

Lifelong  
Spirituality  
and  
God Connection:  
A Kaplanesque  
Suite of  
Learning  
Resources

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## Foreword

Jewish tradition revels in the magic of the number three.

This volume is fashioned out of three Jewish values:

רוחניות: spirituality that is deeply implanted within us;

ספר החיים: learning that is life-long;

אלוהות: the Kaplanian conviction that God and godliness are experienced within and around us as well as beyond us.

Enjoy the deep meaning that comes out of the interplay of the three!

# Spirituality

## רוחניות

# Lifelong Learning

## ספר החיים

# God Connection

## אלוהות

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## Learning Links: Resources for Young Children

“Love Starts the Learning and Experience Makes it Grow”

- Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *God's Paintbrush. A Guide for Jewish and Christian Educators and Parents* (1992) helped initiate a creative new era of children's books about God and prayer.  
For information, please see publisher's [website](#).
- Rabbis Jeffrey L. Schein and Joe M. Blair provide a fuller exploration of using *God's Paintbrush* as a teaching tool in *God's Paintbrush: A Teacher's Guide for Jewish and Christian Educators*  
For information, please see publisher's [website](#).
- Rabbi Jeffrey L. Schein offers a more condensed perspective in [\*The Theological Foundations of God's Paintbrush\*](#)
- Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso has created a whole genre of children's literature about God over the past 25 years. Here is a list: [\*God Books For Children\*](#)
- Rabbis Sandy Eisenberg Sasso and Jeffrey L. Schein (eds.), *Siddur Kol Ha-No'ar / The Voice of Children. A Siddur for Shabbat, Hebrew/English*:  
[\*Kol Ha-No'ar: The Voice of Children \(without transliteration\)\*](#);  
[\*Kol Ha-No'ar: The Voice of Children \(with transliteration\)\*](#)
- Rabbi Jeffrey L. Schein, [\*Text, Teacher and Student: Enhancing Spiritual Development\*](#)
- Rabbi Harold Kushner, an article from his classic volume *When Children Ask About God: [\*The Idea of God in the Jewish Classroom\*](#)*
- Tuvia Ben Shlomo, [\*Aaron and the Wrath of God\*](#)

## Learning Links: Resources for Tweens

*“Language Gives It Meaning for us to Share and Know”*

- Rabbi Erin Hirsh, [\*The Burning Question: Play with Teaching Guide\*](#)
- Rabbi Erin Hirsh, [\*In God’s Name: Matching Game\*](#)
- Rabbi Joseph M. Blair, [\*Ten Eytzot for Seven Berachot: Background to Teaching the Amidah\*](#)
- Dr. Leah M. Mundell, [\*A Curriculum Guide for In God’s Name\*](#)  
(includes names of God in *Kol Haneshamah*)

## Learning Links: Resources for Teens

*“Values Give us Lenses and Relationships Make us Whole”*

- Rabbi Jeffrey L. Schein, A Simulation about Faith in God After the Holocaust: [\*Faith in God After the Holocaust: An Educational Encounter\*](#)
- Admiel Kosman, A Poem about the Blurring of Divine and Human in the Digital Age: [\*Installing You, My Lord\*](#)
- Rabbi Jeffrey L. Schein, Natural and Supernatural Approaches to God for Teens: [\*Teen Exploration of God Beliefs\*](#)

## Learning Links: Resources for Adults

*“All Guiding Us to Live Our Lives, Integrating Learning with Our Souls”*

- Rabbi Jeffrey L. Schein, Rabbi Joseph M. Blair, and Dr. Leah M. Mundell, Essays and Articles about *Kol Haneshamah* as a Resource for Ongoing God Quest, Prayer, and Spirituality (pages 11-66):  
[Connecting Prayer and Spirituality. Kol Haneshamah as a Creative Teaching and Learning Text](#)
- [Three Lectures about Spinoza and Kaplan, Religious Naturalism, and Feminist Approaches to Theology](#) (Kaplan Center for Jewish Peoplehood, September 2020):
  - Rabbi Gordon Tucker – “Kaplan, Spinoza, and the Sources of Truth”
  - Dr. Sanford Goldberg – “The Varieties of Religious Naturalism”
  - Dr. Ellen Umansky – “Naturalism in Jewish Feminist Theology: Reimagining Awe and Transcendence”

Please note that since this volume draws upon numerous sources, the transliteration of Hebrew terms and phrases does not follow one standardized system.

