YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**On Being Chosen:**

**A Philosophical Investigation into the Election of the Jewish People**

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**Shiur #28: God is a Person**

In the previous lesson, inspired by Rabbi Heschel, I offered a definition of what it means to be a person. A person is someone that satisfies *four* criteria: (1) the capacity for interpersonal relations, and the reflective possession, and retention over time, of (2) logos (i.e., beliefs about how the world is), (3) pathos (i.e., feelings of some sort), and (4) ethos (i.e., beliefs about how the world should be).

Saadya Gaon, Yehuda Ha-Levi, and Maimonides would emphatically deny that God is a person. They all insist that God must transcend every possible description. There’s something paradoxical about that conclusion; after all, isn’t describing God as *indescribable* already, somehow, describing Him? And yet, they each adopt this view.

Saadya argued that since God created all properties, He can’t have any properties of His own – at least not essentially. Not being characterized by properties renders Saadya’s God indescribable. Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi and Maimonides argued that in order to be the ultimate explanation of all complex phenomena, God must be so simple as to be totally indescribable.

Saadya’s argument, I suggested, is based upon a controversial account of the nature of properties. The contention of the Rihal and the Rambam, I argued, is based upon a controversial account of the nature of explanation.

In lesson 26, I argued that it was only because they were committed to God’s not being a person that our medieval thinkers embraced their revisionary accounts of the election – be they reductionist (Saadya and the Rambam) or expansionist (the Rihal). My own theory about God’s relationship to personhood is more complicated than I’m going to reveal at this juncture. But it isn’t too far from the truth for me to present myself, at this stage, as a *personalist* (i.e., as one committed to the notion that God is a person). Having hopefully undermined, in lesson 27, the key arguments offered in support of *apersonalism*, my aim, this week, is to provide various arguments in favor of *personalism*. This will, in turn, make room for less revisionary conceptions of the election.

**Omniscience**

The God of the Bible is omniscient.[[1]](#footnote-1) But, if God has no properties, then, clearly, He can’t have the property of knowing things. How then do the apersonslists make sense of God’s omniscience?

As noted in the previous lesson, the Rihal says that a stone knows nothing, but not because a stone is ignorant.[[2]](#footnote-2) A stone is simply too lowly either to know things *or* to be ignorant. Strictly speaking, the Rihal would have to say that God also knows nothing; not because He’s ignorant, nor because, like a stone, He’s too lowly to be either knowledgeable or ignorant, but because He’s too *lofty* to be described in either way. God’s omniscience, it seems, is something like His being *above* knowledge. But isn’t that just a roundabout way of admitting that the Rihal’s God doesn’t know anything?

Maimonides has another strategy. He maintains that the word “knowledgeable” *does* apply to God, but that it means something so very different, when applied to Him, that we’re very close to having no understanding of what we’re saying when we say that God is knowledgeable.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Personalists will have a much easier time making sense of the claim that God is omniscient. It’s no mystery as to how God can know things if He possesses *logos*. Strictly speaking, the God of Maimonides has no logos – or any other properties, for that matter – but Maimonides was willing to suggest that, of all of the personal qualities, the possession of *logos* is the most Godly. Indeed, when the Torah describes us as being created in the image of God, Maimonides insists that the only respect in which humanity “has been compared – though only apparently, not in truth,” to God, is in respect of possessing *logos*.[[4]](#footnote-4) But note that even this likeness, for Maimonides, is *apparent* rather than real; superficial rather than deep. We are *closer* to the truth, as far as Maimonides is concerned, when describing God in terms of logos, rather than ethos or pathos. But in the final analysis, no description really applies to God.

But it could actually be argued that pathos is no less crucial for knowledge than logos. Can you really be said to know everything if you’re incapable of *feeling*?

**Omniscience Continued: Knowledge and Feeling**

Imagine a brilliant neuroscientist, Mary, who has been brought up in a completely black and white environment. She has never once been exposed to color. Instead, she has been given a vast library of black and white books to read in her black and white prison. This all takes place in the distant future – so far in the future that researchers have somehow discovered every scientific truth there is to discover. So, let’s imagine that Mary comes to know, by reading her books, every true proposition that a complete neuroscience (and, indeed, even a complete physics) could furnish her about the human experience of the color blue.[[5]](#footnote-5) She knows exactly which wavelengths of light cause people to see blue, and how it stimulates the retina and optic nerve, the visual cortex, and more.

