

And all my students who studied with me many of the texts included in this book.

I extend my deepest thanks to all of them. “May God reward your deeds” (Ruth 2:12).

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## INTRODUCTION

The statement in Deut. 6:4, “Hear, O Israel, YHWH [the Lord] our God, the Lord *echad*,” is considered to be the watchword of the Jewish faith. It is usually known simply as “the *Sh’ma*,” after the first Hebrew word. However, its meaning is ambiguous and therefore has been historically translated and understood in a variety of ways. For example, the New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV, 2001) renders it as “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone,” but adds a note at the bottom of the same page with other alternatives: “Or *The Lord our God is one Lord*, or *The Lord our God, the Lord is one*, or *The Lord is our God, the Lord is one*.”

The basic problem with Deut. 6:4 is trying to discover its purpose. Does it deal with God’s unity or with the quality of Israel’s relationship with God? In other words, is the emphasis on “our God” or on “one”? Furthermore, what does the word *echad* mean: “one” or “alone”? Commentators have debated these issues for centuries.

I prefer the interpretation that stresses Israel’s special bond with God. The statement in Deut. 6:4, therefore, implies that other people may and do serve other divinities, but Israel is expected to worship only YHWH, and no one else (cf. Deut. 4:19–20). The Hebrew Scriptures contain clearer statements about the uniqueness of God, even within the Book of Deuteronomy: “YHWH alone is God; there is none other beside Him” (Deut. 4:35); “The Creator of heaven who

alone is God" (Isa. 45:18); "Who is god except YHWH?" (II Sam. 22:32; cf. Ps. 18:32). In Deut. 6:4, the author seems to be more interested in the special covenant that God has with Israel.

I also maintain that in Deut. 6:4 we have an affirmation that God is "alone." "One" (the standard translation of the Hebrew word *echad*) implies not "two" or "three." God is *sui generis*. There is nothing or no one like God. God is unique. As the medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) writes:

He is not like a member of a pair, nor a species of a genus, nor a person divided into many discrete elements. Nor is He one in the sense that a simple body is, numerically one but still infinitely divisible. God, rather, is uniquely one.

*Chelek, Sanhedrin*, chap. 10

Isadore Twersky, *Maimonides Reader*  
(New York: Behrman House, 1972), 417–418.

The belief in God's unity has been the hallmark of Jewish thought. This became clearer as the biblical period evolved and continued through the rabbinic times. Medieval Jewish philosophers who, under Greek and Arab influence, probed the meaning and the existence of God with greater intensity in a more systematic fashion, began with the unity of God as a given and then provided different interpretations of God's nature. In our own time the principle of divine unity is taken for granted, based on the assumption that the universe represents an all-encompassing, orderly structure, very much in line with the modern scientific view of the world as operating within a unified field theory.

Theologians are very much aware that we do not know what God is or looks like. Maimonides reminds us that all talk about God is metaphorical, for our language and understanding of the universe are limited. We are incapable of comprehending God's essence, or in biblical terms, we cannot "see God's face" but can only ponder God's "back" (cf. Exod. 33:23), namely, God's effects. Even mystics who aim for direct experience of the presence of God admit that God's essence is ultimately beyond their understanding. In the words of the Kabbalah, God is at best *Ein Sof* (Without Limit). Through observation, analysis, or intuition, the human mind discovers the divine and then comes up with different conceptions of God.

This volume deals with contemporary Jewish images of God in the twentieth century. In our previous book, *Finding God: Selected Responses* (New York: UAH Press, 2002), Rabbi Daniel B. Syme and I chose more than a dozen Jewish philosophers, and provided a summary of their thought, with appropriate quotations. During this past century, there has been an enormous flow of creativity in this field by numerous Jewish thinkers, who have provided us with refreshingly new images. I felt the need to give them a greater voice by collecting their most representative passages within one volume. The result is now in your hands.

Each chapter begins with detailed biographical information about the author as well as a brief overview of his/her approach. This is followed by a selection of texts written by the particular thinker on the subject of God and, occasionally, other related topics that are central to his or her ideas.

The selection of the authors and their texts compelled me to make hard decisions. Aware of the fact that my space was limited, I had to choose the most representative thinkers and passages. First, I decided to limit my research to the twentieth century, because the thinkers included here speak our language and deal with topics with which we are struggling at the beginning of a new millennium. Then, I had to select those thinkers who, in my estimation, stood out because of their novel approach. Thus, for example, I went with Buber, and not with Rosenzweig. Similarly, I chose Gittelsohn over Levi Olan, and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi instead of the many Jewish Renewal thinkers. Other contemporary thinkers such as David Hartman, Neil Gillman, Emmanuel Levinas, and William Kaufman have written substantive books on God and deserve more extensive recognition, but I chose to leave them out in part for fear of making the book too unwieldy, and in part because theirologies are, to a certain extent, represented by others prominently featured in the present volume. Furthermore, I realize that not all the thinkers I have added here are, strictly speaking, theologians with extensive treatises on God, but I felt their approaches were fresh and insightful, and, therefore, worthy of inclusion. For the sake of diversity, I have also added those who have written shorter essays on God, because they provide us with new images that are refreshing and thought provoking.

The next problem I confronted was to decide the appropriate order in which to present the thinkers: would I go alphabetically, by the length of their creative work, or, simply, by their birth date? I decided to follow the latter in order to provide a better historical perspective of their work.

My task would have been much easier had I opted to ask living authors to provide me with their own selection of their material on God. I decided against this approach, because ultimately this entire project has a subjective tone to it, and I did not want the thinkers I studied to determine the orientation and content of the book. So, I chose those texts that in my opinion represented each author's most authentic view on God and related matters.

My hope is that by studying the writings of these outstanding thinkers of our time, the reader, Jewish or not, will come to realize the vast diversity of thought on this subject within Judaism. Each of us needs to seek and appropriate a conception of God that will provide us with the best explanation of the mystery of the universe.