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Who Is God?

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

Q: How do you think of God?

AS: The fundamental concept, is one of an all-embracing, all-encompassing being, the great Mystery, the transcending reality that is above, beyond and behind all that exists.

Q: Are there moments when you feel closer to God? Do you feel He watches every one of your actions?

AS: Every human being, not just religious (or exceptionally holy) people, experiences moments of grace in which one feels the great Presence, how God is close, nearby. Such a feeling is actually a lot more frequent than people think, but those who feel this magnificent feeling do not always know how to attribute it correctly. Some people get this feeling from seeing or feeling any kind of sublimity; others may just suddenly experience, without any prior preparation or knowledge, the bliss and security of this closeness.

Q: When you pray, what do you pray for?

AS: Prayer is always a conversation with God. It is the way in which a person relates things, such as feelings, fears or aspirations, or asks for things – often those that are close to one's heart, solutions to problems, to issues of the current time, or to one's life in general. And there is also prayer in which one beseeches for the immediate community, for one's own nation or for the world as a whole. Prayer can also be a different sort of conversation: an urge to say thank you, to say: how good it is that You are there.

Q: Tell us about reward and punishment: why does God allow pious people to suffer and vicious people to prosper and enjoy life?

AS: I certainly believe in reward and punishment, but I do not think that man has the ability to determine and gauge the Almighty, nor to assess our own conduct accurately. Every



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person's private reckoning, either for the good or for the bad, is far too complex, and no one is able to appraise oneself properly, let alone appraise others. It is funny, sometimes also sad (even tragic) that a human being who is incapable of properly assessing his own reality, who cannot fathom a simple mathematical equation, wants to understand and judge God. Surely, human beings have the right (perhaps also the duty) to converse with God, to ask things from Him and also to complain to Him, to claim: "You're not right." It is the same right that a child has to cry and to say, "Why do other kids get more?" A human being is entitled to complain. God wants us to be honest with Him. But still and all, He cannot be judged.

Q: What does it mean that God signs one's fate in a "Book of Life" on Yom Kippur?

AS: I believe that there is a time of Judgment in which one's fate for the coming year is generally determined. But it is not absolutely decisive. Judgment and verdict are according to man's state at that particular moment in time. When one makes a dramatic change in life, either for better or for worse, one's verdict changes accordingly. The "book" in which God "writes and seals" judgments is, in a way, like word-processing on a computer: on any day, at any time, it is possible to change, delete and rewrite.

Q: Does God watch over individuals?

AS: God is not only the originator of the universe, an entity that gave the universe an initial momentum and then left it. Creation is an ongoing process; the world is being created anew each and every day, each and every instant. The world's existence is the result of God's constant presence within it, and there is no life and no reality without that constant Presence – at any given moment in time, in every single particle of matter. I also believe that God supervises the smallest details and every single individual: His Providence and interest are not confined to human beings but include every created thing. And just as He is the ruler of the great



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galaxies, just as He is in charge of the great eras, so too He is present and oversees every movement that every human being makes, and also every flying bird, every fish in the water, every skipping grasshopper, every leaf drifting in the wind, every wisp of smoke coming out of a chimney—God watches over all these things and cares about them.

Q: Have you ever rejected God? What brought Him back to you, or you to Him?

AS: I cannot say that I have ever rejected God. There were some years in which I was not interested, and that, perhaps, is the greatest rejection of all (much more than hostility or lack of faith). But then the world seemed too small, too confined, far too senseless without Him. In a manner of speaking, God plays hide-and-seek with us; He hides and I must seek Him so that I can cry triumphantly: "I've found Him!" This rediscovery happens throughout a lifetime. There are always periods when there is a feeling of distance, almost of alienation – even if one observes the formalities of ritual and formal prayer; yet these times are followed by a renewed finding, a new love.

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

AS: 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.

Q: Do you have a personal relationship with God?

AS: Of course I have a personal relationship with God—every human being does. My relationship is always personal and private; precisely because He is so infinite and unlimited, He relates personally and specifically to me. It always is a



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one-to-one relationship, when I am by myself as well as when I am in a crowd; somehow we are always alone together.

Q: Does God have a plan for you? For everyone?

AS: I am sure He has a plan for me, just as He has a plan for each and every human being and every single creature. But I do not know what this plan is. Every now and then I ask Him (and sometimes receive an answer, either directly or indirectly): What am I supposed to do now according to the plan? Have I done what You wanted me to do, or have I erred and misunderstood You?

Q: What evidence do you have for God's existence?

AS: In scientific or mathematical terms, one starts with facts that are accepted as correct and clear and then applies those facts as evidence to prove hypotheses that are less and less clear. God's existence is the starting point which does not require testimony or proof; it is the primal beginning. I therefore think that we should rather seek proof for the existence of the world and human beings. Unlike Descartes, who said "I think, therefore I am," I would rather say: "I am, therefore I think."