Frank Jackson devised this thought experiment to demonstrate that not all knowledge can be reduced to the results of the physical sciences. Mary knows everything there is to know about the *physics* of blue, as it pertains to the human experience of color, but there’s something that she *doesn’t* know. She doesn’t know what the color blue *looks like*.

What Mary learns upon breaking out of her prison, and seeing blue for the first time, isn’t simply that some new sentence is true. Admittedly, she *does* learn the truth of new sentences, such as the truth of the sentence, “Blue looks like *this.*” But the word “this” here is doing a lot of work. It gestures towards what it is that Mary has come to know, but it doesn’t really *describe* it. In other words: knowing what a color looks like is a candidate for a kind of knowledge that language can’t fully communicate. In fact, it seems to be the sort of knowledge you can only have if you know what it *feels* like, for a human being, to see something blue; to experience that sensation.[[6]](#footnote-6) And thus, it’s the sort of knowledge that requires *pathos* (as I have defined the term).

According to Maimonides, to say that God has *logos* is less vulgar than to say that He has *pathos*. In saying this, Maimonides was hoping to preserve something of the Bible’s claim that God is a knower. But pathos is relevant to knowledge too. Making God less personal renders His knowledge somehow less authoritative, or thorough, or profound, than human knowledge. Mary’s knowledge was certainly limited by her black and white prison. God’s knowledge would be even more limited by an inability to know what anything feels like for anyone.

There are other things that a being with no pathos would likely fail to know or to understand. My wife and I once visited the house of a man in Swaziland (as it was then called) who was dying of AIDS. The king was building palaces for his fifteen wives but was neglecting infrastructure – thus road connections were poor and it was impossible for sick people in the countryside to make their way to the hospital. The Global Fund donated medication to treat a great many HIV patients, but the king levied a tax on them. This man was going to die. His wife had died already. His children would be vulnerable orphans in a country where it was widely believed that HIV could be cured by raping a child. Leaving that house, the leader of the tour said that he wanted us to feel angry.

I think he was right. Possessing a propositional understanding of the ethical contours of this situation without *feeling* anger would indicate a failure to understand the situation as well as those who *did* feel angry.[[7]](#footnote-7) Sadness alone would be too close to resignation. A lack of emotion, at least for a being that is *capable* of emotion, would amount to cold indifference. *Only* anger did justice to this reality. The unchanging and conceptually simple God of Saadya, Maimonides, and the Rihal would be insensitive to that facet of reality uncovered by anger.[[8]](#footnote-8) This seems to make an impersonal God less knowledgeable and less understanding than a personal God.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Omniscience Continued: Cognition and Emotion**

Maimonides thought God incapable of experiencing emotion because, among other reasons, he regarded emotions as dependent upon the possession of a body.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is because we are trapped in our bodies, Maimonides would claim, that our emotions sometimes interfere with our intellects. But the more we learn about our cognitive architecture, the more it seems that emotions (although clearly capable of interfering with our reason at times) actually work together with our intellects, and even play a crucial role in helping us solve various cognitive puzzles effectively.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Some cognitive tasks might be impossible to perform, with any degree of efficiency, if the mind in question has nothing like emotion to help it along.[[12]](#footnote-12) There are even computer scientists who believe that artificial intelligence will one day have to simulate emotions, not merely to understand and better interact with human beings, but in order to better understand the world around it. If Maimonides had lived to see this research, it’s unclear whether he would have continued to insist that emotions are always bodily impurities that have nothing to do with the life of the mind.

If a wide range of emotions (from compassion to anger) can play an indispensable role in uncovering the truth of a situation, and if emotions play an essential role in performing certain cognitive tasks, then a God whose emotional range is limited stands to be *intellectually* compromised.

