



2

Shema Israel

Bible Correspondance Course

HA-SHEM
The G-D of Israel

What is Truth?

A strange question perhaps, yet one that expresses both our confusion and our skepticism regarding truth. Confusion, because with a multiplicity of religions and a diversity of beliefs around us we may genuinely wonder, “*Where is the truth?*” Skepticism, for it suggests that truth does not exist; in fact, there really is no objective truth.

The Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, answers the question clearly. “*Hashem, God is the truth*” (Jeremiah 10:10; literal translation). For the Bible then, truth does exist; truth *is* association with God Himself. In fact, truth, *Emeth*, in the Hebrew language, is one of the 13 attributes of God. It falls seventh in the list in the exact center of the 13 attributes listed in Exodus 34:6; literal translation, a passage that is recited in the liturgies of Rosh Ha-Shanah Yom Kippur (Jewish New Year, Day of Attonement).

If truth is identified with God’s character, it does not come from us but is to be found outside of us – in God. This recognition implies that in order to find the truth we should not approach it with the preconceived idea that we know what the truth is. Instead, we should approach the truth with a question, “*What is it?*” This is the very same question, in fact, the ancient Israelites asked when confronted with the *manna*, the bread of God in the wilderness. “*What is it?*” they asked, and the question gave the name to this heavenly bread, for the Hebrew word *manna* means “*What is it?*” The meaning of the word *manna* suggests an important lesson regarding how we should approach Biblical truth. We should approach it with the question: “*What is it? What is truth?*” We should approach it with the same humble and honest mindset as the ancient Israelites approached the *manna* in the wilderness, asking “*What is it?*” Asking the question from this frame of reference no longer suggests confusion or skepticism. Instead, it implies sincere questioning from one who expects a true answer from above.

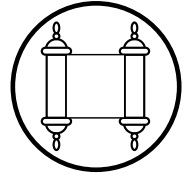
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BIBLE STUDY – Lesson # 2*

The God of Israel



Is There Someone Else?

Climbing toward the top of a snow-capped mountain, a hiker suddenly stumbles. As the rope unfurls and finally breaks, he grasps a jagged rock and is now hanging above a two-mile abyss. He tries to pull himself up but can't. Then, afraid of an avalanche, he whispers: "Is there someone?"

Silence.

He whispers louder: "Is there someone?"

A powerful voice answers: "Yes, I am here: God!"

As his grip weakens, the hiker waits for something to happen. Then, the voice is heard again: "Trust me, son; just let go. I am going to send two mighty angels who will carry you to the ground."

The hiker looks down toward the chasm below feeling utterly hopeless. He cries out again: "*Is there someone else?*"

Like the hiker, it is difficult for many to believe in God – even *if* He answers. And yet, God *is* out there, and there is not "someone else."

**Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the New International Reader's Version of the Bible, Copyright 1998, by the Zondervan Corporation.*

1. What does the Bible say about those who question God's existence?

*Foolish people say in their hearts,
"There is no God" (Psalm 14:1).*

2. Why is it vain to try to prove God's existence?

- "The existence of God is presupposed in the Bible from the very first sentence and no attempt is made to prove it" (Gen. 1:1) (R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], 275).

Before you created the world and the mountains were made, from the beginning to the end you are God (Psalm 90:2).

3. What is the most frequently used phrase describing the reality of God?

- God is alive. (*hay*)

*You can be sure that the Lord who saves Israel lives (1 Samuel 14:39).
You will soon know that the living God is among you... (Joshua 3:10).*

4. Why is it inappropriate to represent God?

- Because God is unique and “no one is like Him.”

So who will you compare God to? Is there any other God like Him (Isaiah 40:18)?

- **A Talmudic story:** Caesar said to R. Joshua ben Hanakiah, “I want to see your God.” He answered: “You cannot see Him” and pointing towards the sun (it was summer), he (Joshua) said to him: “Look at him.” Caesar replied, “I cannot.” Joshua said: “You say you cannot look at him, for he blinds your eye; all the more so, it is impossible to look at the Divine Presence” (Bable, *Hul. 59b*).

