

# SHAVUOT: WHAT DO (AND DON'T) YOU THINK ABOUT GOD?

CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR FACILITATORS

ASK **BIG**  
QUESTIONS

**Hillel**  
International

**Note for Facilitators:** This document is designed to be the centering point for a group conversation. You should plan for the conversation to last between 60 and 90 minutes, depending on group size. Most parts are meant to be read by members of the group, so you should plan to ask participants to take turns reading sections. Alternatively, you can choose the first reader of a section, and then that reader chooses the next reader. Additional guidelines and suggestions for planning and leading a successful conversation can be found at the end of this guide.

# WELCOME

Before we begin, we need to agree on a few things:

- In order for our conversation to be as rich as it can be, we need everyone to feel safe to really share and really listen.
- Therefore, we agree not to share others' comments outside of this space.
- Our aim is to create a space where we can understand others and understand ourselves, not to give advice or to argue ideas of objective truth. With that in mind, in this conversation we will agree to speak in the first-person, about our own truth.
- We will assume good faith in one another.
- We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.
- We won't rush to fill the silence.

Can we all agree to these things? If you feel, for whatever reason, that you cannot agree to these things, then please take this opportunity to exit. By staying in the circle, we all signify our intention to abide by these commitments.

## ASK & SHARE

Let's say that you're required to choose between three formulations: 1) God! 2) God? 3) God. What do you choose? Why? Please share your name, where you call home, and your answer to this question. You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

**Note for Facilitators:** Give people a moment to organize their thoughts before you start asking for volunteers. It may be helpful to model this introduction for participants, so consider introducing yourself first. Be sure everyone states their name. You don't need to go in order around a circle. Allow people to introduce themselves when the spirit moves them.

# LEARN

Shavuot is the holiday celebrating the giving of the Torah. It takes place exactly seven weeks after Passover—after the exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, the Israelites traveled over a period of weeks to the base of Mount Sinai. It was there that the Ten Commandments were revealed to the people Israel with great drama. As the Torah tells it: “Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for God had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder. God came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain.” (Exodus 19:18-20). According to the Book of Exodus, this was all a bit too much for the Israelites, who then asked Moses to go up the mountain and receive the rest of the Torah on his own.

Different people encounter this story of divine revelation in different ways. For some, it’s a record of historical truth. For others, it’s way to describe, symbolically, something difficult to articulate about spiritual experience. For some, it’s a myth of possibly literary interest, but not much more than that.

For everyone, however, the story of Shavuot invites us to consider how we think (and don’t think) about who or what God is, and what that means for us personally, for the Jewish people, and for the world as a whole.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg wrote about her personal journey from atheism to observant Judaism in her memoir, *Surprised By God: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Religion*. In this excerpt, she begins to question the ideas she’d held for many years about God. Please read this aloud as a group.

About six months after my mother died, strange things began to happen. I would walk around Providence at night and I would talk to the moon. It wasn’t really an out-loud talking, or even in words, but rather more like a sort of concentrated focus, a communion with this startling orb that seemed to be watching over me in a way that nobody else really was. I began to connect to something long buried that only had permission to stir as I traversed the winding streets, more than a little lost.

I would listen to Tchaikovsky and weep at the moon. Not just the moon, though. I was equally moved by the shadows created by porchlights and crumbling paint that were cast across the lawn, or the weeds sprouting tenderly between sidewalk cracks. I’d walk home from class and suddenly everything seemed to take on a softness, an illumination of some sort. Colors seemed deeper, corners sharper. I would be walking down the street, and, abruptly, the only thing that seemed to exist in the world was the stop sign at the corner. My mind would go still. It’d be absent of the clacking sound to which I was accustomed, with its endless running commentary about who I had seen and who I would see and what I had eaten that day and what I had to do and what had just happened in class and.... Suddenly the only thing in the world was this stop sign. And, somehow, that was enough.

I didn't know what to call these experiences. I didn't think to label them at all, really. They just sort of happened, captivated me for a time and then I moved on.

For, when I wandered around Providence and slipped into the place where the air vibrated, where rocks and leaves seemed to pulse with opalescent light, I didn't wonder why. I didn't really think at all. The experiences certainly didn't disturb me; they were gentle, rolling, sweet. Safe. What began to bother me, as time went on, was what to make of them.

One afternoon not long after these moonlit walks had begun, I had lunch with a friend at a café near campus. I don't remember what she asked me, but my response caused her to look up at me and say, "You don't consider yourself spiritual? I think of you as pretty much the most spiritual person I've ever met."

She did and still does identify as a secular humanist, with no interest in religion of any sort. She did, and does, count on my short list of people whose observations are almost never off-target.

The comment stayed with me, confounded me. What could she be talking about? What did she see in me to which this word could apply? I was confused and flattered at the same time, and then I wasn't sure why I felt flattered. Was it a good thing to be "spiritual"? Wasn't it just silliness?

I had, at this point, spent several years studying religion from the perspective of an academic trying to understand what people thought they were experiencing when they talked about God—even if, in reality, it was just a neurological reaction or something similar. And yet... I knew that I couldn't entertain the possibility that my midnight excursions might be connected to the word "spiritual" without extending the word to what I regarded as its logical extreme. And opening even the question of the concept of God made me a little bit nervous, a little bit jittery, and rather nauseous.

Like a lot of people, the only images I had of God, or even of "spirituality", was this mythical, anthropomorphized God, some guy in the sky who sees you when you're sleeping and knows when you're awake. The Torah talks about a God who took the Jews out of Egypt with a strong hand and a mighty arm and who, when He (always He) gets angry, has nostrils that flare. The artists of the Renaissance added a few Zeus-inspired touches: big beard, thunderbolt, menacing glare. As a child, the only archetypes that I encountered in my upbringing and the wider culture were of God as fascist dictator or, maybe, God as the Big Buddy who makes everything OK. It was this God—the one who was going to somehow swoop down from the sky and save my mother from cancer—that I had so vociferously rejected the year before, and years before that. From my twenty-one year-old perspective, it seemed ludicrous that I would throw away years of rational inquiry and historical-critical analysis, that I would give up my intellect and my power and go mooning after these problematic images in the naïve belief that it would somehow help my life to do so.

Of course, I wasn't experiencing an angry, or even necessarily a personal, deity. And that was just the thing. There was a disparity between the language I felt pulled to use to describe these experiences and my belief in what that language signified. The experiences weren't wrong. The other possibility, then, was that these words—"spirituality", or "God", even—might refer to something much more powerful and primal, something much more fundamental than I had ever considered before.

I had always believed that religious people were deluded, mistakenly transferring their need for a parent figure or certainty in the world onto mythology. What could it mean if the devout had all long been citizens of the remarkable, translucent world that I was just discovering?

And, sure enough, I would eventually discover that a great many people, from the authors of the Book of Deuteronomy onward, understood what I, at this time, did not: that all the business of God's flaring nostrils and mood swings was actually just metaphor, ways of describing the intangible force I began meeting more and more often.

As I hesitantly experimented with using the word "spirituality" to describe these strange luminous rushes—the sense of being outside time, the sense of stepping into eternity, the sense that my self-as-I-understood-it seemed to melt away into the moment—the rushes got bigger. And later as I began first, tentatively, and then, more assertively, to use the word "God" to describe the experiences, they got bigger and bigger still.