Moreover, an apersonal God couldn’t empathize with others, nor understand what it feels like to be in somebody else’s shoes. This would be a being with a stunted imagination and mind. A being with no *pathos* barely deserves to be called knowledgeable at all; and certainly, couldn’t be described as omniscient – unless you’re satisfied to say, with Maimonides, that God is knowledgeable, whilst insisting that “knowledge,” when applied to God, simply means something completely different from what it means when applied to humans. Does that strategy really preserve omniscience, if it’s totally removed from what we would normally mean by “all knowing”? If we want to say that God can know things but that His knowledge is in no way similar to ours, or that God can empathize but that He can do so without having feelings – even if empathy for humans requires the ability to have feelings – then the fear is that we would have so far stretched the meanings of “knowledge” and “empathy” that we actually wouldn’t know what we were saying when we say that God is knowledgeable and empathetic.

**Shifting the Burden of Proof**

I would argue that personalism should be our theological default. That is to say: we should assume that God is a person and only shift our position if philosophical or other considerations overwhelm us. The idea, in other words, is to place the burden of proof upon the apersonalist. In this section, I provide a few reasons for recalibrating the burden of proof in this way.

Rabbi Sacks describes an experience. “God,” he writes,

is the personal dimension of existence, the ‘Thou’ beneath the ‘It’, the ‘ought’ beyond the ‘is’, the Self that speaks to self in moments of total disclosure when, opening ourselves to the universe, we find God reaching out to us... At its height, faith is none other than the transfiguring knowledge that “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for You are with me.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Rabbi Sacks is describing a second-personal experience – experiencing God as a *you*, as a *person* rather than an object.

Apersonalists can respond by insisting that religious experiences of a *personal* God are simply deceptive. God manifests *as if* He has an emotional life, but there’s nothing behind those manifestations. Nevertheless, it’s a mark against Jewish apersonalism if it must label the very experiences that motivate many to adhere to Judaism in the first place as substantively deceptive. This should be particularly embarrassing to a philosopher like the Rihal, who seeks to place tremendous weight upon religious experience.

As the Rihal points out, God didn’t introduce Himself, at Sinai, as the creator of the universe, but as “The Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The Rihal infers from this that the Jewish relationship with God, as presented by the Bible, is more *experiential* than philosophical.[[15]](#footnote-15) But one could argue equally well, *against* the Rihal’s apersonalism, that the Jews, as depicted in the Bible, discover God through personal and communal *relationship*. In fact, the entire Hebrew Bible is, in large part, a document of the *covenantal* relationship between a particular nation and God. Can we really make sense of that theology if we strip God of His personhood?

Louis Newman argues that the Biblical notion of a *covenant* – quiet unlike a *contract* – only makes sense in the context of a prior *relationship*. Parties to a *contract* are not committed to anything that isn’t explicitly included in the *terms* of the contract. Covenantal relationships, by contrast, are more open-ended. The Jewish people commit to obey God’s voice even beyond any specific injunction written in the Pentateuch, thus making the relationship more than merely contractual. They have bound themselves to all sorts of unstated duties, duties that arise “not from the text of Torah, or even from the interpretations of that text, but from living in relationship with God.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

The Biblical presentation of the life of the prophets of Israel also shifts the burden of proof to the apersonalist. In the context of a careful analysis of multiple books of the Bible, Rabbi Heschel concludes that:

the fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos… The prophet hears God’s voice and feels His heart. He tries to impart the pathos of the message together with its logos.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Moreover, Rabbi Heschel discovers that God’s ethos is inseparable, in the Bible, from His pathos. That which is unjust is presented as equivalent to that which angers or even hurts God. That which is just is that in which God rejoices.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Once again, this won’t unduly trouble our apersonalists. Perhaps God’s causal imprint on the world merely manifests *as if* He stands in a covenantal relationship with us. Perhaps the prophets merely *impose* the language of pathos upon the logos of their prophecy, for poetic effect. But such a wholesale rereading of the central narratives of the Bible, squeezing anything truly personal out of the covenantal relationship, and all of the pathos out of the prophetic moment, is to disfigure the Biblical narrative. This isn’t merely reductivism about the election; it’s reductive of the entirety of the Bible’s implied theology.

Reflections on the religious life, and the narrative of the Bible, lead us to see that the cost of denying God’s personhood – for anyone committed to the significance of religious experience, and to the truth of the Bible – are extremely high. This means the philosophical considerations in favor of apersonalism need to be particularly compelling, much more compelling than they are.