## Introduction

Using the contemporary concept of a “*re-mix*,” I have gathered an assortment of non-supernatural approaches to teaching God and re-packaged them in the context of contemporary thinking about spiritual development and new theologies. These approaches can be seen as “Kaplanesque” in that Kaplan also puts forth a non-supernatural understanding of how God can be experienced in our lives.

Linking all the articles is a concern with the challenge of spiritual meaning-making for the individual learner. However “remixed” with other elements of theology or developmental theorizing, this focus on meaning-making remains the core. While the resources are hardly exhaustive, I hope they lay out the essential touchstones necessary for God-questing to move through the shifting challenges that come to us at various life stages. I have tried to embed that process in dynamic curricular materials not only to be helpful in a concrete way to educators but also to stimulate fresh thinking and reflection.

### The Nature of a Remix

We live in an age of eclecticism. It is an age of remix where a variant of an original recording (as of a song) is made by rearranging, adding to, or mixing with some other element not part of the original. Put more precisely, a remix offers a wide range of conceptual nuances noted in Wiktionary as:

1. **Remix** (*Noun*)  
*A rearrangement of an older piece of music, possibly including various cosmetic changes.*
2. **Remix** (*Noun*)  
*A piece of music formed by combining existing pieces of music together, possibly including various other cosmetic changes*
3. **Remix** (*Verb*)  
*To create a remix*
4. **Remix** (*Verb*)  
*To rearrange or radically alter a particular piece of music*
5. **Remix** (*Verb*)  
*To mix again*

Erica Brown and Misha Galperin link the concept of remix to contemporary notions of customization in the marketplace and end up concluding that there is a “beauty of the remix of identities.” More recently, Roberta Rosenthal Kwall in *Remix Judaism* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2020) makes it the anchor of her life-long journey of reclaiming older Jewish traditions. Rabbi Rachel Weiss of JRC Evanston employs some of this same thinking as she reimagines synagogue life in the “Evolve” series sponsored by Reconstructing Judaism and guided by Dr. Jacob Staub.

In that spirit, I have sought to bring together a rich swath of teaching materials about God and spirituality. Some of these are “oldies but goodies” that once were used fairly extensively in Reconstructionist circles but have been lost during institutional transitions. Other resources, this introductory essay and commentary by various contributors among them, are newly minted.

The key to a successful remix in my mind is that the materials are reorganized around a new purpose. In that sense I am probably closest to definition 4, the verb form of remix as “seeking something radically new.” Here that vital, “new” impulse is to deeply honor the God- and spirituality-seeking impulses within each of us. We have asked ourselves what kind of resources, when gathered and orchestrated, can provide us with life-long opportunities to live and learn around the role of the Divine for us.

Our working assumption is that this process of Divine search is iterative. Hence, it is critical to invite the learners to revisit their relationship to God and spirituality often. As a general guideline, I have tried to orchestrate the resources so that every other year in the typical flow of a young child becoming a tween, becoming a young adult, becoming an adult, a new learning opportunity is provided.

We also believe the journey of communities of educators is enriched by multiple voices. So even before diving into these resources, we invite readers to visit the Google document below and add their voices to what constitutes a meaningful Kaplanian / transnatural approach to teaching God and spirituality:

[\*You Know You have a Kaplanian Approach to Teaching God When . . .\*](#)

## Chapter One: Developmental Flow

A recent article by Rabbi Rebecca Alpert (“Location, Location, Location: Toward a Theology of Prepositions” in *American Jewish Thought Since 1934: Writings on Identity, Engagement, and Belief*, edited by Michael Marmor and David Ellenson, Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2020, pp. 36-38; also see Chapter Three) underscores the deeply personal, profound developmental shifts that occur in our relationship to God and spirituality. The biographical side of her article traces her own shift from a Bertrand Russell-like principled agnosticism to a Buberian focus on relationship, to the influence of Kaplanian theologies, to feminist approaches in her thinking, to her most recent explorations of prepositional theology.

