

***Ever since Jacob wrestled with God, Jews have explored our relationship with God and the presence of God in our lives. What are different ideas about God in our tradition? Is it possible to define the concept of “God”? How can we understand God when we only have our own, human language to describe God?***

In Psalm 139, the psalmist engages in conversation with God, suggesting, “You have scrutinized me and you know; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you understand my thought from afar... You have restricted me and you have laid your hand on me. Knowledge is beyond me; exalted, I am incapable of it.” Central to the Jewish intellectual and spiritual tradition is our opportunity or responsibility to develop a relationship with God—but what does that mean? Psalm 139 explores this question: God knows us, God knows our moves and our thoughts, God limits us when necessary and God takes action against us, and we understand and revere this—still, we cannot know God. Our tradition is filled with ideas similar to this, acknowledging that it is incumbent upon us to love and fear God, and to come to know God through the mitzvot and through study. At the same time, our tradition suggests, there is rarely one understanding of God, rather there are countless images and understandings of God, manifesting in inspiring and complex ideas. These plentiful ideas can be overwhelming, particularly in a larger culture where for many of us, God-talk is not often prevalent and we have only rare opportunities to talk through with others about how we imagine God.

## **Texts #1: Ideas from Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz**

*From Simple Words: Thinking about What Really Matters in Life*

Perhaps our greatest difficulty in relating to God is our inherent inability to form any coherent understanding of the Almighty. With the millions of words that have been said and written, both for and against, with all the prayers, prayer books, and books on devotion, so much of this subject still remains empty words. The word “God” is indeed used—in public prayers or in unvoiced wishes, in common conversation and in curses—with equal meaninglessness. For most people it means everything—and nothing.

For many people, the image of God is quite clear: a big, white bearded man sitting on a throne very high in the sky. He has—at least figuratively—a stick in one hand, and a bag of candy in the other, bestowing each on His subjects. Many prayers, as well as bitter complaints, ask for more of the candy and less of the stick. You may object and say that such an idea is just childish, kindergarten imagery, but how many people actually continue to develop their religious understanding beyond that age?

Asked, “Who is God?” Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz provides his personal reflections in the interview below:

**Q:** Characterize God: Is He vengeful, merciful, moody?

**A:** How can one characterize God? Whatever we say is going to be both right and wrong at the same time. All the good, beautiful and sweet things in this world are actually attributes of God, and every day, nay, every moment, we see Him differently. What is the color of a bubble of water? That depends upon the angle from which I look at it, and when I gaze at it long enough, I shall see in it all the colors and hues: Great, Mighty, Compassionate, Gracious, Awesome, Un-understandable—but forever extremely close to me.

Review what he is saying. What are the different points that Rabbi Steinsaltz is making?

1. What are the different ways that Rabbi Steinsaltz characterizes God?  
What is fundamental to Rabbi Steinsaltz’s ideas of God?
2. To what extent do you take issue with the questioner’s question?  
What’s interesting about it, given Rabbi Steinsaltz’s points about God?
3. To what extent do you relate to what he is sharing? What is challenging about it?  
What is attractive about it?
4. Does his conception surprise you in any way?
5. What are our responsibilities in prayer, according to Rabbi Steinsaltz?

## Text #2: Psalm 85

ספר תהילים פרק פה

א לְמִנְצַחַת לְבָנֵי קִרְחַת מִזְמוֹר:  
ב רְצִיחַת יְקֹנֵק אֲרָצָה שְׁבֵט שַׁבּוֹת {שְׁבִית} יַעֲקֹב:  
ג נְשָׂאתָ עֵז וְעֹמֶה כְּסִיתָ כָּל חַטָּאתָם סִלְהָ:  
ד אֲסַפְתָּ כָּל עֲבָרֹתָהּ הַשִּׁיבוֹת מִתְרוֹן אֶפְדָּה:  
ה שׁוּבוּנָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהִפְרֵ כַעֲסָה עַמְּנוּ:  
ו הִלְעוֹלָם תִּתְאַנֶּף בְּנוֹ תִמְשֹׁף אֶפְדָּה לְדֹר וָדֹר:  
ז הֲלֹא אַתָּה תִשׁוּב תַחֲיֵנוּ וְעַמְּךָ יִשְׁמְחוּ בָּךְ:  
ח הִרְאֵנוּ יְקֹנֵק חֲסִדֶּךָ וְיִשְׁעֶךָ תִּתֵּן לָנוּ:  
ט אֲשַׁמְעָה מִהַ יְדַבֵּר הָאֵל יְקֹנֵק כִּי יְדַבֵּר שְׁלוֹם אֵל עַמּוֹ וְאֵל חֲסִידָיו וְאֵל יִשׁוּבוֹ לְכַסְלָה:  
י אֶף קָרוֹב לִירְאָיו יִשְׁעוּ לְשֹׁכֵן כְּבוֹד בְּאֲרָצָנוּ:  
יא חֲסִד וְאַמֶּת נִפְגְּשׁוּ צְדָק וְשְׁלוֹם נִשְׁקִי:  
יב אֱמֶת מֵאֲרִץ תִּצְמַח וְצְדָק מִשָּׁמַיִם נִשְׁקֶה:  
יג גַּם יְקֹנֵק יִתֵּן הַטּוֹב וְאֲרָצָנוּ תִתֵּן יְבוּלָה:  
יד צְדָק לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וְיִשְׁם לְדָרֶךְ פְּעַמָּיו:

