

# The Torah Revolution

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**A**T the heart of Shabuot lies a timeless mystery, one that has captivated our people for millennia. It is a holiday shrouded in the mists of history, a moment of revelation and wonder that changed the course of human events forever.

In the Torah, Shabuot is simply described as a harvest festival. Harvest festivals were common in pre-Torah cultures and were often associated with gifts as they mark a time of plenty and abundance, when crops have been harvested and the community can enjoy the fruits of their labour.<sup>1</sup> Our Sages, however, focused our attention during this time on a different gift, one that is most precious of all – the Torah.

The commemoration of this sacred day where we received a unique gift serves as a reminder of the distinctiveness of our Torah and its Divine origins. It compels us to remember that we the recipients are expected to be distinct too.<sup>2</sup> But in

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<sup>1</sup> In many pre-Torah cultures, it was customary to offer gifts of thanks and appreciation to the gods or spirits who were believed to have blessed the harvest. There are many key differences between those festivals and the Torah's version. For example, our harvest festivals (such as Sukkot and Shabuot) have been connected to our national and historical traditions. They are not solely focused on the harvest, but also commemorate significant events in Jewish history, such as the exodus from Egypt (Sukkot) and the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai (Shabuot). The Jewish harvest festivals also have a strong ethical component, as they are associated with the obligation to share one's abundance with those in need (Leviticus 19:9; Deuteronomy 24:19; Ruth 2:23). In contrast, pagan harvest festivals tend to be more focused on nature and the cycles of the seasons. They often include rituals and ceremonies that are meant to honour and connect with the natural world, and they may be associated with specific gods or goddesses of agriculture or fertility. Pagan harvest festivals may also include practices such as divination, magic, or other forms of ritual that are anathema to Torah law.

<sup>2</sup> The root meaning of the Hebrew word קָדוֹשׁ (*qadosh*) is “set apart”, “distinct”, or “sacred”. It connotes the separation of things or people from the ordinary, for specific purposes that are elevated and reverence-inducing. This idea of “*qadosh*” is central to the Torah, as it represents the sacredness of God and His chosen people. When God reveals Himself to Moshe at the burning bush, He declares, “Remove your shoes from your feet,

order to truly understand and embody this sense of uniqueness, we must delve deeper into what sets the Torah and its ideas apart from its ancient Near Eastern context.<sup>3</sup> For the Torah was not

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for the place where you stand is sacred ground.” (Shemot 3:5). This ground is sacred or “*qadosh*” because it has been set apart for a special purpose, to receive God's revelation. As Rabbenu Sa’adya Gaon notes in his *Kitab al-Amanat wal-I’tiqadat* (Book 2, Chapter 7): “The sanctity of that site derives from what God and Moshe do there, not from the nature of the place itself.” Similarly, the Ark of the Covenant, which holds the tablets of the Ten Commandments, is also termed “*qadosh*” because it is “set apart” for a specific purpose. In Shemot 40:9-10, God commands Moshe to anoint the Ark and its utensils, declaring them “*qodesh qodashim*”. Sacred objects and places are not to be treated casually or taken for granted. The people of Israel are also referred to as a “*kingdom of priests and a distinct nation*” (Shemot 19:6), indicating their distinctiveness as God's chosen people, with a distinct set of rules and regulations to maintain such distinction. Up until our times, a Jewish wedding requires the groom to state to his bride, “Behold you are consecrated unto me” (“*Ha-re at mequdeshet li*”), with “consecration” referring to the devotion of something exclusively to a particular purpose – in this case, the sacred union of marriage. However, the root of “*qadosh*” can also connote the “setting apart” of things or people for bad or unethical purposes. The term “*qedesha*”, for example, refers to a temple prostitute, someone who is “set apart” for immoral purposes. In Deuteronomy 23:18, it states that “*there shall be no qedeshah of the daughters of Israel, nor a qadesh of the sons of Israel.*” This prohibition reinforces the idea that “*qadosh*” is not just about being set apart, but also about being set apart for moral or good purposes. It is important to stress that the concept of “*qadosh*” is different from the Christian or pagan idea of “holiness.” In those traditions, “holiness” is often seen as a supernatural or ontological reality, or a substance with inherent powers. In contrast, in the Jewish tradition, “*qadosh*” is not an inherent quality, but rather a purposeful separation or distinction for a specific task. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik notes in his *Divrei Hashkafa*, p.117:

