He therefore has to love particularly. And though God loves and recognizes all His children, He loves the Jewish people more⁹⁹. Similarly, Joseph Albo (c. 1380-1444) writes: “God’s love (may He be blessed) for the Jewish people is like the love of one infatuated [*hachoshek*] with his beloved [*chashukato*], which is a special love without reason”¹⁰⁰. Other thinkers have sought to identify reasons for God’s special love of the Jewish people (and some, rather, only for Abraham). For example, one could take the position of the previous centre of variation to be a ground for the position of this one.

A third centre of variation is that GOD HAS A SPECIAL COVENANTAL BOND WITH THE JEWISH PEOPLE. Thus José Faur (1934-2020) writes: “[R]eligion for Judaism is a relationship between God and man, the sole ground of which is the free and mutual election of God and man: God chooses man, man chooses God, and the parties establish a pact, a *berit*... For Judaism only the people of Israel did in fact establish such a pact with God: the people who were at Sinai and in the fields of Moab, and the people of Israel who by physical descent will last till the end of time... Thus took place an event with no parallels in history: a pact between God and an entire nation... Thus conceived, Judaism is to be considered an exclusive religion: only the people of Israel are bound to the pact... [But] the people of Israel includes all non-Jews who accept the pact of Sinai-Moab: proselytism, in effect, is nothing more than the acceptance of the *berit*”¹⁰¹. As to why God chose the Jewish people for His covenant – some Jewish philosophers identify an intrinsic virtue in the Jewish people or their ancestors, others take it to have been an unmotivated choice of (or love for) the Jewish people, and yet others follow a traditional rabbinic teaching that God actually offered His covenant to all the nations of the world but that the Jewish people were the only nation to accept it¹⁰². Usually the covenantal relationship is taken to be a permanent and unbreakable bond between God and the Jewish people. But

⁹⁶ See his *Sefer Nishmat Shabtai haLevy*, Podgórze be Krakon, Druck von SL Deutscher, 1898, pp. 18-23 (‘Sha’ar 4’, pp. 9b-12a).

⁹⁷ Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election*, New York, The Seabury Press, 1983, pp. 63-4 (chap 2, sec 4).

⁹⁸ Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, p. 61.

⁹⁹ Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁰ Joseph Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim: Book of Principles (vol I)*, ed. & trans. Isaac Husik, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946, pp. 23-4 (Introduction, summary of III:37); my translation.

¹⁰¹ José Faur, ‘Understanding the Covenant’, *Tradition*, 9:4 (Spring 1968), pp. 40, 43, & 45; I have silently corrected what I take to be a typo, changing ‘part’ into ‘pact’ in the last sentence.

¹⁰² See *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, trans. Reuven Hammer, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986, pp. 352-3 (Piska §343:6, on Deut 33:3).

some philosophers have taken it to have been – at some point – either abrogated, or at least radically transformed. Thus, Irving Greenberg (b. 1933) writes that as a result of God having allowed the Jewish people to suffer the atrocities of the Nazi Holocaust, the nation has been “released from its imposed obligations by every logical and moral consideration of justice... Morally speaking, God could no longer command; but God could lovingly ask for Israel’s partnership”¹⁰³.

A fourth centre of variation is that GOD HAS A SPECIAL TELEOLOGICAL BOND WITH THE JEWISH PEOPLE. Namely, that He has given the Jewish people an especially central or fundamental role in the fulfilment of His aims for the world. Thus, Obadia Sforno (c. 1470-1550) comments on the verses ‘And you [the children of Israel] shall be special for Me from among all the peoples... And you shall be for Me a kingdom of priests’ (Ex 19:5-6): “Though the whole human race is dearer to Me than the lower beings... Nonetheless, you shall be for Me more special than anyone... [F]or you shall be a kingdom of priests so as to teach and demonstrate to the whole human race how ‘all shall call upon the name of the Lord and worship Him with one accord’ (Zeph 3:9)”¹⁰⁴. The specific role that the Jewish people are taken to play in God’s plan will vary from philosopher to philosopher according to their conceptions of God’s final goal for the world and humanity. Often it is taken to be an educational role of some sort: whether acting as spiritual exemplars to the rest of humanity, or rather, serving as an object lesson (in their moral and spiritual successes and failures). Sometimes this position is combined with the understanding that other nations also have integral roles to play, though these roles are often taken to be secondary to the role of the Jewish people. Thus, Judah haLevi has his Jewish sage say: “God has a secret and wise design concerning us... [T]he law of Moses transforms each one who honestly follows it... The nations merely serve to introduce and pave the way for the expected Messiah, who is the fruition, and they will all become His fruit. Then, if they acknowledge Him... they will revere the origin which they formerly dispersed”¹⁰⁵.