**God, Love, and Time**

Can God be a person if God is outside of time? One of the reasons that philosophers like Saadya, Rihal, and Rambam think of God as timeless is that they think He is the first cause of every causal chain. As such, He causes things to happen, but nothing causes anything to happen for Him. They also think of *change* as a sign of imperfection. If a being changes in any way from one time to another, it indicates that the being didn’t have all it needed at the earlier time to be satisfied at the later time; hence its need to change. The idea that God cannot be changed by others is called Divine impassability. The idea that God cannot change at all is called Divine immutability. But can an immutable and impassable being engage in interpersonal relationships?

One of the prerequisites for relationship, as we discussed in the previous lesson, is the ability to share in moments of joint attention. Joint attention between two beings requires a causal interdependence between their mental states. If one of them is impassable, then there can’t *be* any interdependence between their mental states. How can God love us if He can’t share attention with us? Surely, one of the ingredients of love is the desire for personal closeness, and personal closeness is manifest only in moments of joint attention. Moreover, the notion of God having any desires – such as the desire for personal closeness – makes little sense if perfection requires a being who is always totally satisfied in and of Himself. Ryan Mullins writes:

[D]esire satisfaction quite clearly entails change from *having a desire* to *satisfying a desire*. In order to avoid this problem, a classical theist might try to say that God analogically has desires. However, the idea of timelessly and immutably having a desire that is also timelessly and immutably satisfied does not sound like an analogical use of desire. Instead, it sounds incoherent…[[19]](#footnote-19)

If full-blown personhood requires the capacity for interpersonal relationships, and if interpersonal relationships require the capacity for *change* and reciprocal causal interaction, then it seems that God can only be a full-blown person if God lives in *time*. That seems like a reason to reject the personalism for which I’ve been advocating; surely, God isn’t bound by the chains of time! Surely, God is timeless!

**God and Time**

But is it really so obvious that God exists outside of time? We’re told that a perfect being would have to be *immutable*. But there’s no good reason to think that that’s true. To illustrate the point, William Hasker asks us to imagine a perfect watch:

A short while ago, it registered the time as five minutes after six o’clock, but now it registers twelve minutes after six. Clearly, this is a change in the watch. (Compare this watch with an “immutable” watch that always registers 10:37, day in and day out). Is this a change for the better, suggesting a previous state of imperfection? Not at all... Is it then a change for the worse, a decline from perfection? … It is, in fact, an example of *a change that is consistent with and/or required by a constant state of excellence*.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Perfection *can* allow for change. In fact, some perfect things would *have* to change so as to retain their perfection over time. It follows that immutability *isn’t* a prerequisite for perfection at all, so long as the perfect being exists in time.

Perhaps you’ll say that, because God *created* time, He must be beyond it. But that’s to make various assumptions about what time is. If time is the measure of change in the *physical* universe, then it would seem to follow that the creator of the physical universe must somehow transcend time. Aristotle certainly seems to have thought that time can only pass in the presence of changing physical states. But in more recent times, Sydney Shoemaker has convinced many that we *can* make sense of time passing even through a completely frozen physical universe.[[21]](#footnote-21) If time can carry on ticking, even when there’s nothing happening in the physical universe, then there’s no reason to think that the creator of the physical universe was also the creator of time. Indeed, time might be uncreated, forever ticking, without beginning – even before God created the physical universe.

Perhaps you’ll think that if time is uncreated, and if God is *bound* by time, then the very existence of time becomes something of a threat to God’s sovereignty. But if God is, by nature, a temporal being – because persons are, and because God is a person – then it’s peculiar to say that God is a *prisoner* to time. If God is *good* by nature, then He can do no wrong. Does that make Him a *prisoner* to His goodness? No. It’s absurd to complain that God is a prisoner to His own nature. That God is a prisoner to His temporality is no more and no less worrying than the claim that God is a prisoner to His goodness, if both of these attributes are part of His nature.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Certainly, if we’re thinking of time as some sort of *container* that exists prior to God and forces itself upon God, then God’s sovereignty would be undermined. But for all we know, the passage of time is nothing more than the passage of God’s consciousness from moment to moment. Perhaps the very fabric of time is *grounded* in God – indeed, grounded in the fact that God is a *person* – such that the passage of time is just a consequence of God’s nature, and nothing more.