*Lord and King, how great you are!
There isn't anyone like you (2 Samuel 7:22).*

5. Where is God?

- He is everywhere!

*Where can I escape from Your spirit?
Where can I flee from Your presence
(Psalm 139:7)?*

Look down from the holy place where

you live in heaven... (Deuteronomy 26:15). (cf. Psalm 113:5)

You are all around me. You are behind me and in front of me...If I go up to the heavens, You are there. If I lie down in the deepest parts of the earth, You are also there... (Psalm 139: 5-10).

6. How do the Hebrew Scriptures suggest that God is a real personal being?

So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them (Genesis 1:27).

- The fact that mankind has been created in the image of God implies a reciprocal resemblance. The God of the Bible is not an abstract principle or an ethereal power. He is described as a physical being with hands (Genesis 49: 24; Psalm 75:8-10), a nose (Isaiah 65:5), and a mouth (Deuteronomy 8:3). God is as real and personal as man is. He walks (Deuteronomy 20:4; Genesis 3:8), speaks (Genesis 17:22; Isaiah 65:12), fights (Genesis 32:22-32; Exodus 14:14, 25), and even touches (Genesis 2:7; Genesis 32:25; Psalm 23:5).

7. What are the two Hebrew names given to God to express the idea of His transcendence and His immanence?

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).

Then the Lord God formed a man. He made him out of the dust of the ground. He breathed the breath of life into him. And the man became a living person (Genesis 2:7).

- The name *Elohim*, from the same root *alah* (“strength,” “preeminence”), expresses the idea of God’s transcendence (supremacy) (see Genesis 1).
- The name of *YHWH* is generally translated “The Lord” and is called Ha-shem (the name. In Jewish tradition, it comes from the root *hayah* (“to be,” “to exist,” “to speak”), and expresses the idea of God’s immanence (closeness) (see Genesis 2; cf. Exodus 3:14).
- According to the ancient rabbis, the name *Elohim* denotes the attribute of judgment and the name *YHWH* that of mercy (*Gen. R.* 33:3). “The Holy One, Blessed Be He, said to Moses:

“You wanted to know my name? I am called according to my actions. When I judge the creatures, I am *Elohim* . . . and when I have mercy with my world, I am named by the tetragrammaton” * (*Ex. R.* 3: 6).

8. How did God reveal Himself to mankind?

- In nature: *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands* (Psalm 19:1). (cf. Psalm 139: 13-15)
- In history: *I am the LORD your God. I brought you out of Egypt. That is the land where you were slaves* (Exodus 20:2). (cf. Exodus 3:15)
- In personal experiences: *The Lord was gracious to Sarah, just as He had said He would be. He did for Sarah what He had promised to do. Sarah became pregnant. She had a son by Abraham when he was old. He was born at the exact time God had promised him...* (Genesis 21:1-2). (cf. Exodus 3: 5-6; Daniel 6:22)

9. How was God's proximity experienced by Abraham?

Abraham looked up and saw three men stand-ing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by" (Genesis 18:2-3).

- In v. 2, Abraham addresses the three individuals with the word *Adonai* (My Lord) a name which usually applies to God. In v. 3, although Abraham is speaking to the three individuals, he uses the second person masculine singular *beeyneyka* ("in thy eyes").

The men turned away. They went toward Sodom. But Abraham remained standing in front of the Lord (Genesis 18:22).

- The text suggests that the Lord was one of the three "men," since only two men went to Sodom (see Genesis 19:1).

10. How was God's proximity experienced by Jacob?

So Jacob was left alone. A man struggled with him until morning (Genesis 32:24) (cf. verses 28, 30).

11. How was God's proximity experienced by Moses?

Then the Lord came down in the cloud. He stood there with Moses and announced His name, The Lord. As He passed in front of Moses, He called out. He said, "I am the Lord, the Lord. I am a God who is tender and kind. I am gracious. I am slow to get angry. I am faithful and full of love. I continue to show my love to thousands of people. I forgive those who do evil. I forgive those who refuse to obey. And I forgive those who sin. But I do not let guilty people go without punishing them. I punish the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren for the sin of their parents" (Exodus 34:5-7).