*Holiness is not a supernatural designation that descends from heaven to earth, becoming attached to a certain object. Things do not become sanctified of their own accord. Would things receive automatic sanctification, Judaism would turn into a magical cult, God forbid.*

<sup>3</sup> RaMBa”M utilised his knowledge of pre-Torah peoples (such as the Sabians) to contextualise and elaborate on many elements of the Torah:

*Just as, according to what I have told you, the doctrines of the Sabians are remote from us today, the chronicles of those days are likewise hidden from us today. Hence if we knew them and were cognisant of the events that happened in those days, we would know in detail the reasons for most things mentioned in the Torah. (Moreh HaNebukhim, 3:50)*

given to us simply as a set of rules and rituals, but as a profound, transformative guide that shapes our very perception of the world, our actions, and our attitudes.

### **Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) Context**

Archaeological research has provided us with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the earliest civilisations that once thrived in the ancient Near East (ANE).<sup>4</sup> Remarkably, of all the peoples who inhabited this expansive region, only those from a small enclave known as Cana'an still exist today. Yet, it is somewhat paradoxical that this one group that left a lasting legacy and persist to this day did not construct or occupy any of the distinguished metropolises of ANE civilisation. Instead, they championed a novel idea, one that broke free from the established paradigms of their time. These people are us – Israel.

For a considerable duration of our existence, we were a relatively modest and unremarkable people. Our territory was confined to Can'aan, where we established a kingdom that later splintered into two smaller entities: the northern and southern

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Note Rabbi Herschel Schachter's informal comments about how understanding the meaning of specific biblical words applies to the entire enterprise of understanding “*leshon bene adam*” of the period (see fn. 22):

*A lot of the non-traditional commentary works on perush ha-milot, and on peshuto shel miqra, which is very important. We're not sure about the meaning of a great deal of Biblical words, and we follow the principle, 'kabel et ha-emet mimi she-omro.' If someone has a suggestion, we would be happy to listen—and some of the suggestions of the non-traditional scholars are gevaldig! . . . For instance, archaeology is discovering practices that existed years ago in the days of the Tanakh, and based on these findings, we can understand problematic verses in Tanakh. It is certainly a mišva to understand the peshuto shel miqra, and to know what the verse is talking about.” (“Torah is Not Just a Collection of Dinim: An Interview with Rabbi Herschel Schachter,” by Ari Lamm, Yeshiva University Commentator Newspaper, November 5, 2007.)*

<sup>4</sup> The ancient Near Eastern nations in biblical times refer to the civilisations that existed in the region that is now modern-day Middle East.

kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom, also referred to as Israel, was composed of ten of the twelve tribes and ultimately fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE. Conversely, the Southern Kingdom, known as Judah<sup>5</sup>, consisted of the remaining two tribes and survived for a more extended period, until 586 when the Babylonians invaded, vanquished the kingdom, and exiled its populace. It is worth noting that even the capital city of Jerusalem, a city of immense importance, could not withstand the Babylonian forces.