Eyes to Earth, Heart to Heaven

By Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

The Talmud (Yevamot 105b) records a discussion regarding whether one who prays should focus his attention on earth or Heaven. The issue is resolved by the suggestion that “A man who offers his prayers must direct his eyes below [to Earth] and his heart above [toward Heaven].”

Even though this debate has a literal, practical significance, it also reflects and encompasses a much broader insight. These three approaches have implications in many realms, including a general view about life and even macroeconomic vision.

Eyes And Heart To Heaven

Without going into subtle distinctions, most of the world’s religions—including Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism—suggest that both one’s heart and one’s eyes should be turned toward Heaven. They view the world in which we lead our physical lives as lowly and insignificant, a place that should engage us as little as possible. The goal is to reach the upper world.

The problems of our world are sometimes difficult to see: physical illness, psychological suffering, natural disasters and so much economic distress. How are the members of these religions to respond? All of them, for example, command that one give charity to the poor, but what is the motivation?

It is not to solve the problems of the poor, but because giving charity expedites one’s journey heavenward and assures a better place in Paradise. The Arabic word for charity, for example, is *zakkat*—“merit”; that is, giving charity buys points of merit for the World to Come.

This view crosses cultural boundaries. Thus, a country such as India, which has so many believers, also has appalling poverty, epidemics and other calamities. Because these people consider the important world to be the spiritual one, however, the suffering of the poor, the ill and the homeless is of little concern.

Eyes And Heart To The World

This is the modern Western conception, which is essentially materialistic. This worldview regards this world as the only one of consequence: physically, visually and emotionally. Its adherents not only live within the material world but covet it as their principal goal.



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This approach has yielded many practical achievements: successful efforts to solve, or at least to improve, some of the world's major problems. Much of humanity is healthier and better fed now than at any time since the Garden of Eden. And people are living longer—even if they don't know what to do with their extended lives.

In this materialistic world, “taking stock” refers only to money, to financial credits and debits; everything else is irrelevant. Where profits and losses are what matter, apparent expressions of care for others merely disguise selfish interests. The welfare policy of the capitalistic world, for instance, staves off rebellion, giving the poor just enough that they will not attack the rich.

Similarly, highly developed countries give some aid to underdeveloped ones, but less than they can and less than is needed. The result: unconscionable suffering, yes, but also an adequate supply of low-cost labor.

Eyes To Earth, Heart To Heaven

The Talmud's conclusion is that we turn our eyes to earth but our hearts to Heaven. Our eyes focus on earth, so that we see and deal with the world's problems and pains. At the same time, however, we turn our hearts to Heaven, not for practical reasons but for our own betterment. God surely could have made a perfect, static world, but He did not. He created a dynamic world with lacunae of all kinds, lacunae that facilitate movement and change. God then entrusted this world to Man, a completely improbable being whose Divine soul rests in the body of a gorilla. He created Man with both the capacity for greatness and the susceptibility to sin. Then he made him a partner, albeit a very junior partner, in Creation. From that moment it became our responsibility to finish His work, to observe every aspect of our world, to take responsibility for its problems and, most of all, to care about one another.

God does not want us to divert our eyes from sickness and poverty. Rather He wants us to see them and act against them—not to earn “points” on a Heavenly slate, but because Heaven tells us that this is our job. We may not be able to do everything, but we must do something.

This concept of “Eyes to Earth, Heart to Heaven” connects Heaven and earth, dream and reality, eternal ideals and tangible actions. In this season of intensified prayer, we must go beyond merely contemplating this idea. It has to become a guiding principle in the way we conduct our lives, emotionally and practically. We must develop the ability to think and care about exalted heavenly subjects without neglecting their connection to reality, even when we cannot reach the heavenly ideal. When we do this in deed and in prayer, we are doing what we can to bring about a better year.



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CHARITY IS A JUST AND ETHICAL OBLIGATION

*This piece original ran in the Washington Post's
'On Faith' section at washingtonpost.com/onfaith*

Question:

In tough times, do those of us who handled our finances responsibly have a moral obligation to bail out those of us who didn't? Are we our brother's keeper economically?

Rabbi Steinsaltz's Response:

Charity is a Just and Ethical Obligation

Weblog. 'On Faith' at Washingtonpost.com, 3 March 2009

In some ways, the question itself seems to be out of place. The moral obligation to be “my brother’s keeper” is surely not confined to the act of dragging a man out of the path of an advancing car.

Helping those who are impoverished is an ethical obligation in every code, and surely in every religion. If there is any question, it is sometimes based on the use or misuse of language. The English word “charity” has imbedded within it the concept of benevolence, a special quality of the giver. In other languages, the very meaning of the word has a very different connotation.

The word *zakkaat*, in Arabic, which has practically the same meaning, implies that the very act of giving is a special benefit to the donor. The same root and same notion is found also in Aramaic, in which giving charity is called “having the merit of giving” (*zeckuta*).