12. How was God's proximity experienced by the people of Israel?

- The cloud and the temple

Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting. The glory of the Lord filled the holy tent. Moses couldn't enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled on it. The glory of the Lord filled the holy tent. The people of Israel continued their travels. When the cloud lifted they did not start out. They stayed until the day it lifted (Exodus 40:34-36).

- From the verb *shakan* ("dwell") associated with the cloud is derived the



word *shekinah* (“dwelling,” “presence”) which is used in the Targums and rabbinic writings to express the nearness of God to His people (*Ab* 3:2; *Nb. Rabbah* 13:6).

- The sacrifice

For all time to come, the burnt offering must be sacrificed regularly. Sacrifice it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting in my sight. There I will meet you and speak to you (Exodus 29:42).

- The Hebrew word for sacrifice *haqrib* (from the root *qrb*, “near”) means literally “to draw near.”
- The Holy Spirit (*ruah ha-qodesh*)

Then His people remembered what He did long ago. They recalled the days of Moses and his people. They asked, “Where is the One who brought Israel through the Red Sea? Moses led them as the shepherd of his flock. Where is the One who put His Holy Spirit among them” (Isaiah 63:11)?

- The Hebrew word for “spirit” *ruah* means literally “wind,” “air,” and suggests the subjective experience of God within us just as the air we breathe.

13. What is the relation between the angel of the Lord and the Lord Himself?

- It is the same Person:

By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud. It guided them on their way. At night He led them with a pillar of fire. It gave them light. So they could travel by day or at night (Exodus 13:21).

The angel of God had been traveling in front of Israel's army. Now He moved back and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved away from in front of them. Now it stood behind them (Exodus 14:19).

- Hagar met with the “Angel of the Lord” (Genesis 16:7-11), but later it is said that it is “the Lord who spoke to her” (Genesis 16:13). Likewise, the Angel of the Lord appears to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:2), but later, in the rest of the story, Moses speaks with the Lord. Also, Gideon speaks sometimes with the Lord, sometimes with the Angel of the Lord (Judges 6: 11 ff.).

14. How does the Bible expect Israel and any human creature to respond to this powerful and yet personal and loving God?

- God desires that we know Him intimately. The Hebrew verb *yada* (“know”) expresses the dynamics of the conjugal relationship (Genesis 4:1, 17; Genesis 19:8)

But here is what the one who brags should boast about. He should brag that he has understanding and knows me. I want him to know that I am the Lord (Jeremiah 9:24).

15. Can we still believe in God after Auschwitz?

My ears had heard about you. But now my own eyes have seen you (Job 42:5).

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid (Psalm 23:4).

- After Auschwitz we do not believe in God as before. In fact, after the suffering experience, we do not believe in God just because of who He is or because of what we know. We believe in God *in spite of* our questions, *in spite of* what we do not know. Our relationship with God has

grown from a mechanical or theoretical one to a more personal connection built on faith and grace. God is no more a theory of whom we speak; we have now learned to speak to Him.

- Elie Wiesel: “After Auschwitz, I do not believe that we can speak *about* God; we can only . . . speak *to* God” (“Gespräch mit R. Boschert,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 28/29, 1989, quoted in Hans Küng, *Judaism: Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* [New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1995], 727, n. 44.).
- Still, one baffling question remains: *Why? Why did God, the God of love and justice, the all powerful God allow this to happen?* We will explore this question further in Lesson 3, *Evil and Suffering*.

It is not possible to speak or even to think about God without trembling, not only because God is God, but also because of what we are, limited and distorted creatures. Our assumptions about Him will always be insufficient. God will always stand beyond our minds and our theological analysis. When Moses came to God and asked Him to tell him who He was, not without some irony God answered, “I will be what I will be,” the literal translation of the Hebrew phrase “*Ehye asher Ehye*.”