A fifth centre of variation is that GOD HAS NO SPECIAL BOND WITH THE JEWISH PEOPLE AT ALL. Some Jewish philosophers consider the notion of a special relationship between God and any one person or nation to be incompatible with God’s goodness or love. Thus Marcia Falk (b. 1946) writes: “The idea of Israel as God’s chosen people... seems to fly in the face of the monotheistic belief that all humanity is created in the divine image – and, hence, all humanity is equally loved and valued by God”¹⁰⁶. This, however, does not necessarily mean the jettisoning of the notion of chosenness. Thus – harking back to the previous centre of variation – Ben Zion Bokser (1907-1984) writes: “The Jewish doctrine of the chosen people... stresses... the responsibility of serving as God’s chosen instrument for the dissemination throughout the world of the spiritual truths revealed to them”¹⁰⁷. But Bokser then immediately adds that: “At the same time, it implies the identical appraisal for every other form of group life. All groups are equally God’s chosen, the unique vehicles of His revelation and the instruments of His purposes in history”¹⁰⁸. Others pushing in this direction, however, reject the concept of *chosenness* altogether. Thus Mordecai Kaplan: “No nation is chosen, or

¹⁰³ Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity*, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 2004, pp. 27-8 (Pt. I, Sec. ‘On the Road...’).

¹⁰⁴ Obadia Sforno, *Biur al haTorah (vol I: Bereishit-Emor)*, ed. Ze’ev Gottlieb, Jerusalem, Mosad haRav Kook, 1980, p. 169 (commentary to Exodus 19:5-6); my translation.

¹⁰⁵ Hallevi, *Kitab al Khazari*, pp. 226-7 (Pt IV, Sec 23).

¹⁰⁶ Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1996, pp. 479-80.

¹⁰⁷ Ben Zion Bokser, ‘Doctrine of the Chosen People’, *Contemporary Jewish Record*, 4:3, June 1941, p. 252.

¹⁰⁸ Bokser, ‘Doctrine of the Chosen People’, p. 252.

elected, or superior to any other, but every nation should discover its vocation or calling, as a source of religious experience, and as a medium of salvation to those who share its life”¹⁰⁹.

Heschel writes that “a world without Israel would be a world without the God of Israel”¹¹⁰. In that sense, knowing in what ways God is conceived by Jewish philosophers *as God of Israel* tells us a great deal about what they understood Him to be like *simpliciter*.

8. JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSES TO THIS DIVERSITY OF JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTIONS OF GOD

What have Jewish philosophers made of this overwhelming diversity of conceptions of God within the tradition? First of all, the tradition itself recognizes that there is almost bound to be a multiplicity of conceptions of the Divine. This necessity has often been taken to derive from the combination of God’s immensity and our limited ability to grasp Him. Thus, Judith Plaskow writes that “multiple images of God are not contradictions of monotheism but ways in which limited human beings apprehend and respond to the all-embracing divine reality”¹¹¹. In response to this, some have thought that an ever-increasing fecundity of conceptions should be encouraged, with the virtue lying collectively in their multiplicity (though, even on this ‘catholic’ view, some particular conceptions may be rejected for being destructive in some way). Thus Plaskow writes: “[A]ny individual image of God is a part of the divine totality... Only when our metaphors for God are sufficiently inclusive... will God truly be one – which is to say, all in all”¹¹². Others have seen the inevitable diversity of conceptions as being hierarchically ranked, as regards accuracy, depth, or value. Thus, Abraham Isaac Kook writes: “Divine faith is the most supernal thought, which, due to its loftiness, lowers itself to every level – even the very lowest. And on each rung and level it is pictured in accordance with its worth”¹¹³.

Is the diversity so extreme as to make the above positions, conceptions of completely different Gods? Or are they differing conceptions of the same God, however mistaken some (or all of them) may be? In other words: do the above positions succeed in referring to one and the same target despite the differing (and potentially mistaken) modes of presentation of that target, or are the modes of presentation so divergent as to entail multiple distinct targets? One consideration which may speak in favour of taking these to be diverse conceptions of one God, is the fact that most of the philosophers arrayed above explicitly intended to be conceiving of the same God as the other members of the tradition – and often thereby to be correcting one another’s distorted and inaccurate conceptions (argument and correction would not make sense, after all, if everyone was talking past each other). This co-referential intention could potentially be powerful enough to ensure – or at least make more likely – genuine referential convergence. Mordecai Kaplan makes a point somewhat along these lines: “Words, like institutions, like life itself, are subject to the law of identity in change... [But a]s long as we are struggling to express the same fundamental fact about the cosmos that our ancestors designated by the term ‘God,’ the fact of its momentous holiness, and

¹⁰⁹ Mordecai Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, New York, Reconstructionist Press, 1967, p. 229; in the original this entire sentence is italicized.