In keeping with the spirit of this remix, I see all these approaches as richly annotating commentary on our life-long learning quest for the Divine. I see our *sefer hayim* (book of life) referencing them at different places and times. The strength of our journey will depend in part on the constant availability of these kinds of spiritual resources.

I begin with a *mayse*, a story involving the aforementioned Rabbi Rebecca Alpert. In the midst of my graduate studies in education, I was working closely with Rebecca on a number of educational projects. I was very enamored with the bold claim of Jerome Bruner “that any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development.” Steeled with this insight, I shared with Rebecca that I was sure I could find a way to teach Buber to my 7<sup>th</sup> graders. Rebecca’s wise response was “I am sure you can, but should you?” Given the chance to be “brought up short” by Rebecca’s comment, I realized that Buber had only become truly meaningful to me as a young adult in College.

This raises the developmental question of readiness. I share transparently with the reader that I am a “soft developmentalist,” as will become apparent in my exposition of a poem in the next section of this chapter. I don’t believe in rigid hierarchies of any sort, but I do believe that there are patterns of growth that follow familiar trajectories. To not recognize such patterns in my judgement would be to live out of alignment with the affirmation from the Book of Psalms *How great are your works, o Lord, all have been made in wisdom*. While there can be great variation in patterns

of identity and development, infinite plasticity is not possible (or desirable). It would also be to miss critical opportunities for growth to occur in the life of the learner.

This, for me, points to a selection from *Mishnah Pe'ah* and the morning service: There are forms of learning of which we can say “their fruit is eaten now but their real benefit is reserved for the world to come.” For me, “the world to come” also serves as a metaphor for later stages of human development. As educators, we are always trying to provide experiences that may begin as a seed at one stage of development but ripen into a fuller understanding at a later stage.

Dr. Deborah Schein has crystallized the spiritual journey through life in the form of a poem:

### **A Learning Poem: When and How the Quest Begins**

*Love starts the Learning.  
Experience makes it grow.  
Language gives it meaning,  
For People to share and know.  
Values give us lenses.  
Relationships make us whole.  
All guiding us to live our lives,  
Integrating learning with our souls.*

The Scheins have tested out in their teaching how the poem illustrates significant age-related (but not -determined) changes in what counts as meaningful spirituality. Below, I have broken out the key lines of the poem to point towards these shifts. The more nuanced and complex unfolding of the lines of the poem for young children can be found in Deborah’s book, *Inspiring Wonder, Awe, and Empathy: The Spiritual Development of Young Children* (Red Leaf 2017).

## *Love Starts the Learning*

For young children, the seeds of spirituality are inseparable from the experience of being loved. The love, of course, never ends, and this unending love cultivates the emerging sense of self of the child.

## *Experience Makes It Grow*

At a fairly young age, the love needs to be paired with experiences in the world that exists outside the child, particularly those in nature, that are full of awe, wonder, and empathy.

## *Language Gives it Meaning for People to Share and Know*

The role of language becomes critical in expanding the reach of the child's mind and soul. The richer and more evocative the language is, the stickier the web of experiences that can adhere.

*Values give us lenses.*

*Relationships make us whole.*

Eventually, it becomes quite important for these words to become deeply embedded in relationships that make us whole and values that can guide our spiritual direction.

The life-long process of developing our souls is now marked by greater self-awareness and intentionality.