**Open Theism and Human Freedom**

The idea that God dwells in time is often called “open theism.” Hasker argues that the best reason to endorse open theism is to secure the possibility of human freedom. If God is somehow *outside* of time, and possesses the perfection of omniscience, then He must know all things from the vantage point of His eternal present. Our past, present, and future would all be *present* to Him. But if our future is, so to speak, *already* present to God, then the future must already exist.[[23]](#footnote-23) If the future is already written, and God already knows it, then it seems as if we don’t have the power to write our own future.

Maimonides tries to escape this problem with two claims: (1) God can know the future even though it doesn’t exist, and (2) God can know *infallibly* that something will happen without *necessitating* that it will happen.[[24]](#footnote-24) Granted, *human* knowledge requires existing facts to be known, and necessitates that what is known is true. But God’s knowledge is different.

Gersonides was unimpressed.[[25]](#footnote-25) If the word “knowledge” is so radically equivocal that it behaves completely differently in the case of the Divine, then we can have no sense of what we really *mean* when we say that God knows the future. This reconciliation between free will and timeless omniscience is at best a pyrrhic victory.

To reconcile God’s omniscience with the human possession of a robustly free will, without the word games that Maimonides is accused of playing, Hasker (much like Gersonides before him)[[26]](#footnote-26) endorses open theism. God *is* a temporal being. He decided to create a world and give people complete and utter freedom. This decision entails that major parts of the future were left over for *humans* to shape. Accordingly, an open theist can say the following: God knows everything there is to know, but regarding human *choices*, there is no future *for* Him to know. God has to wait upon the passage of time.

According to this open theistic response to the problem of free will, there’s a sense in which “God is a risk-taker” – that is to say, “in expressing his love toward us,” and granting us freedom, God “opens himself up to the real possibility of failure and disappointment.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

God is aware of all possible eventualities and their likelihoods. At any point, God can temporarily rescind a person’s free will, or otherwise interfere with the natural order. He can therefore guarantee that His promises to the prophets will be realized by hook or by crook. But to grant us freedom was nevertheless to volunteer to be ignorant about aspects of the future. Rabbi Sacks seems to agree. He writes:

[B]y creating humans God was putting the entire future of creation at risk… The real religious mystery, according to Judaism, is not our faith in God. It is God’s faith in us… God invests His hopes for the universe in this strange, refractory, cantankerous, ungrateful, and sometimes degenerate creature called Homo sapiens, part dust of the earth, part breath of God, whose behaviour disappoints and sometimes appalls Him. Yet He never gives up.[[28]](#footnote-28)

I am sympathetic to open theism. I think it wise to locate God in time. But, unlike most open theists, I don’t endorse this position as a solution to the problem of human freedom and Divine foreknowledge. In fact, even if God exists in time, I don’t see a reason to think that He doesn’t know the future. I don’t think the fact that our future choices are free *entails* that God can’t see them yet.

What makes an action free is that it isn’t caused by forces outside of the person who acts. Now, let’s imagine that the future, in some sense, already exists – over there, in the future. The fact that your future actions already exist, over there, in the future, doesn’t entail that anything happening over here, in the present, is *forcing* future-you to be acting the way that he/she is acting over there in the future. So long as nothing outside of future-you is causing future-you to be acting in the ways that future-you is acting, then future-you is *free*, even if God, in the present, can already see into that future, in which you’re acting freely.[[29]](#footnote-29)

And thus, in a nutshell, I don’t claim that God lives in time just to secure human freedom. I don’t think that human freedom requires an unwritten future (so long as that future is written by future-us, and no one else). For that reason, it would be less deceptive to call my position *Divine temporalism*, rather than *open theism*, because I’m not claiming that the future is *open.* Perhaps it is. Perhaps it isn’t. I don’t know.

My argument has nothing to do with freedom and foreknowledge. Rather, I’ve been arguing that God’s being a *person* should be our default position. This is the position that makes the most sense of religious experience and the story of the Bible. It’s also the best way of preserving God’s omniscience, cognitive excellence, and capacity for empathy. An Orthodox Jew should only deny that God is a person if we can find strong philosophical arguments to demonstrate that God really *can’t* be a person whilst being the creator of the universe and possessing the various perfections that the Torah attributes to God.

