

Syllabus: The Nature of God

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Office hours: Furst 231 Wednesday 1:30-2:30; Furst 216 Monday/Wednesday 5:45-6:45

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Purpose of Seminar: Using medieval and modern philosophical sources, we will rigorously and extensively examine traditional Judaism's philosophical and theological views on the nature and attributes of God. For centuries, Jewish philosophers, theologians and mystics have pondered biblical passages that speak of complex subjects such as: God's love for Abraham and his children Israel; God dwelling within the tabernacle, and the Temple in Jerusalem; God's foreknowledge of all human events, but also His anger at Israel's sin, His regret following sin and His forgiveness following this anger.

Maimonides, famously, read these verses through the lens of his own philosophical approach, seeking as much as possible to reduce any true analogy between God's attributes (such as knowledge and love) and similarly named attributes of human beings. Describing biblical language about God as referring to either "negative attributes" or "attributes of action," he insisted that any other approach would embody an assault on the doctrines of God's perfection and incorporeality.

Maimonides's philosophy does not embody the totality of Jewish thought. From Judah Halevi before Maimonides, to Nahmanides after, this approach was criticized as irreconcilable with biblical language and with Talmudic theology. Meanwhile, in the Christian world, Thomas Aquinas seriously engaged Maimonides's writings and responded to them in a way that can be deeply instructive to Jewish students of philosophy. Centuries later, Michael Wyschogrod, influenced by the writings of Protestant theologian Karl Barth, offered his own critique of Maimonides.

We will revisit these debates and engage in our own philosophical and theological analysis. Utilizing the Bible, the Talmud, and medieval and modern philosophical texts, we will consider (in great detail) the nature of God's perfection, love, omnipotence, the nature of His omniscience, and the nature of His omnipresence. We will meticulously examine Maimonides's arguments for the incorporeality of God, how that impacted his understanding of biblical texts, and what other Jewish thinkers offer as interpretations in response.

Other topics we may cover include: God's relationship to time; creation *ex nihilo* vs other kinds of creation; God's relationship to abstract entities (e.g., numbers); the nature of infinity, the nature of human beings, and halakhic metaphysics.

Class requirements and grades: Students are expected to have carefully studied each week's assigned readings in advance, and are expected to attend classes punctually and fully. Often a question will be paired to the reading, and the students will be asked to write several paragraphs of reflection in response. The course will have a concluding final covering all the lectures and

class discussions, and students will write a term paper pertaining to a central text, or question, related to Jewish metaphysics. The grades will be calculated based on the following: one-third class participation and reading response; one-third final; and one-third term paper.

Section I: Divine Attributes, Divine Love, and Chosenness

Moses, in Deuteronomy, explains the reason for the election of Israel: “because He loved thy fathers, therefore He chose their children after them.” What does it mean for God to love, and how does a good God bestow preferential love? What do biblical and philosophical texts about God’s love teach us about our understanding of God’s attributes? In what way is human love different from divine love, and in what way is it similar?

Hebrew Bible, Selections

Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 1:58 and 1:59.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Question 13

Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*, selections

Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, selections

Meir Soloveichik, *God’s Beloved: Election and Tradition in the Theology of Michael Wyschogrod*, selections

Edward Collins Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine*

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, Selections

Section 2: Omnipresence, Indwelling, and Exile

God is described as omnipresent, yet the Bible also describes His glory filling the Temple after it is built. The question of how this is to be understood is raised by Solomon himself: “Behold the very heavens cannot contain Thee!” What is omnipresence, and what does it mean to speak about God dwelling on the Temple Mount? How does Maimonides understand the notion of God’s noncorporeality, and how does that impact his understanding of the Temple? The Talmud speaks further of *Shekhina be-galuta*, of the Divine presence being “in exile” following the destruction of the Temple, of the God of Abraham joining in the suffering of Israel’s persecution. In what way can exile or distress be attributed to God? We will discuss the Jewish intellectual openness to divine indwelling but opposition to the concept of incarnation. As part of this larger topic, we will also discuss what it means to speak of the presence of other non-corporeal entities within a physical space, such as souls within human beings.

Readings:

Hebrew Bible on the Tabernacle and Temple, selections

Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of the Principles of the Torah*, Chapter 1, and *Laws of the Temple*, Chapter 1

Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, selections

Harry Wolfson, “Maimonides and Unity and Incorporeality of God”

Nahmanides, commentary on Genesis 46:1, and Exodus Chapter 25

Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*, selections, and selected poems, including, “Lord Where Will I Find Thee”

Michael Wyschogrod, "A Jewish Perspective on Incarnation"
Meir Soloveichik, "Torah and Incarnation"
Sefer Ha-Aggada, selections
Eliezer Berkovits, "Dr. AJ Herschel's Theology of Pathos"
Thomas Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?"
Aaron Lichtenstein, "The Duties of the Heart and the Response to Suffering"

Section 3: Divine Omniscience, Providence, and Free Will

God's foreknowledge of all events is central to the Bible's understanding of God, and to its assertion of the possibility of prophecy. Medieval Jewish philosophers were greatly troubled with the question of how this doctrine could be reconciled with human free will and responsibility. What does the doctrine of divine omniscience actually declare; does modern philosophical logic allow us to resolve the question that so bothered the medievals; and to what extent should questions about divine knowledge be the focus of theistic philosophy today? How might an assertion of divine omniscience impact a philosophical theodicy, and how is the purpose of prayer to be understood in light of God's foreknowledge?

Saadia Gaon, *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, Chapter 4
Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*, 5:20
Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, Chapter 4, *Guide for the Perplexed*, selections, including 3:17
Nahmanides, *Commentary*
Adams vs. Plantinga on Counterfactuals
Book of Job, selections
Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind* and *On Repentance*, selections.
CS Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, selections

Statement from the Office of Disability Services:

"Students with disabilities who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations should make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services, akelsen@yu.edu during the first week of class. Once you have been approved for accommodations, please submit [to the professor] your accommodation letter and discuss [with the professor] any specifics to ensure the successful implementation of your accommodations."