*All guiding us to live our lives,  
Integrating learning with our souls.*

As we move into adulthood, we have the privilege of sustaining patterns of God quest, prayer, and spirituality that anchor our Jewish communities. The sources of knowledge and inspiration that make us part of meaningful communities of prayer and commitment need constant renewal with new learning.

The role of parent, educator, and spiritual mentor changes as these shifts in the child occur. Particularly critical to the work of [\*Kol Ha-No'ar: The Voice of Children\*](#) (with [transliteration](#)), the Reconstructionist children's siddur created by Rabbis Sandy Sasso and Jeffrey L. Schein, reflects children's own words for the spirituality they discover in themselves and their world. Children who have a firm foundation in love and a rich range of experiences can capture those experiences, underscore their spiritual content, and share with others by tapping into their expanding gifts of language. As our Resources for Tweens (in the Learning Links section of this volume) exemplify, the role of the educator has transformed itself from the "sage on the stage" to the "guide on the side." The cycle of love turned experiences, turned language, turned patterned Jewish living is reflected in this choice of resources.

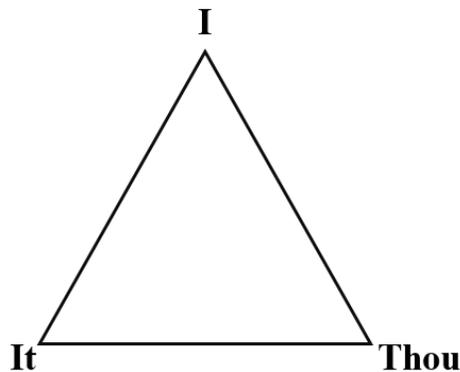
Below, you will find some additional commentary by Dr. Deborah Schein about the origins of the poem and spirituality beginning at birth, Rabbi Sandy Sasso about the role of language and metaphors in expanding the God palette, Rabbis Erin Hirsh and Isaac Saposnik on the role of learning in exploring spirituality and the Divine with tweens, Rabbis James Greene and Ilyse Kramer with adults. The short form is presented as a Talmud page: [\*Talmud-Style Abbreviated Commentary\*](#). The fuller set of commentaries can be found here: [\*Love Starts the Learning Commentary\*](#).

## Chapter Two: The Triangle of Teacher, Learner, and Text

Textuality is a key element of Jewish spiritual life. Here the author explores the rich and complex relationship between the learner, the teacher, and the text. Much of this volume is learner-focused by design. Yet, this focus on the learner also reflects a rebalancing of traditional pedagogies which have been teacher- and content-driven. We recognize the wisdom of scholars like David Hawkins, who emphasizes that the triangle which includes our sacred texts is always critical and that conveying all three elements with their rich interplay is our educational goal. Below are excerpts related to David Hawkins *The Informed Vision: Essays on Learning and Human Nature* (2002) that underscore the importance of the triangle.

### I, Thou, and It

I, Thou, and It – a three-way relationship in which “I and Thou” are the people (often a teacher and child, though not always) and “It” is the content that compels both.



This three-part relationship supports both the development of understanding of the content and the development of human relationships.

On one side of the triangle, a shared interest leads to deeper exploration of content as each involved learner helps the other to uncover new understandings.

On the other side of the triangle, this shared interest drives each learner to uncover new shared traits and interests.

*“One of the very important factors in [meeting and talking with children] is that there be some third thing which is of interest to the child and to the adult.”(David Hawkins)*

*“In sharing enjoyment with a child there is a communication of the fact that as observers and learners we are of the same stuff.”(Frances Hawkins)*

*“Without a Thou, there is no I evolving. Without an It, there is no context, no figure and no heat, but only an affair of mirrors confronting each other.”(David Hawkins)*

Rabbi Jeffrey L. Schein explores the implications of the Hawkins triangle for Jewish spirituality and text teaching in [\*Text, Teacher and Student: Enhancing Spiritual Development\*](#)

Leah Naor’s *When They Received the Torah* provides another example of the theory at work.