God can only be a person, in the fullest sense of the word, if God lives in time. Only then could God engage in joint attention with others. And thus, the only reason to deny Divine temporalism is if we can find strong arguments against it. I don’t know of any such arguments. So, we should continue to operate on the assumption that God exists in time, and that God is a person.

**Where should explanation stop?**

As we explored in the previous lesson, some Jewish philosophers thought God must be conceptually simple. This line of thought was motivated by the claim that God has to be the ultimate explanation of all phenomena in the universe. If God Himself is governed by the distinction between objects and properties, then one could start to look for an explanation as to why God has the properties that He does. But if God is really the end of all explanation, they thought, He must somehow transcend the distinction between objects and properties. This will short-circuit the attempt to ask why He has the properties that He has. He has no properties. He is simple. He is the end of explanation.

In response to this line of thought, I made two claims. One: it’s not at all clear that all things must admit of an explanation. Two: it’s even less clear that a conceptually simple being could function as an explanation for *anything*, since this would be a being over which thought would have no real purchase.

Many early-modern philosophers (such as Descartes, Hume, and Berkeley) noted that our philosophical investigations, if they’re going to begin anywhere, are bound to begin from reflection upon thought, experience, and thinking. As Descartes would put it, our experience of thinking is the one thing about which we can’t be mistaken. We can be mistaken about pretty much everything else, but we can’t be mistaken about the brute fact that we’re thinking. We couldn’t be mistaken about that, because to be mistaken already *requires* that we’re thinking!

Hume, and the empiricists, insist that all we can hope to do, in our thinking, is to organize our various experiences. Even the so-called *objective* natural sciences can only really help to impose order upon the *experiences* that we have, both in the laboratory and on the street, predicting what we’re most likely to experience next.

The fact that the notion of experience is so basic to all of our thinking seems to me to be related to what contemporary philosophers call the hard problem of consciousness.[[30]](#footnote-30) Advocates of that problem maintain that no scientific theory could ever completely explain the emergence of consciousness in purely physical terms. Consciousness is inherently first-personal. Physical theories, by contrast, trade in third-personal descriptions of physical matter. But no third-personal description of the world will capture everything that can be grasped from the first-personal perspective. In other words, we can describe and explain all of the functions of the brain and body, but no such description or explanation will ever preserve the “*what-it-is-like”-ness* of conscious experience. This is related to the claim that Mary can know all the physical truths about the experience of the color blue, without actually knowing what it is like to see the color blue.

These reflections, among others that I don’t have the space to develop here,[[31]](#footnote-31) lead me to believe that some sort of totally fundamental mind, or center of experience, is a reasonable place for explanation to stop. This strikes me as more reasonable than stopping our explanations with conceptual simplicity.

Atheist materialists hope to explain all conscious experiences, and the operations of all minds, purely in terms of impersonal matter. I would suggest, by contrast, that we’d be better off trying to explain the emergence of impersonal matter in terms of the operations of minds, and their experiences. I suggest that we’d be better off ending our explanation of why there’s something rather than nothing, with the posit of one mind that couldn’t *fail* to exist – a necessarily existing mind. This points us in the direction of a personalist theism. God is a mind, with the powers that minds characteristically have, like thinking and feeling; the sorts of powers that make for personhood.

Why do ethos, logos, pathos, perfection, the capacity for interpersonal relations, and necessary existence all come together in God? That’s a question that’s looking for a certain sort of explanation. But it’s not clear to me that I would owe you an answer. God isn’t composed of parts. That’s what we mean when we say that God is one. If He were composed of multiple parts, we could ask what *caused* those parts to stick together. But God’s being the first cause should rule out the need for some prior cause to have assembled Him like that. Accordingly, we say that God is simple. That is to say: He is mereologically simple (which is just a technical way of saying that He has no parts). But none of this rules out the possibility that God has many *attributes*.

To ask why God has the attributes that He does have, or how He comes to have them, is to try to push the horizon of explanation further than humans can go. God has the attributes that He has because they’re Godly. There’s nothing more we can say about the matter, other than to point out that if God didn’t have the attributes that He has, we wouldn’t be able to explain how there could be a universe, with people in it like us, to ask our questions about God’s attributes. After all, if there didn’t exist at least one necessary being, we couldn’t explain why there should be something rather than nothing. The fact that we relate to this being as a *mind* with personal qualities is to relate to Him as possessing only the most *fundamental* properties – i.e., mental properties – without which nothing could really be conceived.