- 1 To the chief Musician, A Psalm for the sons of Korah.
- 2 Lord, you have been favorable to your land; you have brought back the captivity of Jacob.
- 3 You have forgiven the iniquity of your people, you have pardoned all their sin. *Selah*.
- 4 You have withdrawn all your wrath; you have turned from the fierceness of your anger.
- 5 Restore us, O God of our salvation, and cease your anger toward us.
- 6 Will you be angry with us for ever? Will you draw out your anger to all generations?
- 7 Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?
- 8 Show us your loving kindness, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.
- 9 I will hear what God the Lord will speak; for God will speak peace to God's people, and to God's pious ones, but let them not turn back to folly.
- 10 Surely God's salvation is near to those who fear God; that glory may dwell in our land.
- 11 Loving kindness and truth meet; righteousness and peace kiss (confront) each other.
- 12 Truth shall spring from the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven.
- 13 Also, the Lord shall give that which is good; and our land shall yield her produce.
- 14 Righteousness shall go before God; and walk in the way of God's steps.

1. Define the terms "truth," "lovingkindness," "righteousness," and "peace." (Note that "chesed" does not exactly translate to lovingkindness. What does chesed mean to you?)
2. What does it mean that "truth and lovingkindness should meet"? What is the relationship between truth and lovingkindness?
3. What is the relationship between righteousness and peace? Are they naturally compatible?
4. If not, how do we make room for both?

### Text #3: Genesis Rabbah 8:5

Rabbi Simon said: At the moment the Holy One chose to create the first Adam the ministering angels broke up into factions. Some of them said, "Create him," while others said, "Don't do it." Thus it is written: "Lovingkindness and truth will meet, righteousness and peace will kiss." (Psalms 85:11)

**Lovingkindness said:** Create him, for he will do acts of lovingkindness.

**Truth said:** Don't create him, for he is drenched in lies.

**Righteousness said:** Create him, for he will do much Tzedaka.

**Peace said:** Don't do it, for he is essentially quarrelsome.

What did the Holy One do? God took Truth and cast it toward the earth. Thus it is written, "And truth will be cast to the earth" (Daniel 8:12).

The ministering angels said: Sovereign of the Universe, why do You shame the leader of Your court? Let truth rise from the earth. Thus it is written: "Truth will arise from the earth" (Psalms 85:12).

1. Summarize the text. What is happening here? What different ideas are conveyed?
2. What, specifically, do you think is meant by the following phrases?
  - Compassion and truth are opposite
  - Humanity is the enemy of truth and peace and the friends of compassion and righteousness
  - Truth is cast to the ground and then it flourishes from the earth
3. Is “truth” sacrificed for “lovingkindness and righteousness”?
4. What do you learn about the nature of God from this text? What about the nature of people?

### Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Berachot 7a

Rabbi Johanan says in the name of Rabbi Jose: How do we know that the Holy One, blessed be God, says prayers? Because it says: Even them will I bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer. (Isaiah 56:7) It is not said, ‘their prayer’, but ‘My prayer’; hence [you learn] that the Holy One, blessed be God, says prayers.

What does God pray?—Rabbi Zutra ben Tobi said in the name of Rab: ‘May it be My will that My mercy may suppress My anger, and that My mercy may prevail over My [other] attributes, so that I may deal with My children in the attribute of mercy and, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice.’

It was taught: Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha says: I once entered into the innermost part [of the Sanctuary] to offer incense and saw Akathriel Yah [the Divine Crown of God], the Lord of Hosts, seated upon a high and exalted throne. God said to me: Ishmael, My son, bless Me! I replied: May it be Your will that Your mercy may suppress Your anger and Your mercy may prevail over Your other attributes, so that You may deal with Your children according to the attribute of mercy and may, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice! And God nodded to me with God’s head.

1. Summarize the texts. What is happening here? How is God portrayed?
2. How do these images of God compare to what we read in the above set of texts?
3. Why is this an interesting question to the rabbis?
4. In your mind, why might God pray? Why might justice and mercy be in conflict?
5. What do these texts, these ideas, tell us about what God is and can be?
6. In this text, the rabbis seem to suggest that they have a collective or similar understanding of God. To what extent can an objective experience of God be summoned—what do you think?

