

# Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

## God



### Context

*In recent years, Reform Jews have grown increasingly confident in expressing a diverse set of personal theologies. We are a people who struggle with God, as Jacob did when he became Israel, and this struggle requires that we acknowledge that we can say nothing about God with certainty, and so find meaning when we create space for diverse voices around the table. We recognise that it is when we assert absolute certainty (either way) without space for dissenting voices that we exclude others from the conversation, and lessen our own potential for understanding.*

*In this article, **Rabbi Mark Goldsmith**, Rabbinic Partner at Alyth (North Western Reform Synagogue), explores the centrality of God in the Jewish narrative and its impact upon how we see our lives. We may understand God as a concept that shapes our ideas or a reality, active in the world. Both are legitimate in our community.*

### Content

The Torah assumes that God exists. From its very first words, *In the beginning God created* (Genesis 1:1), God is integral to the Jewish narrative and the essence of the universe. God's relationship with the patriarchs and matriarchs of Judaism is that of a friend, supporter, critic, challenger and guide. God hears the protests of the Israelite slaves and guides and enables their liberation. God is the source of the guidance, *Torah*, that they take with them to the Promised Land and then pass on to future generations up to and beyond ourselves. God is there throughout in the Jewish narrative.

What does not happen is that God is pinned down to an image or even a set of images which enable any Jew to explain just what God is to another.

The classic scene in Torah where Moses asks God to do just that at the Burning Bush results in God saying to him only this: *I am that I am* (Exodus 3:14). These words open up for Judaism a multiplicity of ways to relate to God, to understand God and to question the whole idea of God. Even though God is one, Judaism will not set out exactly what that One is. This opens up in Reform Judaism the continuing and unending potential to debate our concept of God, to doubt God's existence in any specific image of the Divine held by another person, and for each of us to relate to God in our own way.

In 1973, Rabbi Michael Goulston wrote "there is no recognizable theology of Reform Judaism in Great Britain."<sup>i</sup> This was restated in 1991 by Rabbi Jonathan Romain in his "Faith and Practice".<sup>ii</sup> In common with other Judaisms, and using ideas from Maimonides Thirteen Principles of Faith to express them, Reform Judaism understands God to be the sole creator, indivisible, incorporeal, eternal and unique.<sup>iii</sup>

Recently, under the initial guidance of Rabbi Tony Bayfield,<sup>iv</sup> Reform Judaism has been bolder in its willingness to develop a distinctive Reform Jewish theology for British Jews to work from. The concept of God existing at all, in the society in which Reform Jews live, is deeply challenged by popular works such as Richard Dawkins' "The God Delusion" and Christopher Hitchens' "God is not Great", together with the challenge to God that comes from the experiences of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, especially the Shoah. A book published by Reform Rabbis in 2008, "God, Doubt and Dawkins" shows the trends and emphases in Reform theology in many of the essays within it.<sup>v</sup>

For example, Reform Judaism profoundly mistrusts those who seek to explain human suffering as divine punishment. Rather, we might understand God as suffering with the sufferings of humanity and weeping at its misery. Or, we can understand God to have created space for the existence of the world in which human activity takes place.

It is humanity's responsibility to share in the work of making this space liveable and repairing it towards perfection. Rabbi Brian Fox wrote, "We live in God's shadow and God's shadow lives in us...every quality we ascribe to God – merciful, loving, loyal, true, sound, redeemer, maker and rock – we set as a challenge to ourselves."<sup>vi</sup>

Reform Judaism understands questions and doubts about God to be part of building a worthwhile relationship with God in our time. In contrast to religious fundamentalisms which have worked to suppress questioning and have brought new dangers to twenty first century life, Rabbi Helen Freeman understands God to be "present in our questions and doubts. Too much certainty is a dangerous thing. It builds security but makes real transformation harder to achieve."<sup>vii</sup>

Some of Reform Judaism's understanding of God is instrumental, considering what trusting in the concept of God does for us. As Rabbi Jonathan Romain puts it, trusting in God enables a Jew to assert that "the world has a purpose, life has meaning, all people are equal, each person is unique and each person is to be treated with dignity."<sup>viii</sup> When we trust that there is a unified divine force behind the existence of all things we can no longer treat these things as if they exist in a hierarchy of value.

Reform Judaism learns from Martin Buber that God exists in our personal relationship and struggle with God.<sup>ix</sup> Indeed the word Israel can be translated as "the people who struggle with God". By not using a particular image or set of images for God, God is not an "it". Rather God is "you", addressable by the individual in prayer, hope and trust. God is a personal God and thus prayer has a soul to it based on our personal relationship with God.<sup>x</sup>

Our understanding and relationship with God progresses and transforms as humanity continues. It is part of the progressive revelation that underpins Reform Judaism. Whilst a systematic theology remains elusive, West London Synagogue's Rabbi Morris Joseph's statement at the turn of the twentieth century that "the divine test of a man's worth is not his theology but his life"<sup>xi</sup> remains a true expression of Reform Judaism today, though it, as well as our images of God, would now be expressed in non-gendered language. Hence, "a Jew is not concerned with having faith but with living faith."<sup>xii</sup>

## Contemplation

*Living in a religious community with diverse theological voices is both liberating and challenging. It asks us to explore questions of sanctity and belief rather than to accept a defined, given dogma. It places the responsibility for theology on to us, and asks us to live in community with those whose views are different to ours. We become exemplars of the Jewish history of struggle with God. Rather than giving in to the seduction of certainty, we leave ourselves open to the possibility of finding meaning by asking ourselves the biggest questions of life. In the words of the Shabbat morning liturgy: What are we? What is our life? What is our love? What is our justice? What is our success? What is our power?*

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<sup>i</sup> Michael J. Goulston, "The Theology of Reform Judaism in Great Britain – A Survey", in Reform Judaism, Ed. Dow Marmur. London: Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, 1973. p.53

<sup>ii</sup> Jonathan Romain, "Faith and Practice", London: Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, 1991. p.28

<sup>iii</sup> Expressed for example in the *piyyut* Yigdal in "Seder HaTefilot", London: Movement for Reform Judaism, 2008, p.318

<sup>iv</sup> The Manna Theological Supplements published from 1990 onwards in Manna, edited by Rabbi Tony Bayfield at the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, develops this thinking.

<sup>v</sup> Jonathan Romain ed., "God, Doubt and Dawkins – Reform Rabbis respond to the God Delusion", London: The Movement for Reform Judaism, 2008

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid, pp16-17

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid, p29

<sup>viii</sup> "Faith and Practice", op.cit. p31 also in "God, Doubt and Dawkins", op.cit. p76

<sup>ix</sup> Martin Buber, "I and Thou", original German edition 1923

<sup>x</sup> Elliott Dorff, "Contemporary Jewish Theology", New York: OUP, 1999, p119

<sup>xi</sup> From Rabbi Morris Joseph, "Judaism as Creed and Life", 1903 quoted in Reform Judaism op.cit. p66

<sup>xii</sup> Rabbi Danny Smith in "God, Doubt and Dawkins" op.cit. p87