In Hebrew, the word *tzedakah* has the same root meaning as justice, *tzedek*; giving charity is not a special act of the good heart, but an obligation like any other legal obligation. It is not just that one is benevolent out of the goodness of his heart; rather, he is obligated to do so.

It is not very important to give significant gifts that the giver does not himself care for. Nor is it very meaningful to help those who can manage without these gifts—banks are usually very good at that. To give a hand to a drowning man after he comes ashore may feel good, but it is not a very meaningful act.

The obligation to be “my brother’s keeper,” and to make an effort to be really helpful—perhaps a more expensive act than just allowing the recipient to survive—is not always an easy task. And this is especially true when the recipient, himself, may be partially responsible for his failure. But we are not to consider guilt of the recipient, but rather his need. And, in this case, we still have an obligation toward everyone who needs our help.



Additional Resources: Books

BOOKS BY RABBI STEINSALTZ

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz has authored more than sixty books and hundreds of articles. Below are the English language books that he has authored over the past forty years—many of them still available today. In addition, Rabbi Steinsaltz's translation and commentary on the Talmud has been published in Hebrew, English, French, Russian and Spanish. For a complete listing of books and articles please visit www.steinsaltz.org.

Books on Talmud

Hebrew Text

Steinsaltz Talmud Bavli, *Hebrew Edition* (Koren Publishers Jerusalem)
45 Volumes

The Koren Talmud Bavli with Commentary by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *Hebrew Edition*
(Koren Publishers Jerusalem)
38 Volumes

English Text

Talmudic Images: An Introduction to the Sages¹ (Koren Publishers Jerusalem)

The Essential Talmud² (Koren Publishers Jerusalem)

The Talmud, The Steinsaltz Edition: A Reference Guide, *English Edition* (Random House; soon to be republished by Koren Publishers Jerusalem)

Other Books of Interest in English

A Dear Son to Me: A Collection of Speeches and Articles³ (Koren Publishers Jerusalem)

A Guide to Jewish Prayer⁴ (Schocken)

Biblical Images: Men and Women of the Book (Koren Publishers Jerusalem)⁵

In the Beginning: Discourses on Chasidic Thought (Jason Aronson; soon to be republished by Koren Publishers Jerusalem)

Learning From the Tanya: Volume Two in the Definitive Commentary on the Moral and Mystical Teachings of a Classic Work of Kabbalah (Jossey-Bass)

¹ Also published in Hebrew, German and Russian

² Also published in French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Swedish

³ Also published in Hebrew

⁴ Also published in Hebrew

⁵ Also published in Hebrew, German, Japanese, French and Russian



Additional Resources: Books

- On Being Free** (Jason Aronson; soon to be republished by Koren Publishers Jerusalem)
- Opening the Tanya: Discovering the Moral and Mystical Teachings of a Classic Work of Kabbalah** (Jossey-Bass)
- Simple Words: Thinking About What Really Matters in Life**⁶ (Simon & Schuster)
- Teshuvah: A Guide for the Newly Observant Jew** (Koren Publishers Jerusalem)⁷
- The Candle of God: Discourses on Chasidic Thought** (Koren Publishers Jerusalem)
- The Illuminated Five Scrolls with Commentary by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz** (Koren Publishers Jerusalem)
- The Lamp of God** (Jason Aronson; soon to be republished by Koren Publishers Jerusalem)⁸
- The Long Shorter Way: Discourses on Chasidic Thought** (Jason Aronson; soon to be republished by Koren Publishers Jerusalem)
- The Miracle of the Seventh Day: A Guide to the Spiritual Meaning, Significance, and Weekly Practice of the Jewish Sabbath** (Jossey-Bass)
- The Passover Haggadah**⁹ (Carta, Jerusalem)
- The Seven Lights: On the Major Jewish Festivals** (Jason Aronson; soon to be republished by Koren Publishers Jerusalem)
- The Strife of the Spirit: A Collection of Essays** (Jason Aronson; soon to be republished by Koren Publishers Jerusalem)
- The Sustaining Utterance: Discourses on Chasidic Thought**¹⁰ (Jason Aronson; soon to be republished by Koren Publishers Jerusalem)
- The Tales of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav**¹¹ (Koren Publishers Jerusalem)
- The Thirteen Petalled Rose**¹² (Koren Publishers Jerusalem)
- The Woman of Valor**¹³ (Jason Aronson; soon to be republished by Koren Publishers Jerusalem)
- Understanding the Tanya: Volume Three in the Definitive Commentary on a Classic Work of Kabbalah by the World's Foremost Authority** (Jossey-Bass)
- We Jews: Who Are We and What Should We Do?** (Jossey-Bass)

6 Also published in French and Italian

7 Also published in French, Hebrew and Portuguese

8 Also published in French

9 Also published in Hebrew and French

10 Also published in Russian

11 Also published in French, Hebrew and Russian

12 Also published in Dutch, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese and Russian

13 Also published in French and Hebrew



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