It is more philosophically respectable, I claim, to think of God as a necessarily existing person, than to relate to Him as a being that defies *all* description. If God *is* a person, as I’m claiming Him to be, then we should reject all of the medieval accounts of the election that we’ve seen up until this point. Those accounts, as we saw in lesson 26, all presume Divine apersonalism.

In the next lesson, we’ll turn to a medieval account of the election that *doesn’t* rely upon any such assumption.

1. See Deuteronomy 29:29; Jeremiah 23:24; Psalms 139:12; Job 28:24, 37:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Kuzari* 2.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Guide for the Perplexed*, III.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., I.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Frank Jackson, “Epiphenomenal qualia,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1982): 127–136. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is the lesson that Eleonore Stump draws from the Mary thought experiment in her fabulous book, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Anastasia Scrutton makes a similar point in her excellent book, *Thinking Through Feeling: God, Emotion and Passibility* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Admittedly, Maimonides thought that anger was never appropriate even for human beings. But not only is that a controversial claim – a controversy made salient by this anecdote – but the example could be replaced with examples in which sadness, happiness, hope, or other emotions, play the role of getting to the heart of the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The difference between knowledge and understanding is a big topic, but I would suggest that knowledge that lacks understanding (to the extent that that is possible) is a lesser form of knowledge. The claim that God is omniscient entails that God doesn’t have lesser forms of knowledge, but the best forms. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Guide for the Perplexed*, I.52. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See for example Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1994); Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2003); Norbert Schwarz, “Feelings-as-Information Theory,” in Paul A. M. van Lange, Arie W. Kruglanski and Edward Tory Higgins (eds), *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology* (London: Sage Publications, 2012), pp. 289–308; and Bennett Helm, “Emotions as Evaluative Feelings,” *Emotion Review* 1 (2009): 248–55.Helm 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See for example Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perception Theory of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Others have argued that any hard-and-fast distinction between emotional and cognitive states, in light of what we now know about the cognitive psychology of emotion, is unsustainable, and trades upon conceptual confusion (see, for example, Joseph LeDoux and Richard Brown, “A Higher-Order Theory of Emotional Consciousness,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States* 114 (2017): E2016–E2025). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life: Finding Happiness in Unexpected Places* (London: Fount, 2000), p. 84, quoting Psalms 23:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Exodus 20:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See lesson 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Louis Newman, “Covenant and Contract: A Framework for the Analysis of Jewish Ethics,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 9 (1991): 89–112, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rabbi A. J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid*.*, p. 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ryan T. Mullins, *God and Emotion (Cambridge Elements in the Philosophy of Religion),* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 126-154, pp. 132-133. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Sydney Shoemaker, “Time without Change,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66/12 (1969): 363–381. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. These arguments are owed to Ryan Mullins, “Doing Hard Time: Is God the Prisoner of the Oldest Dimension?” *Journal of Analytic Theology*, 2 (2014): 160-185; and Ryan Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ryan Mullins explains that the first proponents of God’s timeless eternity were *presentists*. What *they* mean when they say that all times are *present* to God isn’t that all times *exist*, but that all times are somehow represented or known. Even so, to the extent that the future is *already* represented or known, the worry I develop remains, even if talk of *existence* is deceptive (see Ryan Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God*, chapter 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Guide for the Perplexed,* III.20. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Gersonides, *Wars of the Lord* 3.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. Note that Gersonides was committed to a God who was, despite existing in time, and despite not being able to know the future free actions of his creature, resolutely impassable, and in no way personal. He differs significantly in these respects from contemporary open theists. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Jonathan Sacks, *Judaism’s Life-Changing Ideas: A Weekly Reading of the Bible* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books and OU Press). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. In this paragraph, I’m following the lead of Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. David Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2 (1995): 200-219. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See my paper, “Is God a person? Maimonidean and Neo-Maimonidean Perspectives,” in S. Kittle and G. Gasser (eds.), *The Divine Nature: Personal and A-Personal Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 80-105. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)