There was no need for a dramatic leap of faith, for a fuzzy, unfounded trek into darkened woods. My own, lived experience was the guide, here, and all I needed was a willingness to meet it, to allow myself to ask certain kinds of questions and be willing to hear the answers that might follow, no matter how disconcerting those answers might be. This, then, was the real test of faith—not whether I willing to change my beliefs, but, rather, whether I was willing to give language to that which I had already begun to experience as truth.

But that was all later. The present moment in Providence was asking enough of me as it was.

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

## Interpretive Questions

- What's the tension that Ruttenberg feels between her experiences and the language that she uses to describe them?
- How had she thought of God up until this point? What, if anything, had changed for her?
- What do you think Ruttenberg means when she says, "as I began first, tentatively, and then, more assertively, to use the word "God" to describe the experiences, they got bigger and bigger still"? How do you personally make sense of this comment?

## Reflective Questions

- Have you ever had experiences of the sort that Ruttenberg describes? Have you had other kinds of experiences that you would describe as "spiritual" or related to divinity in some way?
- How do you understand the word "spirituality"? Can one be spiritual without believing in God or a divine power of some sort?
- How do you think of God (whether or not you personally believe in God)? Is it similar to, or different from, the way Ruttenberg describes God?
- What does it mean to "believe" in God? What do (and don't) you believe about God?

Take some time to think about these questions. When we're all ready, each of us will turn to our neighbor and share our thoughts. Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

**Note for Facilitators:** This is the heart of the conversation. Give people several minutes to prepare their thoughts. Then invite people to divide into pairs or triads and share their responses. Give them a good amount of time for this—10-20 minutes. It may be longer, depending on how much momentum they develop. Then reconvene in the large group and ask people to share from their small-group conversations.

A few tips on facilitation:

- The large-group debrief should take another 20-30 minutes.
- Begin by asking for a volunteer to share an insight from their conversation. You might begin by asking, "What came up?"
- When each person is done, thank them for their comment.
- Don't feel a need to rush or to fill silences.
- If someone begins to monopolize the time, you might say, "I want to be sure that everyone has a chance to speak, so let's try to make room for another person."

For other ideas on facilitation, please refer to the AIR-IT guide at the end of this document. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its responses to these questions, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.

## DO

Rabbi Harold Schulweis once wrote, "Skepticism was created to keep believers modest." However you personally engage with the idea of God, the dialogue between those who think in very different ways about one of the biggest questions in our culture is absolutely essential. We're grateful that you took the time today to think through some powerful issues around spirituality and divinity, and hope that it has been impactful to you as well.

As we conclude, here are some final questions to consider. Please take a moment to think about your response, and then share when you are ready:

- Did today's conversation bring you some insight about your own approach to spirituality and/or God?
- Did it help you understand others' ways of thinking in some way?
- What is one thing you want to do differently in the next 24 hours based on this conversation?

Feel free to use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

**Note for Facilitators:** Give people a minute to reflect on the question. Then ask anyone who wants to share to do so. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its response to this question, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.

# APPENDIX: SOURCES FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Shavuot is traditionally celebrated with a tikkun leyl Shavuot, an all-night study session that culminates with the reading the story of the giving of the Torah at sunrise. We stay up all night, in other words, preparing ourselves to receive—literally or figuratively—transcendent wisdom. Another major custom of Shavuot involves eating dairy products, perhaps because the Torah is sometimes compared to nourishing mother's milk.

Here are some additional sources for study, which can be used as part of your Big Question conversation, as a follow-up event, or in any other way that feels useful. Feel free to use some or all of the sources together—and definitely feel welcome to use this discussion guide and source sheet as part of a blintz and cheesecake-filled tikkun leyl Shavuot if you would like!

This text describes the scene immediately preceding and following the giving of the Ten Commandments.

And it came to pass on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a horn exceeding loud; and all the people that were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount. Now mount Sinai was altogether on smoke, because God descended upon it in fire; and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.... And all the people perceived the thunders, and the lightnings, and the voice of the horn, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled, and stood afar off. (Exodus 19:16-19, 20:15)

## שמות יט-כ

טז וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְהִיטְתֵי הַבְּקָרָה, וַיְהִי קוֹלֵת וּבְרָקִים וְעָנָן כָּבֵד עַל-הַהָר, וְקוֹל שֹׁפָר, חֲזָק מְאֹד; וַיִּחַרְדּוּ כָל-הָעָם, אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה. יז וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הָעָם לִקְרַאת הָאֱלֹהִים, מִן-הַמַּחֲנֶה; וַיַּתְּצֵבוּ, בְּתַחְתֵּית הַהָר. יח וְהָרַס יְהוָה, עֵשֶׂן כָּלוֹ, מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו יְהוָה, בְּאֵשׁ; וַיַּעַל עֵשֶׂנוּ כְּעָשָׁן הַכֹּבֵשֶׁן, וַיִּחַרְדּוּ כָל-הָהָר מְאֹד.

יד וְכָל-הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת-הַקּוֹלֵת וְאֶת-הַלְפִידִם, וְאֶת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר, וְאֶת-הָהָר, עֹשֵׂן; וַיֵּרָא הָעָם וַיִּגְעוּ, וַיַּעֲמְדוּ מֵרָחֵק

- What kind of language is used to describe divine revelation, here? What theological or literary ideas does this language convey?
- How did the Israelites feel in this scene? Why?
- Does this picture of the giving of the Torah surprise you?
- What does this text tell you about how it might be for any of us to receive transcendent wisdom in our lives?



This text is a midrash, a fanciful reading by some 10th century rabbis about what might have happened during the giving of the Torah.

Come and see how the voice went forth to all of Israel, to each and every one in keeping with his particular capacity--to the elderly in keeping with their capacity, to young men in keeping with their capacity, to the little ones in keeping with their capacity, and to the women in keeping with their capacity. As it is said, "Moshe spoke and God answered him with a voice"--a voice that he would have been able to withstand. R. Yose bar Hanina said: If you are astounded at such an assertion, then draw the relevant inference from the manna, which came down for Israel varying in taste, in keeping with each Israelite's particular need--to young men it tasted like bread, to the elderly it tasted like wafers made with honey, to sucklings it tasted like milk from their mother's breast, to the sick it tasted like fine flour mingled with honey, while for the heathen it tasted as bitter as linseed. Now, if the manna, which was all of the same kind, changed into so many kinds to provide for the particular need of each individual, was it not possible for the voice, in which there is such divine strength, to vary according to the capacity of each individual, so that no harm should befall him? Hence Job said, "God thunders marvelously with His voice" (Job 37:5). (Exodus Rabba 5:9)

