

# **GOD? WHO KNOWS?**

## **A STUDY PACK FOR ENQUIRING MINDS**

**BY  
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Brian Patten © for his poem "A Blade of Grass"  
Debbie Friedman © for "You are the One"

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## IT'S A MYSTERY

Welcome to the world where every serious question is acceptable and no answer is certain or definitely true. When we think or talk about *God*, we are in a very unfamiliar realm. Science gives us theories or hypotheses which can be tested and then accepted or rejected. Some become laws — the law of gravity — while others remain as theories — the theory of evolution.



Theology is the study of the way we think and speak about *God*, our attempts to understand that which is beyond the capacity of the human brain or experience.

**Think of a question to which you are sure that you know the correct and only answer.**

**Now think of a question you believe no one can answer definitely or with authority.**

What are the differences between the two kinds of questions you posed?

Imagine that *God* is waiting to listen to you and respond to your questions. If you could ask any two questions of *God*, what would they be?

GOOGLE

God

## **GOD - WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHY?**

Tick all the statements about *God* in the column that seems most appropriate

Tick here  
**YES NO MAYBE ?**

God answers our prayers				
God is a creation of human imagination				
God is found in nature				
God created the universe				
God looks like an old man with a long white beard				
You can only communicate with God through prayer				
God is dead				
God is male				
God is female				
God is neither male nor female				
God requires sacrifice				
God wrote the Torah				
God prays				
God heals the sick				
God performs miracles				
God is within us				
God is all-powerful				

God punishes when we do wrong				
God cannot change what happens to us				
God cries with us when bad things happen to us				
God demands loyalty				
God is responsible for emotional feelings				
God can die				
God demands that we fulfil the <i>mitzvot</i> (commandments)				
God governs all (not just the Jews)				
God only cares about the Jews				
God is invisible and has no bodily substance				
God speaks to people				
Human beings can question and convince God				
God only speaks through and to certain people				
God is just				
God prefers religious Jews over others				
God is merciful				
People can understand God				
God is responsible for death				
God is responsible for life				
God knows everything, including our thoughts				
God is limited in power				
God will send the Messianic age				
God is blessed				
God is alone and needs humanity				
People need God more than God needs people				

## MEETING GOD "FACE TO FACE" QUESTIONNAIRE

This is an anonymous questionnaire for you to explore your ideas and beliefs about God. Your teacher may invite you to share the answers or keep them private. Please complete as many of the statements as you can:

I think God is.....

I feel close to God when.....

I believe that God.....

I speak to God when I need help with.....

When I talk to God I often feel.....

I don't believe that God.....

The idea of talking to God makes me think .....

I think God listens to me when I .....

## **IF YOU WERE GOD**

A programme by Joe Katzman

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan of blessed memory (American Orthodox Rabbi 1934-1983 who wrote about Kabbalah and Jewish Meditation) wrote a brief and excellent book called [If You Were God](#) (Mesorah, 1983). It begins with this provocative opening...

### **The Problem:**

You are given an island where several tribes live. By nature and culture, these tribes are exploitative and belligerent. This results in much suffering on the island, caused by war, poverty and prejudice. They have been living this way for centuries without any sign of improvement.

### **Your Assignment:**

- To try to improve this society.
- To teach its members to live together in harmony and reduce suffering to a minimum or eliminate it entirely.
- To create a healthy society.

### **Your Resources:**

- You have all the resources that a highly advanced technology can offer.
- You have the entire island under surveillance and can see what is happening in any place at any time.
- You have such devices as cloud-seeding equipment and can plant underground explosives. Within reason, you can control weather, flooding, volcanoes and earthquakes, and produce any "natural" phenomenon on cue.
- You also have devices that can be used to implant ideas through subliminal suggestion. You can implant ideas to entire populations or to certain select leaders.

However, you must take into account the severe limitations of subliminal suggestion. If you try to implant any ideas that go against the basic nature of the populace, they will be totally rejected and your efforts will be in vain.

One alternative would be to implant ideas that somehow would make use of the acknowledged bad nature of these people.

**Your Restrictions:**

Under no circumstances are the natives of this island to be aware of your presence. This supersedes all other considerations.

The cultural shock caused by your revealing yourself would disrupt the entire fabric of the island culture. It would cause much suffering and more than offset any good that you could possibly accomplish.

The natives would be reduced to a state of almost vegetable-like dependence from which they would be unlikely to recover. If they did recover, they might rebel so violently as to eliminate any positive values they might have originally had.

Therefore, the restrictions that you not reveal yourself must be followed without exception under any circumstances.

But aside from this restriction, you have a free hand to proceed as humanely or as ruthlessly as you see fit.

**In short, you have the opportunity to play God.**

**What would you do?**



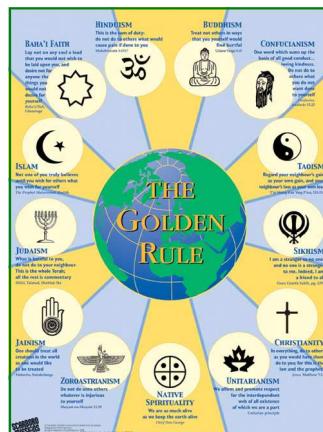
# THE GOLDEN RULE

as taught by Hillel:

"That which is despicable [hateful] to you, do not do to your fellow, this is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary, go and learn it."

Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat 31a*

Rabbi Hillel [born Babylon 1st Century BCE - died ? Jerusalem, 1st Century CE] was one of the most influential scholars in Jewish history. Some of his sayings come down to us in the Mishnah called Pirke Avot, "Sayings of the Fathers."