Throughout history, conquests and exiles have often led to the dissolution of ethnic national groups, particularly in ancient times. Typically, subjugated peoples were compelled to adopt the religion and customs of their conquerors, resulting in the gradual disappearance of their unique identity as they assimilated culturally and ideologically. This was not the fate that befell our people. In a remarkable display of resilience, the Israelites persevered. Despite the loss of their territorial and institutional anchors, they managed to construct a living framework and culture that endured through the ages and continues to persist in modern times. This unprecedented feat is a testament to God's care and concern for His people, and our unyielding determination and creativity. Furthermore, we bequeathed to the world a rich legacy of ideas and traditions that laid the groundwork for some of the most prominent and established ideas of humanity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The Jewish people today are descendants of the tribe of Judah, which is why we are referred to as "Jews". However, it is important to note that there were also members of other Israelite tribes who were assimilated into the Jewish community over time.

<sup>6</sup> For a general overview of this influence, see "*Torah Revolution: Fourteen Truths that Changed the World*" by Reuven Hammer. For an overview of the influence that

What revolutionary concepts of the Torah were so pivotal that they shaped an entire culture and enabled it to endure?

## The God of Tanakh

During the ANE period, individuals commonly held the belief that the various forces of nature were distinct deities. This polytheistic perception delineated reality into discrete categories.<sup>7</sup> Many members of our ancient Israelite community even struggled with this view and actively participated in the prevailing cultic and religious ideas of their era.<sup>8</sup> However, our

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monotheism had on science and our understanding of reality, see “*Monotheism and the Rise of Science*” by J.L. Schellenberg.

<sup>7</sup> For example, the ancient Babylonians believed that the god Marduk controlled the wind, while the goddess Ishtar was responsible for love and fertility. The ancient Egyptians believed in a multitude of gods, including Ra, the god of the sun, and Osiris, the god of the afterlife. The Hittites believed that the god of storms, Teshub, controlled thunder and lightning, while the goddess Hannahanna was responsible for the earth and its vegetation. The Canaanites believed that the god Baal controlled the weather, while the goddess Asherah was responsible for fertility and the growth of crops. For reading on this, see Daniel Snell’s seminal book, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*.

<sup>8</sup> As Rabbi Joseph Dweck points out in his essay, “*The gods, Delusion, and the God Solution*” (*Principles Journal*, Edition 5, available at [www.TheHabura.com](http://www.TheHabura.com)):

*Human beings have a curious and formidable drive to worship. Whether aimed at celebrities, leaders, parents, or a deity, we often find ourselves moved to adore and adulate someone or something that we perceive as great. In ancient times this powerful inclination was often aimed at a number of diverse deities. A great portion of the Torah is focused on aiming the attention of Israel’s drive towards worship away from these deities and exclusively towards God Himself. It is a charge that the nation of Israel struggled with for over one thousand years...The Talmud addresses this with a fascinating account. We are told that the struggles with worshipping foreign deities ultimately drove the Sages at the time of the second temple to fast and pray for its eradication from the Jewish people altogether. They reasoned that it was utterly unmanageable and only got us into trouble. The challenge of directing it appropriately proved too great for us and they believed it was best to shut it down (Yoma 69b; Sanhedrin 102b).*

For Talmudic sources regarding this unfortunate historical reality, see *Sanhedrin* 91a, *Aboda Zara* 44a, and *Sanhedrin* 113a.

people ultimately broke free from this viewpoint and embraced a revolutionary concept: the existence of a single, omnipotent Deity Who transcends nature and is not manifested through natural phenomena but rather known through historical events and a unique relationship with humanity. This paradigm shift had a far-reaching impact on every aspect of Israelite culture and facilitated our survival and identity throughout history. The notion of a wholly transcendent God with absolute control over history even enabled us to interpret the most catastrophic events, such as the destruction of our capital and the subsequent exile of our people, not as a rejection of our God or a manifestation of His defeat, but rather as integral components of His grand plan and purpose for His people.

Our people have a record of this ideological and cultural revolution – the Torah. Indeed, it is the intimate receipt of this record that we celebrate on Shabuot.

### **Common Narratives Through the Lens of Torah**

It is interesting to note that some of the narratives described in the Torah seem closely tied to the cultural and historical context of the ANE. In the words of Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh (1822–1900), these “*common humanitarian traditions*” were simply “*preserved by Israel*”<sup>9</sup>, and Rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Kook elaborates even further (1865–1935).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh, *Israel & Humanity*, Part 2, p. 388.