## שמות רבה ה:ט

בוא וראה היאך הקול יוצא, אצל כל ישראל כל אחד ואחד לפי כחו, הזקנים לפי כחן, הבחורים לפי כחן, והקטנים לפי כחן, והיונקים לפי כחן, והנשים לפי כחן, ואף משה לפי כחו, שנאמר (שמות יט, יט): משה ידבר והאלהים יענו בקול, בקול שהיה יכול לסובלו. וכן הוא אומר (תהלים כט, ד): קול ה' בכח, בכחו לא נאמר אלא בכח, בכחו של כל אחד ואחד, ואף נשים מעברות לפי כחן, הוי אומר כל אחד ואחד לפי כחו. אמר רבי יוסי בר חנינא אם תמה אתה על הדבר הזה למד מן המן שלא היה יורד לישראל אלא לפי כח של כל אחד ואחד מישראל, הבחורים היו אוכלין אותו כלם, שנאמר (שמות טז, ד): הנני ממטיר לכם לחם מן השמים וגו'. והזקנים, כצפיחת בדבש, שנאמר (שמות טז, לא): וטעמו כצפיחת בדבש. ויונקים, כחלב משדי אמו, שנאמר (במדבר יא, ח): והיה טעמו כטעם וגו'. והחולים כסלת מערב בדבש, שנאמר (יחזקאל טז, ט): ולחמי אשר נתתי לך סלת ושמן ודבש האכלתי. והעובדי כוכבים טעמו אותו מר וגד, שנאמר (במדבר יא, ז): והמן כזרע גד הוא. אמר רבי יוסי בר רבי חנינא ומה המן שהיה מין אחד נהפך לכמה מינין בשביל צרף כל אחד ואחד, הקול שהיה כח בו על אחת כמה וכמה שהיה משתנה לכל אחד ואחד שלא ינזקו. ומנין שהקול נחלק לקולות הרבה שלא ינזקו, שנאמר (שמות כ, טו): וכל העם ראים את הקולת, הוי (איוב לז, ה): רעם אל בקולו נפלאות.

- How does this text describe the receiving of the Torah? What's the central metaphor, here?
- How is this way of thinking about receiving Torah different from or similar to the first text?
- Does this resonate with the way you think about transcendent wisdom? About the divine?

This text is also a midrash, from the same source as the one above.

At Sinai, when the Holy One gave the Torah to Israel, God manifested marvels upon marvels for Israel with God's voice. How so? As the Holy One spoke, the voice reverberated throughout the world. At first Israel heard the voice coming to them from the south, so they ran to the south to meet the voice there. It shifted to the north, so they ran to the north. Then it shifted to the east, so they ran to the east; but from the east it shifted to the west, so they ran to the west. Next it shifted to heaven. But when they raised their eyes toward heaven, it seemed to rise out of the earth. Hence Israel asked one another, "But wisdom, where shall it be found?" (Job 28:12) (Exodous Rabbah 5:9)

קִשְׁנָתָן הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת הַתּוֹרָה בְּסִינֵי הָרָאֵה בְּקוֹלוֹ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל פְּלֵאִי פְּלֵאִים, כִּי צִדְ הֵיָה הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְדַבֵּר וְהַקּוֹל יוֹצֵא וּמִחֲזִיר  
בְּכָל הָעוֹלָם, יִשְׂרָאֵל שׁוֹמְעִין אֶת הַקּוֹל בָּא עֲלֵיהֶם מִן הַדְרֹם וְהָיוּ רָצִים לְדְרוֹם לְקַבֵּל אֶת הַקּוֹל, וּמִדְרוֹם נִהְפָּךְ לָהֶם לְצָפוֹן וְהָיוּ רָצִים לְצָפוֹן,  
וּמִצָּפוֹן נִהְפָּךְ לְמִזְרָח וְהָיוּ רָצִים לְמִזְרָח, וּמִמִּזְרָח נִהְפָּךְ לָהֶם לְמַעְרָב וְהָיוּ רָצִים לְמַעְרָב, וּמִן הַמַּעְרָב נִהְפָּךְ לָהֶם מִן הַשְּׁמַיִם וְהָיוּ תוֹלִין  
שִׁנִּיהוּן וְהָיָה נִהְפָּךְ בְּאֶרֶץ, וְהָיוּ מְבִיטִין לְאֶרֶץ, שְׁנֹאֲמֵר (דְּבָרִים ד, לו): מִן הַשְּׁמַיִם הַשְּׁמִיעַךְ אֶת קוֹלוֹ לְיִסְרָאֵל. וְהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אוֹמְרִים זֶה לְזֶה  
(אִיּוֹב כח, יב): וְהִחֲכְמָה מֵאִין תִּמְצָא.

- How is revelation depicted in this text?
- How is this image of revelation similar to or different from the other texts?
- What do you think this midrash is trying to say about what it means to receive transcendent wisdom?

These are the Ten Commandments, often described as the cornerstone of the giving of the Torah.

1. I am God your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You should have no other gods before me.
2. Do not make yourself a graven image, or any type of likeness, of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; do not bow down to them, or serve them; for I God your God am a jealous God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of those that hate me; and showing mercy unto the thousandth generation of those that love me and keep my commandments.
3. Do not take the name of the God your God in vain; for God will not hold guiltless the one that takes God's name in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you will labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath for God your God, in it you should not do any manner of work—neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male and female workers, nor your cattle, nor the stranger that is within your gates; for in six days God made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; wherefore God blessed the Sabbath day, and made it holy.
5. Honor your father and thy mother, that your days may be long in the land which God your God gives you.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not bring false testimony against your neighbor.
10. Do not desire to possess your neighbor's house; do not desire your neighbor's wife, nor his male or female workers, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor any thing that is your neighbor's. (Exodus 20:2-14)

## שמות כ

אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים:

לֹא יִהְיֶה־לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל־פְּנֵי:

לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה־לְךָ פֶסֶל | וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשָׁמַיִם | מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּיָּם | מִתַּחַת לְאָרֶץ

לֹא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַדְוֵה פֶקֶד עֹון אֲבֹת עַל־בְּנֵים עַל־שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל־רַבְעִים לְשָׁנָאִי:

וְעָשָׂה חֶסֶד לְאֵלִפִּים לְאֹהֲבֵי וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי: (ו)

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹן כִּי לֹא יִנְקָה יְהוָה אֶת־אֲשֶׁר־יִשָּׂא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ לְשׁוֹן: (פ)

זָכוֹר אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ

שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלַאכְתְּךָ

וַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת | לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה כָל־מְלָאכָה אַתָּה | וּבִנְךָ־וּבִתְךָ עַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ וּבְהֵמָתְךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ

כִּי שִׁשְׁתַּיִּמִּים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם וַיִּנַּח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל־כֵּן בֵּרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת

וַיְקַדְּשֶׁהוּ: (ו)

כָּבֹד אֶת־אָבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמְךָ לְמַעַן יֵאָרְכוּן יְמֶיךָ עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ: (ז)

לֹא תִרְצַח: (ח) לֹא תִנְאָף: (ט) לֹא תִגְנוֹב: (י) לֹא־תַעֲנֶה בְרַעַךְ עַד שִׁקְרָה: (יא)

לֹא תַחְמוֹד בֵּית רַעַךְ לֹא־תַחְמוֹד אִשְׁתְּ רַעַךְ וְעַבְדּוֹ וְאִמְתּוֹ וְשׁוֹרוֹ וְחֲמֹרוֹ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר לְרַעַךְ: (יב)

- What sorts of patterns, if any, do you see in this list?
- What of these commandments feel intuitive to you? Which of them feel harder to understand?
- Of the ones that challenge you, why do you think they're on this list?
- Some commentaries suggest that this list is split into two—the first five commandments deal with the relationship between people and the divine, and the second five deal with relationships among people. With this reading, how do you make sense of the fifth commandment, to honor your parents? Does this two-list idea appeal to you? Why or why not?
- If you were going to write these Ten Commandments in your own language, what would you say?
- What would be on your own list of ten commandments, if you were to write one?