### **Entering the Poem**

Invite your learners to respond to and interpret this extraordinary poem by Leah Naor. Perhaps they even want to compile a “*Mikraot Gedolot*” of their own interpretations. Note that the poet draws from some of the same *midrashic* sources as Judith Kaplan Eisenstein and Ira Eisenstein’s *What is Torah*, a cantata about the Israelites receiving the Torah. Some of the questions you might explore revolve around the poet’s intent and the repeating chorus of “that is exactly how it was when they received the Torah.” Is it? How does the poet want us to orient ourselves to the giving of the Torah? Are we being cajoled? Cradled? Challenged? Here is the poem in English:

## ***When They Received the Torah***

A Poem for Shavuot by Leah Naor from her book Chag Li

*When they received the Torah ... When they received the Torah  
The desert was still and no bird chirped  
and the wind did not blow and the ox did not low  
and the people stood around and everyone saw*

*That's exactly how it was when they received the Torah\*  
That's exactly how it was when they received the Torah.*

*It was on the third day of the third month.  
Just yesterday they all finished washing their garments  
and suddenly there was a heavy cloud, all of the mountain of Sinai trembled  
and I heard that everyone really saw the voices*

*That's exactly how it was when they received the Torah  
That's exactly how it was when they received the Torah.*

*From the mountain smoke arose, it was like from a kiln  
There was thunder and lightning and awe and the sound of a horn  
and the people stood aside because they were all scared  
all the people stepped back and only Moses climbed the mountain*

*That's exactly how it was when they received the Torah  
That's exactly how it was when they received the Torah.*

*Then suddenly there was silence, even the wind did not hum,  
the silence was complete and no bird chirped  
and even the angels did not break into song  
only God spoke and all the people received the Torah.*

*That's exactly how it was when they received the Torah  
That's exactly how it was when they received the Torah.  
That's exactly how it was when they received the Torah  
That's exactly how it was when they received the Torah.*

\*Blue highlighting of refrain is from Jeffrey Schein

## Expanding the Meaning of the Poem

The following sources might enrich the study.

- 1) The [Hebrew original](#) of the poem:
- 2) The [Hebrew original put to a musical setting](#) by the Israeli musician Ilanit.
- 3) The French philosopher and theologian [Paul Ricoeur on the notion of “second naivety.”](#)

I have a point of view here that is aligned with Ricoeur’s understanding of “second naivety”: To be “standing again at Sinai” is to open ourselves to the power of myth and find new meaning in what happened at Sinai. It is not to suspend our critical sensibilities, but to move beyond them. Ironically, the poem prepares us for that possibility by “teasing” us about the literalism of the event. Perhaps fittingly, the linked excerpt is from “Desert Spirit Press.”

## The Poem Illustrating the Triangle of Pedagogic Purposes

The poem’s meaning is perhaps enhanced through the perspective of the pedagogic triangle described by Hawkins and Schein. As an expression of peoplehood, this story can be utilized as a Jewish equivalent of a Rudyard Kipling “Just So” story. It is itself well crafted, aesthetic, and engaging. These qualities enhance our sense of being part of the master narrative of the Jewish people. Sinai is where a disparate and dispirited people received divine inspiration and moved along in its journey. In this mode, we enjoy the poem and the connection to this moment of our master story.

As an expression of Jewish values, this poem lends itself to a second reading and dialogue. What is so extraordinary about the Sinai experience that it demands absolute accuracy?

*That’s exactly how it was when they received the Torah  
That’s exactly how it was when they received the Torah.  
That’s exactly how it was when they received the Torah  
That’s exactly how it was when they received the Torah.*

ככה בוודאי קרה כשקיבלו את התורה  
ככה בוודאי קרה כשקיבלו את התורה  
ככה בוודאי קרה כשקיבלו את התורה  
ככה בוודאי קרה כשקיבלו את התורה

Is Leah Naor meaning to make birds and other creatures part of the revelation (as recipients, not as backdrop)? What would it mean to think of Torah as belonging to all of God's creatures? What does it mean for a thin, whispering voice to appear suddenly?