### Text #5: Exodus Rabbah 5.9

“For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?” (Deuteronomy 5:23). Come and see how the voice went forth to all of Israel, to each and every one in keeping with his particular capacity—to the elderly in keeping with their capacity, to young men in keeping with their capacity, to the little ones in keeping with their capacity, and to the women in keeping with their capacity. As it is said, “Moshe spoke and God answered him with a voice”—a voice that he would have been able to withstand. R. Yose bar Hanina said: If you are astounded at such an assertion, then draw the relevant inference from the manna, which came down for Israel varying in taste, in keeping with each Israelite’s particular need—to young men it tasted like bread, to the elderly it tasted like wafers made with honey, to sucklings it tasted like milk from their mother’s breast, to the sick it tasted like fine flour mingled with honey, while for the heathen it tasted as bitter as linseed. Now, if the manna, which was all of the same kind, changed into so many kinds to provide for the particular need of each individual, was it not possible for the voice, in which there is such divine strength, to vary according to the capacity of each individual, so that no harm should befall him? Hence Job said, “God thunders marvelously with God’s voice” (Job 37:5).

1. Summarize the text. What is being communicated? What is the logic behind the conclusion?
2. How does this text contrast with the other texts reviewed?
3. What might have generated this *midrash*, this conception of God? Is it something that you relate to?
4. What does the text suggest for the Jewish understanding of God, for our understanding of God that we invoke when we say the Shema?

## Hebrew Sources

### Text #3:

#### בראשית רבה ח:ה

א"ר סימון בשעה שבא הקב"ה לבראת את אדם הראשון, נעשו מלאכי השרת כיתים כיתים, וחבורות חבורות, מהם אומרים אל יברא, ומהם אומרים יברא, הה"ד תהלים פה חסד ואמת נפגשו צדק ושלוש נשקו, חסד אומר יברא שהוא גומל חסדים, ואמת אומר אל יברא שכולו שקרים, צדק אומר יברא שהוא עושה צדקות, שלום אומר אל יברא דכוליה קטטה, מה עשה הקב"ה נטל אמת והשליכו לארץ הה"ד דניאל ח ותשלך אמת ארצה, אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקב"ה רבון העולמים מה אתה מבזה תכסיס אלטיכסייה שלך, תעלה אמת מן הארץ, הדא הוא דכתיב תהלים פה אמת מארץ תצמח...

### Text #4:

#### ברכות ז:א

אמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי יוסי: מנין שהקדוש ברוך הוא מתפלל? שנאמר ישעיהו נ"ו+ והביאותים אל הר קדשי ושמתים בבית תפלתי, תפלתם לא נאמר אלא תפלתי, מכאן שהקדוש ברוך הוא מתפלל. מאי מצלי? אמר רב זוטרא בר טוביה אמר רב: יהי רצון מלפני שיכבשו רחמי את כעסי, ויגולו רחמי על מדותי, ואתנהג עם בני במדת רחמים, ואכנס להם לפנים משורת הדין.

### Text #5:

#### שמות אבה ה:ט

כי מי כל בשר אשר שמע קול אלהים חיים מדבר מתוך האש וגו' אתה היית שומע קולו [וחיית אבל עובדי כוכבים שומעים ומתים, בוא וראה] היאך הקול יוצא, אצל כל ישראל כל אחד ואחד לפי כחו, הזקנים לפי כחו, הבחורים לפי כחו, והקטנים לפי כחו, והיונקים לפי כחו, והנשים לפי כחו, ואף משה לפי כחו, שנאמר שמות יט משה ידבר והאלהים יעננו בקול, בקול שהיה יכול לסובלו, וכה"א תהלים כט קול ה' בכח, בכחו לא נאמר אלא בכח, בכחו של כל אחד ואחד, ואף נשים מעוברות לפי כחו, הוי אומר כל אחד ואחד לפי כחו, אר"י בר חנינא אם תמה אתה על הדבר הזה למוד מן המן שלא היה יורד לישראל אלא לפי כח של כל אחד ואחד מישראל, הבחורים היו אוכלין אותו כלחם שנאמר שמות טז הנני ממטיר לכם לחם מן השמים וגו', והזקנים כצפיחת בדבש שנאמר שם /שמות ט"ז/וטעמו כצפיחת בדבש, ויונקים כחלב משדי אמו שנאמר במדבר יא והיה טעמו כטעם וגו', והחולים כסולת מעורב בדבש, שנאמר יחזקאל טז ולחמי אשר נתתי לך סלת ושמן ודבש האכלתיך, והעובדי כוכבים טעמו אותו מר וגד, שנאמר במדבר יא והמן כזרע גד הוא, אר"י בר חנינא ומה המן שהיה מין אחד נהפך לכמה מינין בשביל צורך כל אחד ואחד, הקול שהיה כח בו עאכ"ו שהיה משתנה לכל אחד ואחד שלא ינזקו, ומנין שהקול נחלק לקולות הרבה שלא ינזקו שנאמר שמות כ וכל העם רואים את הקולות, הוי איוב לז ירעם אל בקולו נפלאות,