## New Media Sources for Discussion

There are a wealth of videos on G-dcast's website that can enrich our Jewish learning and thinking about Torah, God, and revelation. Here are a few great ones to get you started:



"Where is Your God?" A gorgeous and powerful reinterpretation of Psalm 42:

<http://www.g-dcast.com/psalm42/>

- What is the narrator afraid of?
- Why does she feel like she doesn't connect with God?
- What do you think she means when she refers to her "lost soul"?
- What does reconnection with God look like, to her?

Here is the original Psalm 42 if you'd like to read it together with viewing and discussing this video:

### Psalm 42

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

<sup>2</sup> My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

<sup>3</sup> My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

<sup>4</sup> These things I remember, as I pour out my soul; how I went with the masses, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

<sup>5</sup> Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

<sup>6</sup> Hope in God; for I shall again praise God, my help and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

<sup>7</sup> Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.

<sup>8</sup> By day God commands God's steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

<sup>9</sup> I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?"

<sup>10</sup> As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

<sup>11</sup> Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

<sup>12</sup> Hope in God; for I shall again praise God, my help and my God.

## תהילים מב

למנצח משכיל לבני־קרח:  
כִּאֵל תַּעֲרַג עַל־אֲפִיקֵי־מַיִם כֵּן נַפְשִׁי תַעֲרַג אֵלֶיךָ אֱלֹהִים:  
צְמָאָה נַפְשִׁי | לֹא־לֵאלֹהִים לֹאֵל חִי מִתִּי אָבוֹא וְאַרְאֶה פָּנַי אֱלֹהִים:  
הִי־תֵהֱלִי דַמְעֹתַי לֶחֶם יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה בְּאֶמְרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֵיךְ אֵלֶיךָ:  
אֵלֶּה אֲזַכְּרֶה | וְאֲשַׁפְּכֶה עָלַי | נַפְשִׁי כִּי אֶעֱבֹר | בְּסֶף אֲדָדָם עַד־בֵּית אֱלֹהִים בְּקוֹל־רִנָּה וְתוֹדָה הַמּוֹן חוֹגֵג:  
מֵה־תִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶהֱי | נַפְשִׁי וְתִהְיֶה עָלַי הוֹחִילִי לֹא־לֵאלֹהִים כִּי־עוֹד אֲדֹנּוּ יִשְׁעוֹת פְּנֵי:  
אֱלֹהִי עָלַי נַפְשִׁי תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה עַל־כֵּן אֲזַכְּרֶךָ מֵאָרֶץ יִרְדֵּן וְחַרְמוֹנִים מֵהַר מִצְעָר:  
תְּהוֹם־אֶל־תְּהוֹם קוֹרָא לְקוֹל צִנּוּרֶיךָ כָּל־מִשְׁבְּרֶיךָ וְגִלְיֶיךָ עָלַי עֲבֹר:  
יוֹמָם | יָצָה יְהוָה | חֲסִדוֹ וּבִלְיִלָה שִׁירָה [שִׁירָה] עִמִּי תִפְלֶה לֹאֵל חַיִּי:  
אוֹמְרָה | לֹאֵל סֹלְעֵי לְמָה שְׂכַחְתִּנִּי לְמָה־קִּדַּר אֶלְךָ בְּלַחֲץ אוֹיְבִי:  
בְּרִצַּח | בְּעֲצֻמוֹתַי חֲרַפּוֹנֵי צוּרֶיךָ בְּאֶמְרָם אֱלֹהִים אֵיךְ אֵלֶיךָ:  
מֵה־תִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶהֱי | נַפְשִׁי וּמֵה־תִּהְיֶה עָלַי הוֹחִילִי לֹא־לֵאלֹהִים כִּי־עוֹד אֲדֹנּוּ יִשְׁעוֹת פְּנֵי וְאֵלֶיךָ:



Some thoughts on the act of writing the Torah down from  
Professor David Henkin:

<http://www.g-dcast.com/mishpatim-2010/>

- What does “we will do and we will listen?” mean?
- Why do you think that a divine vision appears in this section?
- What’s the relationship between divine revelation and written legal record?
- What’s the relationship between spiritual experience and spiritual practice?

## Some Additional Sources From G-dcast

Here are some additional videos on the theme of Shavuot and God that may be of interest in your discussion. For more videos, please go to [www.g-dcast.com](http://www.g-dcast.com).

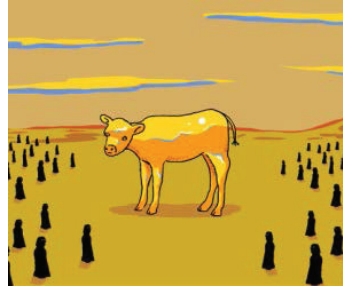
Some thoughts on consciousness and Creation from Rabbi Lawrence Kushner:

[www.g-dcast.com/bereshit/](http://www.g-dcast.com/bereshit/)



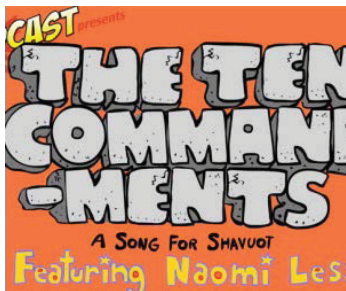
A psychological look at the golden calf story by Sarah Gershman:

[www.g-dcast.com/ki-tisa](http://www.g-dcast.com/ki-tisa)



A song to learn the Ten Commandments from Naomi Less:

[www.g-dcast.com/shavuot/](http://www.g-dcast.com/shavuot/)



The Talmudic legend of Moses in Heaven, seeing how the Torah gets used by later generations:

[www.g-dcast.com/crowns](http://www.g-dcast.com/crowns)



Leah Jones illuminates a story about Biblical leadership:

[www.g-dcast.com/yitro/](http://www.g-dcast.com/yitro/)



# AIR-IT: A GUIDE TO FACILITATING CONVERSATION

## A: ASK BIG QUESTIONS.

BIG QUESTION	HARD QUESTION
<b>Anyone can answer it.</b> Example: "For whom are we responsible?"	<b>Experts will answer it best.</b> Example: "What's the best economic policy for the United States?"
<b>Focuses on wisdom and experience.</b> Example: "What's the best advice you've ever received?"	<b>Focuses on intelligence and skill.</b> Example: "Are human beings naturally good or evil?"
<b>Uses plain language.</b>	<b>Uses technical language.</b>
<b>Directed at a subject (me, you, us).</b> Example: "What could we sacrifice to change the world?"	<b>Directed at an object (it).</b> Example: "Is it better to cut spending or raise taxes to balance the federal budget?"
<b>Opens up space and invites people in as participants.</b>	<b>Closes space and leads people to feel like spectators.</b>
<b>Leads to sharing personal stories.</b>	<b>Leads to debates about truth claims.</b>
<b>Emphasizes a both/and approach.</b>	<b>Emphasizes an either/or approach.</b>

## I: INVITE PERSONAL STORIES.

Big questions lead to sharing personal stories. The facilitator acts to support this by:

- Creating the space (physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual) of trust in which these stories can be shared and honored.
- Weaving: Summarize, reflect back, and keep the stories and observations tethered to the big question. This helps the group to maintain integrity and not feel that it is fragmenting or fraying.