אז פתאום היתה דממה. גם הרוח לא המה  
הדממה הייתה שלמה ושום ציפור אז לא זימרה  
ואפילו מלאכים לא אמרו פתאום שירה  
רק האלוהים דיבר וכל העם קיבל תורה

*Then suddenly there was silence. Even the wind did not hum  
the silence was complete and no bird chirped  
and even the angels did not break into song  
only God spoke and all the people received the Torah.*

What is the difference between “complete silence” and “incomplete silence”? How does “complete silence” contribute to the reception of the Torah? What are your own moments of complete and full silence like?

Finally, the poem has significant pedagogic value for our third function as a spur to our own thinking about God. At one side of the interpretive possibilities is that of God and the revelation as being exactly as described in the Torah. At the other extreme is the possibility of it being a totally human creation. In between, our numerous permutations of a divine-human mixture.

Where do we think Leah Naor might locate herself along this spectrum? What is she suggesting to us about the revelation at Sinai?

## Chapter Three: Kaplanian and Post-Kaplanian Theologies

I am among hundreds of rabbis who were deeply influenced by the emphasis of Rabbi Harold M. Shulweis on predicate theology. The key, in very shortened form, was to do a double shift: from “where (or why) is God?” to “when is God?” and from adjectives or nouns about God to predicates (from *elohim* [God] in the abstract to *elohut* [Godliness] embedded in human experience).

A partner of Rabbi Shulweis working along a different but certainly intersecting theological trajectory was Rabbi Harold Kushner. His work *When Children Ask about God* helps sensitize parents to what lies behind their children’s questions and observations about God.

Perhaps even more critical now is revisiting the issues in Kushner’s *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Famously, Kushner notes that from his perspective one does not find God in the tragedy itself but in the human response to the tragedy. Is this even more true as we face the pandemic of Covid-19? These and other issues of non-supernatural theology were explored in a two-day [symposium hosted by the Kaplan Center](#) on September 13 and 14, 2020.

For myself, there has been enduring benefit to this approach. The reader can see it at work in an educational context ([You Know You have a Kaplanian Approach to Teaching God When . . .](#)) which invites readers to compose an educational predicate theology of productive “when” moments in teaching about God and spirituality. There is something (again speaking subjectively for myself) of deep and lasting value in this approach.

In the spirit of remix, however, this classically Kaplanian approach of a predicate theology needs to be blended with other, more contemporary, approaches. I will share two of these that have affected my own thinking. The first has been developed by Rabbi Toba Spitzer and appeared most recently in *Reconstructing Judaism’s* “Evolve” series. Below are two key paragraphs from her thinking and a link to the fuller article:

What I've come to understand in recent years is that the “God problem” that so many people have - the difficulty of believing in or even taking seriously the notion of some kind of all-powerful, all-knowing Being that interacts with us in mysterious ways—is not really a

problem with God. Rather, it's a reaction to a metaphor, or a set of metaphors, that have come to dominate our thinking about God. What is sad about this is that once upon a time, our ancestors employed a rich palette of metaphors to shape their experience of the Divine, metaphors that spoke directly to their everyday experiences. My hope is that we can recapture the alive-ness which once pervaded our holy texts, and reconstruct our metaphors so that they are once again engaging and meaningful. . .

We can also begin to employ new/old metaphors for the Divine. What follows are suggestions for some possible metaphors that you might want to try out during services, either inserted into the traditional prayers or during your own reflection. See where a particular metaphor “takes you,” what it evokes for you. And remember - a metaphor is not a definition; whatever that “force vaster than ourselves” might be, we can't define It. But we can try to articulate our experience of It, and that's where we need metaphors. Judaism's holiest name for God - spelled with the four letters *Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay* - is traditionally not said aloud, and is quite possibly impossible to pronounce. It is as if our most ancient and holiest texts knew something that cognitive linguists are just understanding now: we cannot directly speak to those things that are most important, and only through multiple metaphors can we begin to express the breadth and depth of our experience.