<sup>10</sup> See Section 20 in the Introduction to his *Eder HaYakar*, where he notes:

*When Assyriology made known its findings, many were troubled because of some similarities that were found, according to their baseless suppositions, between the teachings of the Torah and some cuneiform texts, in certain ideas, ethics, and customs. Is there any basis whatsoever for this unease? It is well known that among the ancients there were those who knew of God, prophets, and spiritual giants such as Methuselah, Enoch, Shem, Eber, and others. They must have influenced the people around them,*

For example, the opening chapters of Genesis bear a striking resemblance to the well-known traditions of the region, such as the Babylonian epic known as Enuma Elish. Similarly, the story of the Garden of Eden shares clear affinities with the Epic of Gilgamesh, while the account of Noah and the flood shares similarities with an earlier Mesopotamian narrative called the Epic of Atrahasis.

The roots of Tanakhic traditions run deep and have extensive historical antecedents, with the presence of these parallels between similar stories being crucial. Nonetheless, it is the *differences* between these accounts that are of paramount importance, especially considering the unique interpretive lens through which the Tanakh reimagines the shared ANE heritage in light of its novel and radical conceptions of God, the world, and humanity. This transformation is an engrossing phenomenon that presents common tales of veracity, known to

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*even if they did not reach the level of influence of 'Ethan the Ezrahite,' that is Abraham, our father. If so, this influence must have left some impressions on their culture, and these impressions would be very similar to the Torah. Regarding the similarity in practices, both Maimonides and the sages before him understood that prophecy functions in accordance with human nature, because this nature and human inclinations must be elevated by divine guidance, as 'the commandments were only given to purify humanity.' Therefore, the holy Torah included within itself existing practices from before the revelation of the Torah that had ethical foundations and could be elevated to a more advanced, enduring, moral state. From a clearer perspective, this is the true foundation for the positive cultural awareness deep in the nature of man. Therefore the verse 'This is the book of Adam's descendants. When God created man, He created him in God's image' (Gen. 5:1,2), is the basic principle of the entire Torah and is more important than the verse 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev. 19:18), considered by Rabbi Akiva to be the basic principle. These and other similar matters should concern any knowledgeable person, upon his initial consideration of the issues. However, there is no basis whatsoever for the fraudulent heresy that is spreading throughout the world and being strengthened by these discoveries.*



the people of the ANE, through the distinctive prism of the Israelite perspective.<sup>11</sup>

Consider, for instance, the Sumerian account of Ziusudra, which bears resemblance to the story of Noah's flood in Genesis. Remarkably, the two tales share a host of similarities, including a flood that stems from a divine mandate, the selection of a single individual to be rescued, the provision of instructions on how to construct a vessel and who to bring in it, the annihilation of all living beings and the destruction of the land, the landing of the vessel atop a mountain, the dispatch of birds to survey the terrain, and the offering of a sacrifice after the protagonist exits the vessel. The parallel narrative elements that surface in these stories are indeed striking.

What is of utmost importance is not merely the retelling of an earlier narrative within the Torah, but rather the manner in which it serves as a conduit for the manifestation of the unique Israelite ethos and their distinct perceptions of God, the world, and humanity.