What, if anything, does Rabbi Hillel's statement have to do with your belief in God?

What does Rabbi Hillel's statement suggest that he believed about God?

## WHO, WHAT AND WHERE IS GOD?

Examine the texts on the following three pages; they are intended as stimulus materials to help you explore who, what and where God is in your own experience.

Below are suggestions for different ways you might wish to approach the question:

1. Think about where and when you feel “closest to God,” whatever that may mean for you. Then read the poem and listen to the song. Write a poem or paragraph or draw an image that represents your response to the material.
2. Go out into a local park and sit on the grass. Examine different blades of grass and spend some quiet meditative time individually. Then come together with another person and read the poem to each other. Talk about your thoughts and feelings, including where and if you think God fits into this.
3. After reading the poem, song and quotations with your class or a partner, imagine you are a blade of grass and write a poem, song or piece of prose expressing your identity and how you think you fit into the wide scheme of Creation.
4. Do you think God wants us to care about grass, and by extension, the environment? Talk, write or compose a song, poem or rap about your answer to the question.
5. Do some gardening work for an older or infirm person in your community. Get your hands dirty and feel the grass as you weed or mow.

## Poem: A blade of grass by Brian Patten

You ask for a poem.  
I offer you a blade of grass.  
You say it is not good enough.  
You ask for a poem.

I say this blade of grass will do.  
It has dressed itself in frost,  
It is more immediate  
Than any image of my making.

You say it is not a poem,  
It is a blade of grass and grass  
Is not quite good enough.  
I offer you a blade of grass.

You are indignant.  
You say it is too easy to offer grass.  
It is absurd.  
Anyone can offer a blade of grass.

You ask for a poem.  
And so I write you a tragedy about  
How a blade of grass  
Becomes more and more difficult to offer,

And about how as you grow older  
A blade of grass  
Becomes more difficult to accept.



Poem © Brian Patten. Reproduced by permission of the author c/o Rogers, Coleridge & White Ltd.,  
20 Powis Mews, London W11 1JN

## YOU ARE THE ONE: REB NACHMAN'S PRAYER

Music: Debbie Friedman  
Text: Reb Nachman of Bratslav

You are the One, for this I pray  
That I may have the strength to be alone,  
To see the world, to stand among the trees, and all the living things.  
That I may stand alone and offer prayers and talk to You.  
You are the One to whom I do belong.  
And I'll sing my soul, I'll sing my soul to You  
And give You all that's in my heart.

Make all the foliage of the field, all grasses, trees and plants,  
Awaken at my coming, this I pray,  
And send their life into my world of prayer  
So that my speech, my thoughts and my prayers will be made whole  
And through the spirit of all growing things.  
And we know that everything is one  
Because we know that everything is You.

You are the One, for this I pray.  
I ask You, God, to hear my words  
That pour out from my heart. I stand before You,  
I, like water, lift my hands to You in prayer.  
And grant me strength, and grant me strength to stand alone.  
You are the One to whom I do belong.  
And I'll sing my soul, I'll sing my soul to You  
And give You all that's in my heart.

You are the One, for this I pray.  
And I'll sing my soul, I'll sing my soul to You.



© Debbie Friedman. This song is available on cd "It's You" # swp615 and on "Songs of the Spirit" # jmc001-2 and book "Renewal of Spirit" #dfb-103 from Harmony Ridge Music — <http://www.hrmusic.com/artists/dfrart.html>

## QUOTATIONS ABOUT GOD AND NATURE THROUGH THE IMAGERY OF GRASS

"If the sight of the blue skies fills you with joy, if a blade of grass springing up in the fields has power to move you, if the simple things in nature have a message you understand, Rejoice, for your soul is alive."

Eleanora Duse, Italian Actress 1858-1924

"Every blade of grass has its angel that bends over it and whispers, 'Grow, grow.'"

Babylonian Talmud

"I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars"

Walt Whitman, American poet 1819-1892

"To see a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower  
Hold infinity in the palms of your hand and eternity in an hour."

William Blake, English artist, poet, mystic 1757-1827

Rabbi Nachman of Bratislav [a great Chasidic rabbi who was a master of mysticism] expressed this idea eloquently:

"Know that every single shepherd has a unique tune according to the grass growing in the place where he pastures his sheep. For every single animal has a special grass that it needs to eat ... and according to the grasses and the place where he pastures, so too he has a tune. For every blade of grass has a song that it sings, which is like a passage of poetry.

Rav Kook [Abraham Isaac Kook, first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel and a great mystic and scholar] believed that when people make their lives fit in with nature then they can restore the sense of natural bliss, fine attributes and the experience of spiritual elation that they lost because of having grown apart from nature."

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion is that there is no conclusion. We can never know the final answers to any questions about God, unless perhaps we learn them after our death in "the world to come."

In the meantime, we have our Jewish belief that we are created by God in the image of God, בְּצֵלֶם אֱלֹהִים (b'tzelem elohim), and we therefore have the possibility of becoming and living the potential that God has created in us.

Imagine that every morning, as you dress for your day, you allow this thought into your awareness:

**I am made in the image of God; I am part of the family of Israel and God is always with me, even at the darkest times. I can find within me the strength and creativity to be and do what God would like me to do, if only I can listen hard enough to hear that voice.**

**Just think what you might be and do.**



## **YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY**

Use this page to make notes about your own beliefs and intentions. This is completely private and voluntary and may help you to clarify your own ideas and feelings about God.