### **New - Old Names for God**

God ~ Water

Water is one of the most common metaphors for God in the Hebrew Bible, and is used to convey a range of experiences: being nourished by life-giving rain; being swept along by a powerful river; joining in the flow of justice. Just as a body of water can buoy us, refresh us, and sustain us, it can also become fearsome in a storm and overwhelm us. This can be a powerful metaphor for our own experiences of the sacred.

Sometimes we seek spiritual nourishment; we long to drink from *Peleg Elohim* - the “God River.” At other times we feel buffeted by the waves of our life's ups and downs, and seek reassurance, as in the words of the prophet Isaiah: “When you pass through the Waters, I am with you.” Water is life-giving, essential, and powerful; sometimes beautiful and sometimes scary. Just like life. Just like God.

Some Biblical water names for the Divine include:

- Wells of Liberation - *May'anei Hayeshua* - מַעְיָנֵי הַיְשׁוּעָה
- Deep - *Tehom* - תְּהוֹם
- Fountain of Living Waters - *M'kor Mayyim Chayim* - מְקוֹר מַיִם חַיִּים
- Source / Wellspring of Life - *Ain Hachayim* - עֵין הַחַיִּים

God ~ *Makom*

A common rabbinic name for God is “*Makom*,” which literally means “place.” The origin of this metaphor may be the Torah's story of Jacob, who, in distress and running away from home, happens upon “a place” in the desert where he has a direct experience of the Divine. Waking from a marvelous dream where he meets and speaks with God, he exclaims, “*Mah nora hamakom hazeh!* How awesome is this Place!” The name *Makom* conveys a sense of being able to experience the Godly in any place; it also connotes forgiveness and compassion, a sense of nearness to the Divine. *Makom* invites us to associate Godliness with all those places where we've experienced a hint of Something beyond ourselves. It invites us to find the Divine right here, wherever we happen to be - in this Place.

(Rabbi Toba Spitzer, [Voice, Water, Place: New/Old Ways of Understanding God](#))

What underlies this approach, I believe, is the profound insight of *Rambam* and others that we will inevitably speak about God *bilshon adam*, through our human language. A whole school of analytic philosophers, including Tom Green and R. S. Peters, have underscored that the best use of philosophy is to investigate our use of language in everyday contexts with all its richness and nuance. Metaphors are among the treasures of our language repository. Rabbi Spitzer is wise to point us in this direction.

In 2013, much of the Jewish world was deeply impressed with Dr. Ron Wolfson's publication of *Relational Judaism*. The choral response of the many readers was a collective hand knock on our not always wise *yiddishe kep*; oh my God, how could we have overlooked the obvious — Judaism is at its heart of course relational! What deceptions of mind or spirit or complexities of Jewish life account for losing sight of that truism?

Applied to our search for the Divine, this again points us to language and some trenchant insights from Rabbi Rebecca Alpert in her article on “prepositional Judaism” (“Location, Location, Location: Toward a Theology of Prepositions,” see Chapter One, p.8), Rabbi Alpert begins by suggesting that even the most innovative understandings of God as noun, pronoun, and verbs can be meaningfully supplemented by the treasure trove of relational prepositions.

## **Grammar, Prepositions, and Theology**

It's an odd approach indeed, as conversations about parts of speech have not been part of theological inquiry in most Jewish or any other religious tradition. But some attempts have been made to point out the importance of grammar in thinking about God. For example, I use the noun "God" intentionally, as I learned a basic grammar lesson from feminist theologians who avoid referring to God with another part of speech: pronouns. That last sentence would more commonly have ended "avoid referring to Him."

Some feminist theologians would prefer "avoid referring to Her" instead, and their point is well-taken. After all, pronouns are used frequently when talking about God and, like other parts of speech, they tell us something. If you take the language you use seriously, you can't deny that referring to God as "He" and "Him" evokes images of masculinity. Many theologians have rejected the claim that referring to God with masculine pronouns has anything to do with the gender of God. But even if you understand that they are referential and not to be taken literally, you don't have to assume God is a man to think about God's maleness when you refer to God as "He."