In the Sumerian rendition of the tale, the gods appear capricious and capriciously act on a whim; their sole justification for the annihilation of humanity is their purported annoyance with the excessive noise generated by human beings! There is no mention of any warning or chance for repentance. The resulting rule is both unjust and uncaring. In stark contrast,

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<sup>11</sup> However, as Joel Wolowelsky of *Tradition*, notes:

*We had no need for Ancient Near Eastern texts to know the great Torah message that the true God, in total contrast to pagan concepts of the world, created and guides the universe unchallenged and with a sense of morality. But now that we have these texts, we can better understand how the Torah spoke “ki-leshon bene adam” to teach these values to an emerging nation. (“A Note on the Flood Story in the Language of Man,” Tradition 42:3 (2009): 41-48 (47-48)*

For an analysis of “*Dibra Torah Ki-leshon Bene Adam*”, see footnote 23.

the Tanakh portrays a depiction of God who is uncompromising in His ethical standards, and as such, the flood is a punishment for the wicked and corrupt behaviour of humans whom He created with tender love, and whose moral decline He can scarcely bear to witness. This version offers a starkly divergent message and conveys a radically different viewpoint.

Numerous such examples indicate that the Tanakh expresses a fundamental discontent with the broader cultural milieu in which it existed; it is a revolutionary, cultural critique.

### **Hebrew Monotheism: Revolution or Evolution?**

Another conspicuous difference of our Torah is the monotheistic perspective that the Torah espouses, which presents a departure from the polytheistic beliefs of the broader ANE.

But why was the notion of a single God instead of many deemed such a revolutionary concept? What was so different about it?

The classical account of the rise of monotheism maintains that in every society, there is a natural progression from polytheism (personifications of natural forces) to henotheism (acknowledging one god as supreme over others) or monolatry (worshipping one god while recognising others as existing), ultimately culminating in monotheism (recognising the reality of only one God). This evolutionary model of religion, which posits that polytheism was primitive and monotheism represented the purest form of religion, was put forward by Western monotheists in the 18th and 19th

centuries.<sup>12</sup> They asserted that elements of biblical religion represented “pure religion,” a religion that had evolved to its highest form, no longer tainted by pagan and polytheistic practices. The early archaeology of the 19th century seemed to corroborate this theory, with cuneiform tablets inscribed with Mesopotamian literature displaying striking parallels in themes and language to Tanakhic stories. This evidence led to the conclusion that Israelite monotheism was not all that different from ANE religions, as they shared similarities in their creation narrative, flood story, animal sacrifices, and observance of purity taboos. It was posited that Israelite monotheism represented a more *refined* version of ANE religion.

This evolutionary model falls short. Monotheism does not and cannot emerge from polytheism since the two are based on divergent intuitions and views of reality. Therefore, Hebrew monotheism represented a polemic against the ANE worldview, signifying a *revolution* rather than an *evolution*.<sup>13</sup> We will come to realise that the differences between the Torah and ANE literature are fundamental, rather than superficial. Although the Torah drew from pre-existing elements, **it transformed them into vehicles that explained its worldview.** Thus, similarities in *form* (narratives, rituals, etc.) between Israel and its ANE neighbours do not connote similarities in *function*.

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<sup>12</sup> See Edward Burnett Taylor, *Primitive Culture*

<sup>13</sup> For a thorough analysis of this point, see Yehezkel Kaufmann’s seminal work, *The Religion of Israel*.

## **Paganism and the Meta-Divine Primordial Realm**

Pagan religion is rooted in the belief that there exists a realm beyond the gods, “a meta-divine realm” that transcends them and whose decrees they must obey. This primordial realm sits above the gods, and it may take the form of water, darkness, spirit, or fate. This realm ultimately limits the power of the gods. It is impossible to conceive of a supreme divine will in this worldview since the will of one deity can be thwarted by this more powerful “meta-divine realm”. Further, mythology is key to pagan religion as it tells the tales of the lives of the gods, their births, lives, and deaths.

Pagan religions also have theogonies and cosmogonies which describe the birth of gods and the generation of the natural world. There is a fluid boundary between the divine, the human, and the natural worlds as they all emerge from this meta-divine realm. Power is materially conceived and found in certain substances that are deeply connected to this meta-divine realm. The gods have power only insofar as they are connected to that primordial space. The pagan cult involves the manipulation of substances, such as animal flesh and blood, that have inherent power due to their connection to the meta-divine realm. The cultic festivals often re-enact mythological stories or stages of the gods’ lives to bring magical powers into play and benefit the lives of the worshippers.