## R: REALLY LISTEN.

Ask Big Questions conversations are marked by real listening. The facilitator's reflecting back and weaving is crucial to this.

Participants should be able to answer questions like: "What did so-and-so say? What do you think they meant when they said it?

What did it evoke in you?"



## **IT: USE INTERPRETIVE THINGS.**

Ask Big Questions conversations often use a text, poem, artwork, song, natural object or other “interpretive thing” to help center the conversation and create a common point of access for all participants.

## **QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN PREPARING FOR A DISCUSSION**

### **Where?**

- Does the place where you’re having the conversation create a space in which people can feel safe?
- Is it a closed space? Does it have a door you can close to ensure privacy and confidentiality when needed?
- What can you do to make the space visually appealing or lovely? Does it have windows to let in light? Do you want to play some music?
- Can everyone sit comfortably in a circle?

### **When?**

- Are you scheduling the conversation at a time when everyone can be physically awake and present?
- Will people be hungry? Will you provide food or drink?
- Will they be tired or sleepy after a meal?
- How long will the conversation be?
- How will you break up the time if necessary?

### **Who and How?**

- How many people will participate? Will there be enough to sustain diverse conversation? Will there be too many to keep the conversation centered?
- How will you get the word out and then remind people?
- Do you need to make any special arrangements for people with special needs (i.e. physical disabilities)?
- Greetings – Who will welcome people to the conversation and how will they do it?
- How will you have everyone introduce themselves? (Big Questions are great for introductions!)
- How will you close the conversation?
- How will you follow up with people?
- How will you capture their contact information?

### **What About You?**

- What will you do to get yourself ready?

Thank you for being part of this conversation. Please share this conversation guide with others in your community. And join our conversation online at [AskBigQuestions.org](http://AskBigQuestions.org).



Feeling awkward about your Jewish knowledge? We encourage you to check out our partner, G-dcast, a new media nonprofit organization that creates videos, apps, and interactive experiences for everyone. Check out their apps and watch their incredible, smart animated shorts at [www.g-dcast.com](http://www.g-dcast.com).



Ask Big Questions is an initiative of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life in partnership with the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust. Visit [AskBigQuestions.org](http://AskBigQuestions.org) to answer questions, learn from others, and join the movement.

# SHAVUOT: WHAT DO (AND DON'T) YOU THINK ABOUT GOD?

CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR PARTICIPANTS

ASK **BIG**  
QUESTIONS

**Hillel**  
International

## WELCOME

Before we begin, we need to agree on a few things:

- In order for our conversation to be as rich as it can be, we need everyone to feel safe to really share and really listen.
- Therefore, we agree not to share others' comments outside of this space.
- Our aim is to create a space where we can understand others and understand ourselves, not to give advice or to argue ideas of objective truth. With that in mind, in this conversation we will agree to speak in the first-person, about our own truth.
- We will assume good faith in one another.
- We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.
- We won't rush to fill the silence.

Can we all agree to these things? If you feel, for whatever reason, that you cannot agree to these things, then please take this opportunity to exit. By staying in the circle, we all signify our intention to abide by these commitments.

## ASK & SHARE

Let's say that you're required to choose between three formulations: 1) God! 2) God? 3) God. What do you choose? Why? Please share your name, where you call home, and your answer to this question. You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

## LEARN

Shavuot is the holiday celebrating the giving of the Torah. It takes place exactly seven weeks after Passover—after the exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, the Israelites traveled over a period of weeks to the base of Mount Sinai. It was there that the Ten Commandments were revealed to the people Israel with great drama. As the Torah tells it: "Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for God had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder. God came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain." (Exodus 19:18-20). According to the Book of Exodus, this was all a bit too much for the Israelites, who then asked Moses to go up the mountain and receive the rest of the Torah on his own.

Different people encounter this story of divine revelation in different ways. For some, it's a record of historical truth. For others, it's way to describe, symbolically, something difficult to articulate about spiritual experience. For some, it's a myth of possibly literary interest, but not much more than that.

For everyone, however, the story of Shavuot invites us to consider how we think (and don't think) about who or what God is, and what that means for us personally, for the Jewish people, and for the world as a whole.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg wrote about her personal journey from atheism to observant Judaism in her memoir, *Surprised By God: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Religion*. In this excerpt, she begins to question the ideas she'd held for many years about God. Please read this aloud as a group.

About six months after my mother died, strange things began to happen. I would walk around Providence at night and I would talk to the moon. It wasn't really an out-loud talking, or even in words, but rather more like a sort of concentrated focus, a communion with this startling orb that seemed to be watching over me in a way that nobody else really was. I began to connect to something long buried that only had permission to stir as I traversed the winding streets, more than a little lost.

I would listen to Tchaikovsky and weep at the moon. Not just the moon, though. I was equally moved by the shadows created by porchlights and crumbling paint that were cast across the lawn, or the weeds sprouting tenderly between sidewalk cracks. I'd walk home from class and suddenly everything seemed to take on a softness, an illumination of some sort. Colors seemed deeper, corners sharper. I would be walking down the street, and, abruptly, the only thing that seemed to exist in the world was the stop sign at the corner. My mind would go still. It'd be absent of the clacking sound to which I was accustomed, with its endless running commentary about who I had seen and who I would see and what I had eaten that day and what I had to do and what had just happened in class and.... Suddenly the only thing in the world was this stop sign. And, somehow, that was enough.

I didn't know what to call these experiences. I didn't think to label them at all, really. They just sort of happened, captivated me for a time and then I moved on.

For, when I wandered around Providence and slipped into the place where the air vibrated, where rocks and leaves seemed to pulse with opalescent light, I didn't wonder why. I didn't really think at all. The experiences certainly didn't disturb me; they were gentle, rolling, sweet. Safe. What began to bother me, as time went on, was what to make of them.

One afternoon not long after these moonlit walks had begun, I had lunch with a friend at a café near campus. I don't remember what she asked me, but my response caused her to look up at me and say, "You don't consider yourself spiritual? I think of you as pretty much the most spiritual person I've ever met."

She did and still does identify as a secular humanist, with no interest in religion of any sort. She did, and does, count on my short list of people whose observations are almost never off-target.

The comment stayed with me, confounded me. What could she be talking about? What did she see in me to which this word could apply? I was confused and flattered at the same time, and then I wasn't sure why I felt flattered. Was it a good thing to be "spiritual"? Wasn't it just silliness?

I had, at this point, spent several years studying religion from the perspective of an academic trying to understand what people thought they were experiencing when they talked about God—even if, in reality, it was just a neurological reaction or something similar. And yet... I knew that I couldn't entertain the possibility that my midnight excursions might be connected to the word "spiritual" without extending the word to what I regarded as its logical extreme. And opening even the question of the concept of God made me a little bit nervous, a little bit jittery, and rather nauseous.