Feminist theology requires that we pay attention to third-person pronouns. Beginning with the Hebrew Bible, God has not only been referred to as "He" but also referenced with nouns that tend to conjure images of men: "shepherd," "king," and "father," for example.

Some Jewish feminist theologians experiment with thinking about God as "She," "queen," and "mother," and liberal Jews have today incorporated those images in their liturgy. These efforts are a good reminder that pronouns are not abstract but rather evoke powerful if symbolic images of an anthropomorphized deity. Although avoiding referring to God as either "He" or "She" is my personal preference, alternating between them opens us to the complexity that transgender members of our communities have helped us understand. I have learned, for example, that it is polite to ask people what pronoun they prefer (usually he, she or they) when introducing themselves. Perhaps it's important to ask God the same question.

Rabbi Alpert then turns to the importance of a prepositional/relational understanding.

### **Relation**

While where we locate God is important, it's only the first part of the theological work that's done by prepositions. Prepositions are also words that indicate relationships. How we as human beings define our connection, or lack of it, to God, is made manifest in the prepositions we use to talk about that connection. God in proximity: beside, between, and with and for us. As part of his description of how predicate theology works, Schulweis noted: "the key preposition in predicate theology is not "in" or "beyond" but "with."

Those with more personal theological approaches to God as Friend (feminist theologian Judith Plaskow comes to mind here) imagine God as “near” or “close to” or “alongside.” Or God may be “among” or “together with” us, as Schulweis imagines, or as Buber suggests, God is in the connection *between* I and Thou. These ways of thinking about God lend themselves to another dimension of the preposition’s function—to denote not only location but also relationship. These relational words encapsulate a crucial aspect of theological musings. Where God is located may matter philosophically, but where God is in relationship to humans (and for some, the planet and all its inhabitants) matters more . . .

These various prepositions are keys to the idea of being in a relationship of proximity with God. Whether you imagine God as located inside us or throughout the world, you can access this God by invoking God through the prepositions “with,” “near,” or “alongside.” In this relationship, humans encounter God, feel supported by or connected to God.

More broadly, they can apprehend how they should behave in the world, what God is commanding them to do. Being accompanied by God in these ways brings a sense of power and passion to one’s life. Choosing from among this set of prepositions also provides flexibility. One may not always be able to access or experience God’s nearness, but through these prepositional positions one can always be reminded of the possibility. This type of personal theology may also be understood in relationship to God operating “for” or “on behalf of” individuals, the Jewish people, humanity or the entire planet. A belief in God acting for individuals, or on behalf of the Jewish people, emphasizes that God has made a covenant with the Jewish people and chosen them for a particular destiny. The Hebrew Bible is replete with examples of God acting for the Jewish people in this way, most centrally in the act of taking them out of bondage in Egypt, giving them the Torah, and taking them to inhabit a promised land.

## **Prelude to Future Developments / Closing**

There is a triple sense in which this "end" of the volume is not really an ending at all. Firstly, our understandings of spirituality and God connection continue to evolve. We invite ongoing midrash and debate about our learning poem, our understanding of spirituality and the connection with the Divine, and the educational scaffolding that supports that growth.

Secondly, we live in the 21st century digital age and I look forward to the ease in which resources beyond the immediate reach of the Kaplan center come to our attention through the readers and users of this material. As much as we link to the Divine and spirituality, we also connect with our educational and theological resources. It will be our pleasure to create new links for resources that fit into the framework outlined in the book.

Thirdly and perhaps most significantly, the readers of this volume will themselves grow and change. It seems clear to me as we support seekers and learners in their life-long quest for the spiritual and the Divine that they will turn back to us and share the ways in which the quest has become internalized and uniquely their own.

In February of 2021, you will find links on the Kaplan Center [website](#) to leave comments and contributions.