To paganism, evil is an autonomous demonic realm and a metaphysical reality. Indeed, a polytheistic pagan worldview is ripe for evil to thrive - among both humans and their various gods.<sup>14</sup> Salvation is the concern of humans and is achieved

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<sup>14</sup> ShaDa”L (1800–1865) notes, in his *Commentary on Exodus (Yitro)*:

through magic<sup>15</sup> and gnosis<sup>16</sup>. The gods are not interested in human salvation since they are trying to save themselves from

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*One who believes in many god...this will result in his inclination toward evil or imperfection, as he will think that in so doing, he will find favour with such-and-such god whose ways are so. This is known from experience, as anyone knows who has read the annals of the ancient peoples and their customs. Besides, only a single God is likely to be conceived as possessing the epitome of perfection. If many gods are imagined to exist, each one of them must necessarily be lacking and imperfect, for the power of one will limit that of the other. As a result, jealousy, hatred, and rivalry will be ascribed to the heavens above, as is known from the beliefs of ancient peoples. And as a further inevitable result, human relations will suffer. Polytheistic beliefs cause the heart of the various people to be sundered, for the members of one nation, who worship a particular god, will despise the members of another nation who worship another god, and they will claim to lack any relationship with them, as if those others were not human beings like themselves. Only those who believe in One God know that we all have One father, that One God created us, and that all humankind is dear to Him. Indeed it was only after the Torah of Moses was spread throughout the world that the peoples began to recognise that we are all brothers.*

<sup>15</sup> As Rabbi Dr Jose Faur points out in his essay, "Monotheism & Magic" in *Harvard Theological Review*:

*Jewish opposition to magic is old. Magic is intrinsic to Aboda Zara (imperfectly translated "idolatry," but actually meaning "strange" i.e. unprescribed, "worship," encompassing any ritual not included in the Jewish way of worshipping, even when directed to God). In a deep sense, magic and religion compete for the same things and apply similar methods: both aim at affecting the effects of this world by influencing the realm of the beyond. The Talmudic legend that Abraham taught the art of necromancy to children of the concubines (Sanhedrin, 91a, cf. Rashi ad. loc.), reflects the intimate relation between magic and religion. Although one is superior to the other, both were taught by the patriarch Abraham, hence the fierce rivalry between them. Traces of this fight are found in Rabbinic literature (Mishna Sanhedrin, VI 4 and P.T. ad. Lock.; Bekhorot, 8a-9a, etc.). This brings us to a fundamental problem: how to distinguish between them. At the practical level there was no problem. Certain rituals and acts were classified as "magical", others as "religious". Conceptually, however, it was another matter. The distinction between "white" and "black" magic (or "good" and "evil" spirits etc.) usually made in this connection, cannot be accepted by a monotheistic religion believing in one omnipotent God, Creator of everything, "pure" and "impure"...The same concern is evident in Elijah's prayer that his miracles not be perceived as necromancy (Berakhot, 6b)...There is no doubt that Maimonides' statement that magic is sheer nonsense and useless (Aboda Zara XI, 17) offended the religious sensitivities of many. To them, denial of the magical was tantamount to denial of the miraculous.*

<sup>16</sup> Gnosis is the knowledge of mystical secrets that can liberate one from regular rules.

the powers and decrees of the meta-divine realm. In pagan thinking, humans can only achieve salvation by circumventing the capriciousness of the gods by tapping into the material of the meta-divine realm – whether it is blood, flesh, or other substances that were thought to have inherent power.

The pagan worldview is also amoral, which means that it neither has a concept of absolute morality nor of absolute immorality. Some gods may be responsible for maintaining social order, but their laws are not absolute and can be vetoed by the orders of this pagan meta-divine realm. Since each god's knowledge and wisdom are limited, what is considered moral depends on what a particular god likes or desires, which may differ from what another god likes or desires!