Like a lot of people, the only images I had of God, or even of “spirituality”, was this mythical, anthropomorphized God, some guy in the sky who sees you when you’re sleeping and knows when you’re awake. The Torah talks about a God who took the Jews out of Egypt with a strong hand and a mighty arm and who, when He (always He) gets angry, has nostrils that flare. The artists of the Renaissance added a few Zeus-inspired touches: big beard, thunderbolt, menacing glare. As a child, the only archetypes that I encountered in my upbringing and the wider culture were of God as fascist dictator or, maybe, God as the Big Buddy who makes everything OK. It was this God—the one who was going to somehow swoop down from the sky and save my mother from cancer—that I had so vociferously rejected the year before, and years before that. From my twenty-one year-old perspective, it seemed ludicrous that I would throw away years of rational inquiry and historical-critical analysis, that I would give up my intellect and my power and go mooning after these problematic images in the naïve belief that it would somehow help my life to do so.

Of course, I wasn’t experiencing an angry, or even necessarily a personal, deity. And that was just the thing. There was a disparity between the language I felt pulled to use to describe these experiences and my belief in what that language signified. The experiences weren’t wrong. The other possibility, then, was that these words—“spirituality”, or “God”, even—might refer to something much more powerful and primal, something much more fundamental than I had ever considered before.

I had always believed that religious people were deluded, mistakenly transferring their need for a parent figure or certainty in the world onto mythology. What could it mean if the devout had all long been citizens of the remarkable, translucent world that I was just discovering?

And, sure enough, I would eventually discover that a great many people, from the authors of the Book of Deuteronomy onward, understood what I, at this time, did not: that all the business of God’s flaring nostrils and mood swings was actually just metaphor, ways of describing the intangible force I began meeting more and more often.

As I hesitantly experimented with using the word “spirituality” to describe these strange luminous rushes—the sense of being outside time, the sense of stepping into eternity, the sense that my self-as-I-understood-it seemed to melt away into the moment—the rushes got bigger. And later as I began first, tentatively, and then, more assertively, to use the word “God” to describe the experiences, they got bigger and bigger still.

There was no need for a dramatic leap of faith, for a fuzzy, unfounded trek into darkened woods. My own, lived experience was the guide, here, and all I needed was a willingness to meet it, to allow myself to ask certain kinds of questions and be willing to hear the answers that might follow, no matter how disconcerting those answers might be. This, then, was the real test of faith—not whether I willing to change my beliefs, but, rather, whether I was willing to give language to that which I had already begun to experience as truth.

But that was all later. The present moment in Providence was asking enough of me as it was.

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

### **Interpretive Questions**

- What's the tension that Ruttenberg feels between her experiences and the language that she uses to describe them?
- How had she thought of God up until this point? What, if anything, had changed for her?
- What do you think Ruttenberg means when she says, "as I began first, tentatively, and then, more assertively, to use the word "God" to describe the experiences, they got bigger and bigger still"? How do you personally make sense of this comment?

### **Reflective Questions**

- Have you ever had experiences of the sort that Ruttenberg describes? Have you had other kinds of experiences that you would describe as "spiritual" or related to divinity in some way?
- How do you understand the word "spirituality"? Can one be spiritual without believing in God or a divine power of some sort?
- How do you think of God (whether or not you personally believe in God)? Is it similar to, or different from, the way Ruttenberg describes God?
- What does it mean to "believe" in God? What do (and don't) you believe about God?

Take some time to think about these questions. When we're all ready, each of us will turn to our neighbor and share our thoughts. Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

## DO

Rabbi Harold Schulweis once wrote, "Skepticism was created to keep believers modest." However you personally engage with the idea of God, the dialogue between those who think in very different ways about one of the biggest questions in our culture is absolutely essential. We're grateful that you took the time today to think through some powerful issues around spirituality and divinity, and hope that it has been impactful to you as well.

As we conclude, here are some final questions to consider. Please take a moment to think about your response, and then share when you are ready:

- Did today's conversation bring you some insight about your own approach to spirituality and/or God?
- Did it help you understand others' ways of thinking in some way?
- What is one thing you want to do differently in the next 24 hours based on this conversation?

Feel free to use the space below to write some notes to yourself.



# APPENDIX: SOURCES FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Shavuot is traditionally celebrated with a tikkun leyl Shavuot, an all-night study session that culminates with the reading the story of the giving of the Torah at sunrise. We stay up all night, in other words, preparing ourselves to receive—literally or figuratively—transcendent wisdom. Another major custom of Shavuot involves eating dairy products, perhaps because the Torah is sometimes compared to nourishing mother’s milk.

Here are some additional sources for study, which can be used as part of your Big Question conversation, as a follow-up event, or in any other way that feels useful. Feel free to use some or all of the sources together—and definitely feel welcome to use this discussion guide and source sheet as part of a blintz and cheesecake-filled tikkun leyl Shavuot if you would like!

This text describes the scene immediately preceding and following the giving of the Ten Commandments.

And it came to pass on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a horn exceeding loud; and all the people that were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount. Now mount Sinai was altogether on smoke, because God descended upon it in fire; and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.... And all the people perceived the thunders, and the lightnings, and the voice of the horn, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled, and stood afar off. (Exodus 19:16-19, 20:15)

## שמות יט-כ

טז וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְהִיט הַבְּקָרָה, וַיְהִי קוֹלֵת וּבְרָקִים וְעָנָן כָּבֵד עַל-הַהָר, וְקוֹל שֹׁפָר, חֲזָק מְאֹד; וַיִּחַרְדוּ כָּל-הָעָם, אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה. יז וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הָעָם לְקִרְאֵת הָאֱלֹהִים, מִן-הַמַּחֲנֶה; וַיַּתְּצֵבוּ, בְּתַחְתִּית הַהָר. יח וְהָר סִינַי, עָשָׂן כְּלוֹ, מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו יְהוָה, בְּאֵשׁ; וַיַּעַל עֲשָׂנוּ כְּעָשָׂן הַכֹּבֵשֶׁת, וַיִּחַרְדוּ כָּל-הָהָר מְאֹד.

יד וְכָל-הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת-הַקּוֹלֵת וְאֶת-הַלְפִּידִם, וְאֵת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר, וְאֶת-הָהָר, עָשָׂן; וַיֵּרָא הָעָם וַיִּגְעוּ, וַיַּעֲמְדוּ מֵרָחֵק

- What kind of language is used to describe divine revelation, here? What theological or literary ideas does this language convey?
- How did the Israelites feel in this scene? Why?
- Does this picture of the giving of the Torah surprise you?
- What does this text tell you about how it might be for any of us to receive transcendent wisdom in our lives?

This text is a midrash, a fanciful reading by some 10th century rabbis about what might have happened during the giving of the Torah.