¹¹⁰ Abraham J Heschel, ‘God, Torah, and Israel’, in *Theology and Church in Times of Change*, eds. Edward LeRoy Long Jr & Robert T Handy, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1970, p. 84 (Sec II).

¹¹¹ Judith Plaskow, ‘God: Some Feminist Questions’, in her *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2005, p. 121.

¹¹² Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, p. 151 (chap 4, sec 4).

¹¹³ Abraham Isaac haKohen Kook, *Orot haEmunah*, ed. Mosheh Gurvitz, Jerusalem, Tzur-Ot Publications, 1998, pp. 66-7; my translation.

are endeavouring to achieve the ideals of human life which derive from that momentousness or holiness, we have the right to retain their mode of expression”¹¹⁴.

It should not surprise us that those who take cognizing God to be our highest mode of relating to Him, will find the diversity of conceptions of God most troubling (at least, those who consider that only one such conception could be correct). Thus, Maimonides sometimes claims that those who misconceive God even slightly, end up failing to count as believing in Him at all: “[T]he predication of affirmative attributes of Him, may He be exalted, is very dangerous... I shall not say that he who affirms that God, may He be exalted, has positive attributes... falls short of apprehending Him... but I shall say that he has abolished his belief in the existence of the deity without being aware of it”¹¹⁵.

On the other hand, those who take our highest mode of relation to the Divine to be something other than cognitive, will tend to be far less concerned about the diversity of conceptions of God. According to these thinkers what is most important is that you have the right attitude – or take up the right orientation – towards God, regardless of how you conceive of Him. Thus Buber: “[H]e who speaks the word God and really has *Thou* in mind (whatever the illusion by which he is held), addresses the true [Divine] *Thou* of his life”¹¹⁶. Or consider Solomon Ibn Gabirol (c. 1021-1057), regarding everyone, including even idolaters and worshippers of other gods: “You are God – and all creatures are Your witnesses / ...You are God – and all beings are your servants and worshippers, / and Your honour is not lessened by those who worship others / for it is everyone’s intention to arrive at You...”¹¹⁷. According to Ibn Gabirol, “to seek the first maker and to be moved to him was implanted in all things”¹¹⁸, so regardless of any creature’s conscious intentions or understandings, it is necessarily their truest and deepest intention to arrive at God. As a result, whatever deities a person thinks they are worshipping, they count – at root – as actually worshipping the one true God. Indeed, if God is understood as The Good, then it makes perfect sense that one need not have any deity – or even any worship – explicitly in mind, to count as worshipping God. Thus, Abraham Isaac Kook writes of unbelievers that “all the while that... they are engaged in the expansion of morality and seeking out the good, that is a quest for God”¹¹⁹.

For Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) what is most important is that we approach the object of all these conceptions with burning existential concern, whatever our conception of the Divine may be. For it is such living “concern... that alone makes all knowing true”¹²⁰. Indeed, Rosenzweig takes this recognition – that the Divine can be faced with one and the same passionate concern, equally, across all ways of conceiving

¹¹⁴ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 398 (chap XXVI).

¹¹⁵ Maimonides, *The Guide (Vol I)*, pp. 144-5 (I:60).

¹¹⁶ Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 76 (Part III).

¹¹⁷ Solomon ibn Gabirol, *The Kingly Crown: Keter Malkhut*, trans. Bernard Lewis, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2003, p. 51 (§8); my translation.

¹¹⁸ Solomon ibn Gabirol (Avicbron), *The Font of Life (Fons Vitae)*, trans. John A Laumakis, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 2014, p. 250 (V:34).

¹¹⁹ Abraham Isaac haKohen Kook, ‘*Perurim miShulchan Gavohah*’, in his *Ma’amarei haRe’ayah: Kovetz Ma’amarim (vols I & II)*, Jerusalem, 1987/8, p. 41 (§6); my translation.

¹²⁰ Franz Rosenzweig, *Ninety-Two Poems and Hymns of Yehudah Halevi*, trans. Thomas Kovach, Eva Jospe, & Gilya Gerda Schmidt, ed. Richard A Cohen, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000, p. 57 (‘Commentary No. 18, The Remote-and-Near-One’).

of Him – to be the real core insight of Jewish monotheism: “Only in this... do we have the ‘essence of Judaism’ ”^{121, 122}

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¹²¹ Franz Rosenzweig, ‘The Eternal’: Mendelssohn and the Name of God’, in his and Martin Buber’s, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald & Everett Fox, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993, p 108.

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