The Hebrew monotheism of Torah challenged this worldview by introducing a radically new idea of a God Who is the source of all being, free from all the limitations of myth and magic, and whose Will is absolute and sovereign. The Hebrew monotheistic enterprise eliminates the meta-divine realm, and this difference is fundamental in asserting the supreme sovereignty of our God.

### **Other Differences**

Hebrew monotheism is distinct from pagan religions in several other ways, too. For one, God has no life story. He is not subject to any pre-existing realm, so He is free from all limitations. In Genesis, God is not born or seen as coming to be; His name denotes “Being” or “Existence” itself.<sup>17</sup> God is timeless, ageless,

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<sup>17</sup> The name YHWH denotes “Being” or “Existence” itself. This is based on the etymology of the name, as well as its usage in the Torah. In Hebrew, the verb “to be” is *הָיָה* (*hayah*), and the name YHWH is derived from the same root. As RaMBa”M notes: “The name of God that is written with the four letters [YHWH]...is derived from the verb ‘to be’

non-physical, and eternal. He transcends nature and is not identifiable with any source in it. As a result, there is no blurring between humans and divines, and magic is deemed pointless and useless<sup>18</sup>, as there is no meta-divine realm to tap into. God can't be manipulated or coerced by charms, spells, amulets, or substances – and these things have no inherent power. This emphasis on the powerlessness of materials is a crucial feature of the Torah's revolutionary model of reality.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to the pagan worldview, where the meta-divine realm spawns all types of evil in equal strength, the Torah emphasises that God is “good”,<sup>20</sup> and there are no divine evil agents that oppose Him as equal rivals. The concept of “sin”<sup>21</sup> is

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*(הַיְיָ)*. This implies that He is the Being, in the sense that He is the necessary existent Being. For every being that is not God, its being is only accidental, and therefore its existence needs explanation. But God is the Being Whose existence does not require any explanation.” (Moreh HaNebukhim, Book I, Chapter 63) We also see this in Exodus 3:14, when Moshe asks God what His name is. God responds, “I will be who I will be” (*אֲנִי הָאֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי*). This is often interpreted as a play on words, with the name YHWH being a shortened version of this phrase. In this way, the name YHWH is seen as a declaration of God's essential nature as the source and sustainer of all existence.

<sup>18</sup> For more on this, see Rabbi Dr. Jose Faur's essay, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry”, in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*.

<sup>19</sup> As RaMBa”M states in *Moreh HaNebukhim* (1:61):

*You must beware of sharing the error of those who write amulets. Whatever you hear of them or read in their works, especially in reference to the names which they form by combination, is utterly senseless; they call these combinations names and they believe their pronunciation demands sanctification and purification and that by using them they are able to work miracles. Rational people ought not to listen to such men nor in any way believe their assertions.*

<sup>20</sup> For examples, see Exodus 34:6; Psalms 34:8, 100:5, 143:10, 145:9; Ezra 3:11; Nehemia 9:20

<sup>21</sup> It is important to distinguish between the correct meaning of the Hebrew word *חטא* (*het*) as “missing the mark/target” rather than the incorrect meaning of “sin”, because these two concepts carry different connotations and implications for how we understand human behaviour and our relationship with God. In Tanakh, the concept of *het* does not necessarily carry the same moral judgement that the word “sin” does in Christian theology. Rather, it describes a failure to achieve a particular goal or standard, which can include

demythologised in Torah, and is characterised by a deep sense of personal responsibility and a focus on ethical behaviour and covenantal relationship with God, rather than simply following the correct rituals or making the right offerings to various gods for appeasement. In the Torah, evil comes about as a clash between the Will of God and the will of humans, who have the free will to rebel. In other words, evil is a moral choice, not a force that is built into the universe. The only supreme law is the Will of God, as He is a creator-God who has imposed order on the cosmos, making the universe a moral cosmos that imposes morality on its structure.