In other words, “Who I am,” said God “is not of your concern, and ultimately the encounter will surprise you. You cannot lock me into your definitions and your theological analysis. It would be vain to try to prove my existence.” Indeed God is not a truth or an idea to be demonstrated following a logical sequence of arguments. His existence is never questioned. Only the fool would venture to say “in his heart, there is no God” (Psalm 14:1). God’s existence imposes itself upon us before anything: “Before You created the world and the mountains were made, from the beginning to the end you are God” (Psalm 90:2).

The Bible starts with this clear and unquestionable presumption that God exists: “In the beginning God created” (Genesis 1:1). In the Bible the most frequent phrase describing the reality of God is the affirmation that He is alive. That is what characterizes Him in comparison to the

¹ Jacques Doukhan, “Ha-Shem, The God of Israel,” *Shabbat Shalom*, Autumn 1999, 18-20.

idols of wood or clay who have eyes and don't see, and have ears and do not hear (Psalm 115:5-6). The God of Israel is "*Hay*," "alive" (Joshua 3:10; Judges 8:19; 1 Samuel 14:39; Psalm 84:3, English verse 2). "Life" is therefore the best place where God makes Himself known. God reveals Himself in the life and the beauty of nature, His creation (Psalm 19:1) and more importantly in the events of history. The God of Israel is the God who delivered the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt (Exodus 20:2) and brought them out of the Babylonian exile (Jeremiah 29:10). Yet, He is also the personal God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 3:6), the God who answers prayers and takes care of our very human needs (Daniel 6:22).

The God of the Bible is not an abstract principle or an ethereal power. He is described as a physical being with hands (Genesis 49:24; Psalm 75:8-10), a nose (Isaiah 65:5), and a mouth (Deuteronomy 8:3). God is as real and personal as a human being. He walks (Deuteronomy 20:4; Genesis 3:8), speaks (Genesis 17:22; Isaiah 65:12), fights (Genesis 32:22-32; Exodus 14:14, 25) and even touches (Genesis 2:7; Genesis 32:25; Psalm 23:5).

To be sure, we should not take this description of God to the letter. The purpose of this language is to teach us that God is real, even as real as we are. This concept is further revealed in the mutual resemblance between God and the human creature (Genesis 1:27). Thus, the Bible presents a paradoxical picture of God. On the one hand, He is depicted as the God

beyond human perception. No one can see Him (Exodus 33:10). Any picture or form of Him would therefore be inappropriate (Exodus 20:4). God is infinitely distant, He is unreachable and no one can control or apprehend Him. He dwells in heaven (Deuteronomy 26:15; Psalm 113:5; Isaiah 14:13-14).

On the other hand, God is present everywhere: “How can I get away from your Spirit? Where can I go to escape from You? If I go up to the heavens, You are there. If I lie down in the deepest parts of the earth, You are also there. Suppose I were to rise with the sun in the east and then cross over to the west where it sinks into the ocean. Your hand would always be there to guide me. Your right hand would still be holding me close. Suppose I were to say, ‘I’m sure the darkness will hide me. The light around me will become as dark as night.’ Even that darkness would not be dark to You. The night would shine like the day, because darkness is like light to You.” (Psalm 139: 7-12).

In fact, the Bible begins with an acute awareness of this tension. The first creation story (Genesis 1:1-2:4a) presents a God who is far, transcendent, God of the Universe, and the second creation story (Genesis 2:4b-25) presents a God who is near to mankind and is directly involved in human affairs. Interestingly the name of God which appears in those texts corresponds to their respective contexts. In the first creation account, the name of God is “*Elohim*,” from the root “*alah*,” which conveys the idea of strength and preeminence. This name is

also used in the plural form to express the idea of God's majesty and supremacy: this God is the God of Gods! He contains in Himself all the divine powers. In the second creation account the name of God is YHWH (the tetragrammaton) from the Semitic root "hwh" which means "to be" or "to speak" and expresses the idea of God's closeness to humans. The ancient rabbis understood this linguistic and theological distinction: "The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to those, You want to know my name? I am called according to my actions. When I judge the creatures I am Elohim, and when I have mercy with My world, I am named YHWH" (*Ex R.* 3:6).

For the men and the women of the Bible, God's proximity, or closeness was a daily and continuous experience. Adam, the first man, was created as a result of a personal and physical contact with God who "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7). God actually spoke to Adam and Eve, to Cain, to Noah, and to Sarah and they answered back! The Bible records these conversations between God and mankind. One of the most poignant of these divine-human dialogues involves Abraham, our father. The Biblical text describes Abraham bowing before three individuals, one of whom he addresses with the usual name of God "*Adonay*" (Genesis 18:2). He addresses Him with the second person masculine singular pronoun "*be'eyneyka*" "in thy eyes" (Genesis 18:3). Furthermore the Biblical text clearly suggests that two of the three "men" went to Sodom (Genesis 19:1) and Abraham "still stayed before the Lord" (Genesis 18:22). The story is puzzling

and somewhat disturbing because it places God in space and time, within the limitations of our flesh. But Abraham does not seem to be shocked; he even debates with the Lord as one would do in a Middle Eastern marketplace!

Jacob too, experiences close physical contact with the divine. He wrestles with God and takes his name Israel from this violent encounter (Genesis 32:28). Moses is remembered in Biblical tradition as the only one “whom the Lord knew face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:10) and indeed no one came so close to God. As He passed in front of Moses, He said, “I am the Lord, the Lord. I am a God who is tender and kind. I am gracious. I am slow to get angry. I am faithful and full of love. I continue to show my love to thousands of people. I forgive those who do evil. I forgive those who refuse to obey. And I forgive those who sin. But I do not let guilty people go without punishing them. I punish the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren for the sin of their parents” (Exodus 34:6-7).

Later the presence of God was sensed in the midst of the people of Israel. Through the visible sign of the cloud, God dwelled (*shakan*) among them (Exodus 40:34-38). In the memory of Israel this experience of God’s nearness was preserved, and the word *Shekinah*, derived from the verb “*shakan*” (dwell), came to express the nearness of God and even God Himself (*Ab* 3:2; *Nb Rabbah* 13:6).

It is also interesting that the prophet Isaiah, referring to this experience of the Israelites

in the wilderness, preferred to interpret it in relation to the Holy Spirit (*Ruah ha-qodesh*). Through the “*Ruah*,” this powerful and invisible “Wind” of God, divine power was manifested among them (Isaiah 63:11). The *Shekinah* is here associated with the Holy Spirit within them God’s proximity at its best.

Then, there is the case of the “angel of the Lord,” “*Malakh YHWH*” who is often identified with the Lord YHWH Himself. Hagar met the angel of the Lord (Genesis 16:7-11), but it is said that it is “the Lord who spoke to her” (Genesis 16:13). Likewise the angel of the Lord appears to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:2), but later in the story Moses speaks with the Lord. Also Gideon speaks alternatively with the Lord, and with the angel of the Lord (Judges 6:11-24). Along the same lines, the Aramaic Targum of Onkelos (Genesis 16: 13) identifies the angel of the Lord with the *Shekinah*, the concrete manifestation of the presence of God.

Even the services of the Temple and its sacrifices were occasions imparted to the people of Israel in order to draw them near to God. The offering on the altar was a place where God promised, “There I will meet you and speak to you” (Exodus 29:42). The Hebrew word for sacrifice “*haqrib*” means *to bring near*, and thereby reflects the promise of God’s proximity.

This movement of God who responds to mankind and even comes down to dwell in the midst of His people constitutes one of the most unique features of the God of

Israel. In the Ancient Near East all peoples believed in the existence of a God who lived in heaven. But only the God of Israel left His heavenly palace to hear men and women and reveal Himself to them. This is the essential difference Daniel notes between the gods of the pagan Chaldeans and the true God: “but there is a God in heaven who can explain mysteries. Nebuchadnezzar, He has shown you what is going to happen...” (Daniel 2:28).