Come and see how the voice went forth to all of Israel, to each and every one in keeping with his particular capacity--to the elderly in keeping with their capacity, to young men in keeping with their capacity, to the little ones in keeping with their capacity, and to the women in keeping with their capacity. As it is said, "Moshe spoke and God answered him with a voice"--a voice that he would have been able to withstand. R. Yose bar Hanina said: If you are astounded at such an assertion, then draw the relevant inference from the manna, which came down for Israel varying in taste, in keeping with each Israelite's particular need--to young men it tasted like bread, to the elderly it tasted like wafers made with honey, to sucklings it tasted like milk from their mother's breast, to the sick it tasted like fine flour mingled with honey, while for the heathen it tasted as bitter as linseed. Now, if the manna, which was all of the same kind, changed into so many kinds to provide for the particular need of each individual, was it not possible for the voice, in which there is such divine strength, to vary according to the capacity of each individual, so that no harm should befall him? Hence Job said, "God thunders marvelously with His voice" (Job 37:5). (Exodus Rabba 5:9)

## שמות רבה ה:ט

בוא וראה היאך הקול יוצא, אצל כל ישראל כל אחד ואחד לפי כחו, הזקנים לפי כחן, הבחורים לפי כחן, והקטנים לפי כחן, והיונקים לפי כחן, והנשים לפי כחן, ואף משה לפי כחו, שנאמר (שמות יט, יט): משה ידבר והאלהים יענו בקול, בקול שהיה יכול לסובלו. וכן הוא אומר (תהלים כט, ד): קול ה' בכח, בכחו לא נאמר אלא בכח, בכחו של כל אחד ואחד, ואף נשים מעברות לפי כחן, הוי אומר כל אחד ואחד לפי כחו. אמר רבי יוסי בר חנינא אם תמה אתה על הדבר הזה למד מן המן שלא היה יורד לישראל אלא לפי כח של כל אחד ואחד מישראל, הבחורים היו אוכלין אותו כלם, שנאמר (שמות טז, ד): הנני ממטיר לכם לחם מן השמים וגו'. והזקנים, כצפיחת בדבש, שנאמר (שמות טז, לא): וטעמו כצפיחת בדבש. ויונקים, כחלב משדי אמו, שנאמר (במדבר יא, ח): והיה טעמו כטעם וגו'. והחולים כסלת מערב בדבש, שנאמר (יחזקאל טז, ט): ולחמי אשר נתתי לך סלת ושמן ודבש האכלתי. והעובדי כוכבים טעמו אותו מר וגד, שנאמר (במדבר יא, ז): והמן כזרע גד הוא. אמר רבי יוסי בר רבי חנינא ומה המן שהיה מין אחד נהפך לכמה מיניו בשביל צרף כל אחד ואחד, הקול שהיה כח בו על אחת כמה וכמה שהיה משתנה לכל אחד ואחד שלא ינזקו. ומנין שהקול נחלק לקולות הרבה שלא ינזקו, שנאמר (שמות כ, טו): וכל העם ראים את הקולת, הוי (איוב לז, ה): רעם אל בקולו נפלאות.

- How does this text describe the receiving of the Torah? What's the central metaphor, here?
- How is this way of thinking about receiving Torah different from or similar to the first text?
- Does this resonate with the way you think about transcendent wisdom? About the divine?

This text is also a midrash, from the same source as the one above.

At Sinai, when the Holy One gave the Torah to Israel, God manifested marvels upon marvels for Israel with God's voice. How so? As the Holy One spoke, the voice reverberated throughout the world. At first Israel heard the voice coming to them from the south, so they ran to the south to meet the voice there. It shifted to the north, so they ran to the north. Then it shifted to the east, so they ran to the east; but from the east it shifted to the west, so they ran to the west. Next it shifted to heaven. But when they raised their eyes toward heaven, it seemed to rise out of the earth. Hence Israel asked one another, "But wisdom, where shall it be found?" (Job 28:12) (Exodous Rabbah 5:9)

קִשְׁנָתָן הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת הַתּוֹרָה בְּסִינֵי הָרָאֵה בְּקוֹלוֹ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל פְּלִאֵי פְּלִאִים, כִּי צִד הֵיָה הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְדַבֵּר וְהַקּוֹל יוֹצֵא וּמִחֲזִיר  
בְּכָל הָעוֹלָם, יִשְׂרָאֵל שׁוֹמְעִין אֶת הַקּוֹל בָּא עֲלֵיהֶם מִן הַדְרֹם וְהָיוּ רָצִים לְדְרוֹם לְקַבֵּל אֶת הַקּוֹל, וּמִדְרוֹם נִהְפָּךְ לָהֶם לְצַפּוֹן וְהָיוּ רָצִים לְצַפּוֹן,  
וּמִצַּפּוֹן נִהְפָּךְ לְמִזְרָח וְהָיוּ רָצִים לְמִזְרָח, וּמִמִּזְרָח נִהְפָּךְ לָהֶם לְמַעֲרָב וְהָיוּ רָצִים לְמַעֲרָב, וּמִן הַמַּעֲרָב נִהְפָּךְ לָהֶם מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָיוּ תוֹלִין  
עֵינֵיהֶן וְהָיָה נִהְפָּךְ בְּאֶרֶץ, וְהָיוּ מְבִיטִין לְאֶרֶץ, שְׁנֹאֲמֵר (דְּבָרִים ד', לו'): מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם הִשְׁמִיעַךְ אֶת קוֹלוֹ לְיִסְרָאֵל. וְהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אוֹמְרִים זֶה לָזֶה  
(אִיּוֹב כח', יב): וְהִחֲכְמָה מֵאֵין תִּמְצָא.

- How is revelation depicted in this text?
- How is this image of revelation similar to or different from the other texts?
- What do you think this midrash is trying to say about what it means to receive transcendent wisdom?

These are the Ten Commandments, often described as the cornerstone of the giving of the Torah.

1. I am God your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You should have no other gods before me.
2. Do not make yourself a graven image, or any type of likeness, of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; do not bow down to them, or serve them; for I God your God am a jealous God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of those that hate me; and showing mercy unto the thousandth generation of those that love me and keep my commandments.
3. Do not take the name of the God your God in vain; for God will not hold guiltless the one that takes God's name in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you will labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath for God your God, in it you should not do any manner of work—neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male and female workers, nor your cattle, nor the stranger that is within your gates; for in six days God made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; wherefore God blessed the Sabbath day, and made it holy.
5. Honor your father and thy mother, that your days may be long in the land which God your God gives you.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not bring false testimony against your neighbor.
10. Do not desire to possess your neighbor's house; do not desire your neighbor's wife, nor his male or female workers, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor any thing that is your neighbor's. (Exodus 20:2-14)

## שמות כ

אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים:  
לֹא יִהְיֶה-לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל-פָּנָי:  
לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה-לְךָ פֶסֶל | וְכָל-תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשָׁמַיִם | מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת | וְאֲשֶׁר בַּיָּם | מִתַּחַת לְאָרֶץ  
לֹא-תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַדָּשׁ וְעוֹן אָבֹת עָלֶיךָ עַל-שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל-רַבְעִים לְשָׁנָיִם:  
וְעָשָׂה חֶסֶד לְאֵלֵפוּיִם לְאֹהֲבָיו וְלִשְׂמֵרָי מִצֹּתֵי: (ו)  
לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת-שֵׁם-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹא כִּי לֹא יִנְקָה יְהוָה אֶת-אִשְׁרֵי-שָׂא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ לְשׁוֹא: (פ)  
זָכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ  
שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלַאכְתְּךָ  
וְיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת | לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כָל-מְלָאכָה אַתָּה | וּבִנְךָ-וּבִתֶּךָ עַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתֶּךָ וּבְהֵמְתֶךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ  
כִּי שִׁשְׁתַּיִּמִּים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֶת-הַיָּם וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-בָּם וַיִּנַּח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל-כֵּן בֵּרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת  
וַיְקַדְּשֶׁהוּ: (ס)  
כָּבֹד אֶת-אָבִיךָ וְאֶת-אִמְךָ לְמַעַן יֵאָרְכוּן יְמֶיךָ עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ: (ס)  
לֹא תִרְצַח: (ס) לֹא תִנְאֹף: (ס) לֹא תִגְנוֹב: (ס) לֹא-תַעֲנֶה בְרַעַךְ עַד שִׁקְרָ: (ס)  
לֹא תַחְמוֹד בֵּית רַעַךְ לֹא-תַחְמוֹד אִשְׁתִּי רַעַךְ וְעַבְדוֹ וְאִמְתּוֹ וְשׁוֹרוֹ וְחֲמֹרוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרַעַךְ: (פ)