With the giving of the Torah, the People of Israel also received the conception of the Divine in an entirely new way, with God differing from pagan gods in His essential nature. This difference was not just *quantitative* (from many gods to One God) but it was *qualitative*. While God is demythologised in Torah, He is still anthropomorphised so that humans can relate and to capture His interactions.<sup>22</sup> For the people of Israel,

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religious or moral expectations. This understanding of *het* suggests a more practical and concrete approach to ethical and religious behaviour, focusing on the need to do better and strive for improvement. In other words, when one “misses the mark,” they pick up another arrow and try again. In contrast, the Christian concept of “sin” often carries a strong moral and theological weight, suggesting that human beings are fundamentally flawed and in need of divine grace and redemption. This conception of sin can be seen as reflecting a more pessimistic view of human nature, emphasising the need for forgiveness and spiritual transformation. While the distinction between *het* and “sin” may seem subtle, it can have significant implications for how we approach ethical and religious questions. By focusing on its correct meaning as “missing the mark,” we can emphasise the importance of ongoing growth and self-improvement, rather than simply viewing ourselves as inherently sinful or flawed. This can lead to a more positive and empowering approach to our relationship to God and others, focused on the potential for growth and transformation rather than a sense of guilt or shame.

<sup>22</sup> The principle of דְּבַרָּה תוֹרָה כְּלָשׁוֹן בְּנֵי אָדָם, translated as “the Torah speaks in the language of humans”, refers to the principle that the Tanakh often describes God in human



the interaction between God and humans is not through nature, but through history and *berit*.

## Recalibrating Ourselves on Shabuot

As Shabuot is upon us, we can remind ourselves of these distinct and revolutionary features of the Torah we received from God, as a means to recalibrate ourselves.

In Exile, it can be all too easy to give in to the primal pagan drives that the Torah demanded that we abandon. The dangers that lie in reverting back to these old comforts are still here – even subconsciously.<sup>23</sup> By learning about the revolutionary nature of our Torah, we remain cognisant of the falsehoods it sought to overcome. This can help ensure that such

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terms, using metaphors, anthropomorphisms, and other literary devices to help people relate to, and understand, Him. The principle can be found in *Sanhedrin* 46a, *Berakhot* 31b, and *Midrash Tanhuma* (Tazria). For example, the Tanakh often describes God as having features such as hands, eyes, and emotions. This does not mean that God is a physical being, but rather that the language is used to convey a sense of God's power, presence, and activity in the world. Ḥakham Yosef Ibn Kaspi, in his *Sefer HaDinim ve HaDaot*, believed that the anthropomorphic language used in the Tanakh was primarily a concession to the limitations of human understanding and should not be taken literally. RaMBa”M, in his *Moreh HaNebukhim*, believed that anthropomorphic language in the Tanakh was a necessary part of our education. He argued that the use of such language was a pedagogical device that helped people grasp the concept of God and understand God's attributes in a way that was accessible to them. However, he cautioned that such language should not be taken literally or as indicative of God's actual nature.

<sup>23</sup> As RaMBa”M notes in his *Perush HaMishnayot* (*Aboda Zara* 4:7):

*The deception is so great that even the best of the faithful among our scholars of Torah think that they are true. They do not realise that they are nonsensical false things that the Torah warned against, just as it warned us against falsehoods.*

In more recent times, see Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim in his *Judaism: Religion of Reason* (p.10):

*The failure to accept that God alone provides for man drives Jews to seek an imagined security by wearing red strings, checking Mezuzot, carrying Jewish books for protection, praying to the dead, paying for human blessings, and performing acts at certain times and with certain objects.*

falsehoods have no place in the thoughts and actions that influence our knowledge of God and our practice of Judaism today. For only then can we ensure that our nation remains set apart with great distinction; that we remain *qadosh*.

וְאַתֶּם תְּהִי-לִי מְמִלְכֶת פְּהַנִּים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ