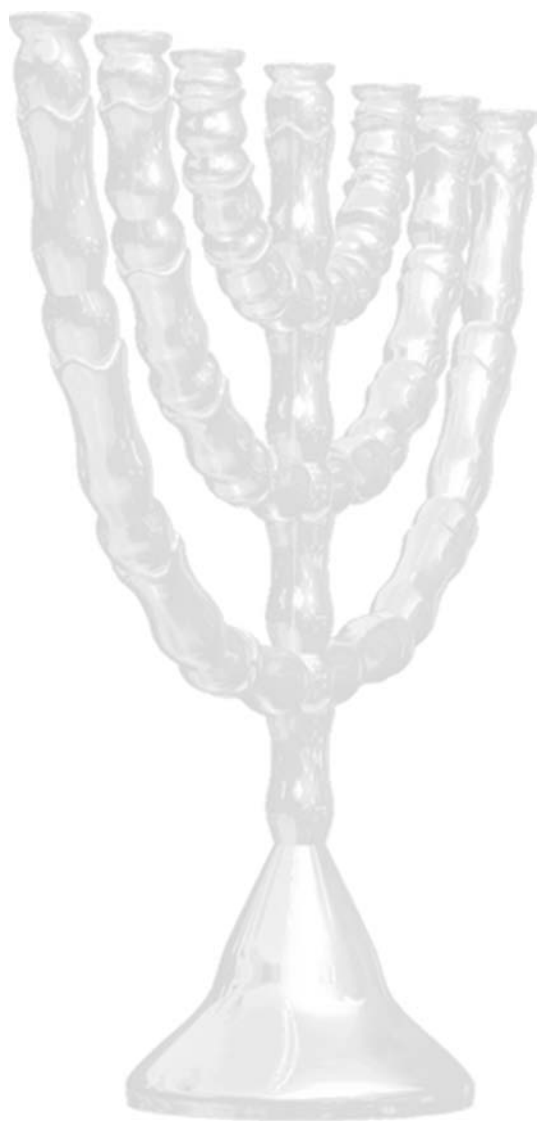
This is, perhaps the primary reason why we believe in God—because He makes Himself known to us, because humans experience His word, His love, His power, His person and His influence in the flesh of their existence, and in the flow of history.

Even the existence of suffering and the sense of God’s silence was interpreted by the prophets as an indication of His presence rather than His absence. Paradoxically, the prophet Isaiah find in the very fact that God is not visible and hides Himself, the very reason why He is the true God. “I will wait for the Lord. He is turning His face away from Jacob’s people. I will put my trust in Him” (Isaiah 8:17). For, true faith in God implies an experience which challenges this faith. In spite of His absence and the perception of His distance, there is not another God. Even *if* God does not bless, and our work is not successful, even *if* He seems not to answer our prayers, His existence is never questioned; we believe in spite of all this. Like the Jews hidden in a cave in Cologne who inscribed on the wall, “I believe in the sun even if it does not shine, I believe in love even if I do not

feel it, I believe in God even if He hides Himself.”

Only those who have run the risk of God’s absence have been able to experience His presence. As long as we believe in a God-slot machine who responds mechanically, as long as our God is the God who never surprises; He is simply an idea, a theology but is not yet God. Job’s story reveals that paradigm. It’s only after the turmoil of his pain, and the violence of his questions, that he finally confesses to God, “my ears have heard about you. But now my own eyes have seen you.” (Job 42:5). The entire book of Job is full of profound theological statements about God. All the theologians are gathered around the table digging into their books and yet, only Job can speak the truth about God, simply because he is the only one who knows Him. This is the paradoxical lesson that Elie Wiesel has learned from the memory of the gas chambers, “After Auschwitz, I do not believe that we can speak *about* God; we can only . . . speak to God.”²

² Elie Wiesel, “Eine Quelle für die Hoffnung finden, Gespräch mit R. Boschert, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 28/29, 1989, quoted in Hans Küng, *Judaism: Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* [New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1995], 727, n. 44





And God said to Moses, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh."
He continued, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites,
'Ehyeh sent me to you.'"

Exodus 3:14, NJPS