- What sorts of patterns, if any, do you see in this list?
- What of these commandments feel intuitive to you? Which of them feel harder to understand?
- Of the ones that challenge you, why do you think they're on this list?
- Some commentaries suggest that this list is split into two—the first five commandments deal with the relationship between people and the divine, and the second five deal with relationships among people. With this reading, how do you make sense of the fifth commandment, to honor your parents? Does this two-list idea appeal to you? Why or why not?
- If you were going to write these Ten Commandments in your own language, what would you say?
- What would be on your own list of ten commandments, if you were to write one?

## New Media Sources for Discussion

There are a wealth of videos on G-dcast's website that can enrich our Jewish learning and thinking about Torah, God, and revelation. Here are a few great ones to get you started:



"Where is Your God?" A gorgeous and powerful reinterpretation of Psalm 42:

<http://www.g-dcast.com/psalm42/>

- What is the narrator afraid of?
- Why does she feel like she doesn't connect with God?
- What do you think she means when she refers to her "lost soul"?
- What does reconnection with God look like, to her?

Here is the original Psalm 42 if you'd like to read it together with viewing and discussing this video:

### Psalm 42

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

<sup>2</sup> My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

<sup>3</sup> My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

<sup>4</sup> These things I remember, as I pour out my soul; how I went with the masses, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

<sup>5</sup> Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

<sup>6</sup> Hope in God; for I shall again praise God, my help and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

<sup>7</sup> Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.

<sup>8</sup> By day God commands God's steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

<sup>9</sup> I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?"

<sup>10</sup> As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

<sup>11</sup> Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

<sup>12</sup> Hope in God; for I shall again praise God, my help and my God.

## תהילים מב

לְמַנְצַח מִשְׁכִּיל לְבַנֵּי־קִרְחַי:  
כִּאֲלֵי תַעֲרַג עַל־אֲפִיקֵי־מַיִם כֵּן נַפְשִׁי תַעֲרַג אֵלֶיךָ אֱלֹהִים:  
צְמָאָה נַפְשִׁי | לַאלֹהִים לֹאֵל חִי מִתִּי אָבוֹא וְאַרְאֶה פָּנֵי אֱלֹהִים:  
הִי־תֵהֱלִי דַמְעֹתַי לֶחֶם יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה בְּאֶמְרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֵיךְ אֱלֹהִים:  
אֵלֶּה אֲזַכְּרֶה | וְאֲשַׁפְּכֶה עָלַי | נַפְשִׁי כִּי אֶעֱבֹר | בְּסֶף אֲדָדָם עַד־בַּיִת אֱלֹהִים בְּקוֹל־רִנָּה וְתוֹדָה הַמּוֹן חוֹגֵג:  
מֵה־תִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶהֱי | נַפְשִׁי וְתִהְיֶה עָלַי הוֹחִילִי לַאלֹהִים כִּי־עוֹד אֲוֹדֶנּוּ יִשׁוּעוֹת פָּנָיו:  
אֱלֹהִי עָלַי נַפְשִׁי תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה עַל־כֵּן אֲזַכְּרֶךָ מֵאָרֶץ יִרְדָּן וְחַרְמוֹנִים מֵהַר מִצְעָר:  
תְּהוֹם־אֶל־תְּהוֹם קוֹרָא לְקוֹל צִנּוּרֶיךָ כָּל־מִשְׁבְּרֶיךָ וְגִלְיָךְ עָלַי עֲבָרוּ:  
יוֹמָם | יָצָה יְהוָה | חֶסֶדוֹ וּבִלְיִלָה שִׁירָה [שִׁירָה] עִמִּי תִפְלֶה לֹאֵל חַיִּי:  
אוֹמְרָה | לֹאֵל סֹלְעֵי לְמָה שְׂכַחְתָּנִי לְמָה־קִּדַּר אֶלְךָ בְּלַחֲץ אוֹיְבֵי:  
בְּרָצַח | בְּעֲצֻמוֹתַי חֲרַפּוֹנֵי צוּרֶיךָ בְּאֶמְרָם אֱלֹהִים אֵיךְ אֱלֹהִים:  
מֵה־תִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶהֱי | נַפְשִׁי וּמֵה־תִּהְיֶה עָלַי הוֹחִילִי לַאלֹהִים כִּי־עוֹד אֲוֹדֶנּוּ יִשׁוּעוֹת פָּנֵי וְאֵלֶיךָ:



Some thoughts on the act of writing the Torah down from  
Professor David Henkin:

<http://www.g-dcast.com/mishpatim-2010/>

- What does “we will do and we will listen?” mean?
- Why do you think that a divine vision appears in this section?
- What’s the relationship between divine revelation and written legal record?
- What’s the relationship between spiritual experience and spiritual practice?

## Some Additional Sources From G-dcast

Here are some additional videos on the theme of Shavuot and God that may be of interest in your discussion. For more videos, please go to [www.g-dcast.com](http://www.g-dcast.com).

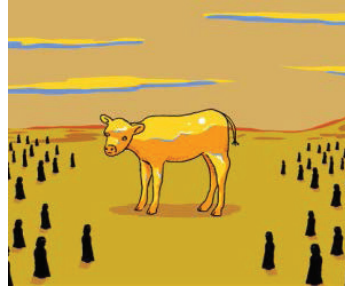
Some thoughts on consciousness and Creation from Rabbi Lawrence Kushner:

[www.g-dcast.com/bereshit/](http://www.g-dcast.com/bereshit/)



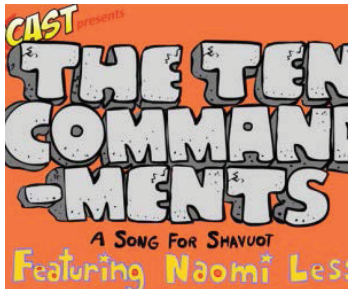
A psychological look at the golden calf story by Sarah Gershman:

[www.g-dcast.com/ki-tisa](http://www.g-dcast.com/ki-tisa)



A song to learn the Ten Commandments from Naomi Less:

[www.g-dcast.com/shavuot/](http://www.g-dcast.com/shavuot/)



The Talmudic legend of Moses in Heaven, seeing how the Torah gets used by later generations:

[www.g-dcast.com/crowns](http://www.g-dcast.com/crowns)



Leah Jones illuminates a story about Biblical leadership:

[www.g-dcast.com/yitro/](http://www.g-dcast.com/yitro/)

