

What is a neo-Hasidic God?



Background

HaShem is a common Jewish name for God, and yet it describes nothing. It provides no information about that which we worship. It literally means only *the Name*.

Our ancestors understood that any name, form, or gender ascribed to the Divine is already a limitation, and thus misses the mark. The Divine contains in it all names, forms, and genders. The Divine is beyond such things, beyond any things, beyond *anything* at all. *Gashmius* positions itself within this lineage: we are among those devoted to something which is so incomprehensible that we won't—we can't—attempt to name It.

How, then, should we think or talk about the Divine? We can start with feminist theologian Judith Plaskow's accusation that traditional Judaism often falls short of its self-proclaimed monotheism, and instead veers into "monolatry." She writes that "when monotheism is ... identified with the worship of a single image or picture of God,"—that is to say, a male King who judges our actions and thwarts our enemies— "what passes for monotheism is really monolatry." [1] She shows this to be the case in instances when folks change the language in religious metaphor to non-gendered or feminine descriptors, and the Jewish establishment bristles.

So although HaShem is One (as we say in the *Shema* daily) and this "One" is variously referred to as male, female, non-gendered, old, young, humanoid, and amorphous, there is still much power placed in the Man-in-the-sky image.

To help break up this monolatry, we collected a diverse selection of concepts of God. Some are traditional Hasidic sources. Some are from self-proclaimed neo-Hasidic authors. Others are from contemporary queer and/or feminist theologians. We hope that by providing a smattering of ideas, you might find one(s) that speaks to you and support your own idiosyncratic relationship with the Divine.

Before Diving In:

Know: these are not meant to be a quick read. Sit with each source. Reread them over and over and over. Discuss them a *chavrusa* (study partner). Think about: Do you understand what they are saying? Are they referencing something else in Jewish texts? Can you locate that reference? It is good to look into every cited source to understand not only how they are using that source, but how it might differ from its original context.

What speaks to you? What would you like to leave behind? What do you want to learn more about? But most of all, enjoy.

A person who does not see the Holy One Blessed be He in every place
does not see Him at all.

**Hannah Rochel, the Maiden of Ludmir (the only woman
to function as a Hasidic rebbe) [2]**

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The blessed Creator made everything and is everything. In each moment, without ever ceasing, God bestows blessing upon His creatures and upon all the worlds above and below, onto the angels and onto all living beings. It is for this reason that we say in our morning prayers, “Who *forms* light and creates darkness (based on Is. 45:7) and not “Who *formed* light and creates darkness.” We use the present tense because God is constantly forming, revitalizing all of life, moment to moment; all is from the blessed Holy One, who is perfect and all-inclusive.

Levi Yitshak of Berdetchiv (18th c Hasidic rebbe) [3]

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The blessed Holy One is hidden in many garments and concealments. But I heard the following from my teacher [the Baal Shem Tov]: If you know the blessed Holy One is hiding, then He is not truly hidden. Then “all doers of iniquity shall vanish” (Psalms 92:10). This is the meaning of “And I will surely hide my face from them (Deut. 31:18)— [the curse is that] even the blessed Holy One’s hiding will become concealed from you. The words of the wise are precious.

Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye (18th century Hasidic rebbe) [4]

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We are in the shift to the place where everything is God, pantheism. The understanding that has come from mysticism and from people on the cusp of periods moving from past to present, people talking about primary experience, is that the body and the soul cannot be separated. It shouldn't be that they should be fighting one another, that you have to get rid of one in order to get the other. We want Wholeness, a holistic understanding, now. I believe that people are moving from theism to pantheism. There are some who don't like the word *pantheism*, the idea that God is everything. They prefer the word *panentheism*, which means that God is *in* everything. I, however, don't think that the distinction is real. What was the objection that people had to pantheism, God is everything? "Are you going to tell me that the excrement of a dog is also God?" And the answer to this would be— "Yes." What is wrong with that? It is only from the human perspective that we see a difference between that and *challah*. On the submolecular level, on the atomic level, they all look the same. And if you look from a galactic perspective, what difference is there between one and the other? So if "God is everything," why are you and I here? Because we are the appearance of God in this particular form. And God likes to appear in countless forms and experience countless lives.... Deep down, the deepest level of the pattern is that God is everything. So it's not that God *created* the world but that God *became* the world.

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (Founder of Jewish Renewal) [5]

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This feminine immanent face of God has many names, but the most prominent of them is Shekhinah. Shekhinah means "dwelling," with the noun-verb force of that word: the act of dwelling. The state of being somewhere. This Talmudic word describes the numinous presence of God that abided in the Temple. In the centuries following the destruction of the Temple, sages begin to depict the Shekhinah as a woman. They see her as a loving mother who suffers the same exile as her people.

Rabbi Kohenet Jill Hammer (Co-Founder of Kohenet Movement) [6]

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There is only One. That is the great truth of mysticism, found within and reaching beyond all religions. That One embraces, surrounds, and fills all the infinitely varied forms that existence has taken and ever will take. We call that truth out twice daily in reciting *Shema' Yisra'el*, "Hear, O Israel." "Y-H-W-H is One" means that there is none other. Our daily experience of variety, separate identity and alienation of self from other renders an incomplete and ultimately misleading picture of reality... The one Being is clothed within each being. For reasons we do not begin to understand, that one dressed itself in this "coat of many colors" called the universe, and on this planet into the endless dance of variety and multiplicity that we call evolution. It is present within each unique form of existence that has come to be in the universe, and yet remains One, in and through them all.

Arthur Green (neo-Hasidic pioneer) [7]

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The Torah's stories about God were the first I had seen about someone who, like me, didn't fit binary gender categories.... From the time I first read Genesis as a child who knew that I didn't fit the male/female binary, it has been clear to me that the "image of God" has nothing to do with sex, gender, human differences, or human bodies. Whatever the benefits of gender as a means of fostering human relationships, if our goal is to recognize our kinship with God, then we need to look to the aspects of humanity that can't be conceived in terms of gender, to the ways in which we, like the God in whose image we are created, exceed or confound human categories.

Joy Ladin (Trans poet and theologian) [8]

Footnotes

- [1] Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1991), 151.
- [2] Quote attributed to her by Epharim Taubehaus, *Ha-Betulah Hanah Rohel mi Ludmir* (The Virgin Hanah Rohel from Ludmir), Ha-posek 141 (1952) trans. in Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Maiden of Ludmir: A Jewish Holy Woman and Her World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013), 43.
- [3] *Kedushat Levi*, parshat breishit in *Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from Around the Maggid's Table (Volume 1)*, ed. Arthur Green, Ebn Leader, Ariel Evan Mayse, and Or N. Rose (Woodstock, VT, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013), 80.
- [4] *Toledot Yaakov Yosef, breishit* in *Hasidism: Writings on Devotion, Community and Life in the Modern World*, ed. Ariel Evan Mayse and Sam Berrin Shonkoff (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2020), 6.
- [5] Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame: Teachings and Tales of The Hasidic Masters* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 20.
- [6] Accessed via <https://feminismandreligion.com/2013/06/10/shekhinah-by-rabbi-jill-hammer/>
- [7] Arthur Green, “Neo-Hasidism: A Judaism for Monists” in *Judaism for the World: Reflections on God, Life, and Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 3.
- [8] Joy Ladin, *The Soul of a Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2018), 7, 34.