

## Question #1: What do we mean by God ?

**Answer:** *"Shema Yisroel Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echod."* This familiar quote-"Hear O Israel, Hashem is our God, Hashem is One" - forms the very basis of Jewish belief.

It is said three times daily by Jews throughout the world, as it has been for centuries. It formed the dying words of Jewish martyrs, as they gave their lives to keep their faith. It is a powerful affirmation of the Jews' link to the Almighty.

- But who is God? What do we mean when we refer to God?
- Is the God worshipped by the Jews similar to the mythological deities of the Greeks?
- Do we mean the hundreds of divinities of the Hindus, with each god responsible for a different power?
- Or should we see God as being synonymous with Nature, as the pantheists have claimed?

Not at all.

Judaism does not accept the mythological stories of gods frolicking foolishly in the heavens. It doesn't see God as made up of many powerful bits and pieces-for if so, how could He be one all- powerful Being? And it rejects the idea that God is simply part of nature, for it believes God to be nature's Master. Instead, Judaism asks man to think of an all-powerful Supreme Being. It views Him as the Planner, Creator, and Eternal Master of all forces, matter, and life in the cosmos-One Who regulates all existence and gives it meaning. It sees God as an absolute, unlimited Spiritual Being. It believes Him to be everywhere, transcending time, space and nature- knowing all.

And it encourages man to think of Him as a celestial Father. He takes a personal interest in all creatures. He sets objective standards for all men-especially His Chosen People-to live by.

To Jews, God is not an imaginary concept, but an ever-present reality. He is Someone to Whom everyone can directly relate. He is the ultimate guardian, Someone to turn to in times of trouble, Someone to express one's deepest feelings to. There is no need for an intermediary when communicating with God.

This is what we mean by Hashem.

But can we go any closer to the essence of God? Can we define Him more specifically, or form a portrait of Him with definite dimensions? Can we point Him out for quick viewing? How do we respond to the assertion of the Russian cosmonaut who said that God cannot exist, since he had not seen Him while orbiting the earth? Why isn't God more visible and more easily knowable to man? To answer this, we must first consider man himself.

Man is, of course, a marvelously complex being. He is an amazing composite of cells that somehow are together capable of great physical feats and outstanding abstract thought. Nevertheless, man is of limited capacity. He may think of himself as gigantic when compared to an amoeba, but he is dwarfed by a tall mountain; and, strong as he is, he cannot move that mountain by himself. Left entirely without aid, he cannot fly like a bird, or produce food like a plant; and without oxygen, food, and water, he will die.

His ability to think also has its limits. The average person may be able to do certain mathematical problems, but he will probably fail when asked to multiply two SO-digit numbers within a matter of seconds, without any outside help. His limited senses enable him to comprehend only a limited number of sensations and dimensions. No man can truly claim to

know everything that is happening today or accurately predict everything that will occur tomorrow.

Man is not a superman. The human body, though extremely supple, is comprised of a limited number of cells which eventually deteriorate and die. Likewise, the human brain, though incredibly adept, operates under limited patterns defined by set electrical and chemical reactions.

Therefore, when we discuss the essence of God, we are faced with a major problem. We are forced to use our limited mental capacity to try to comprehend a boundless, omnipotent force.

This is not fully possible. It is like expecting a fly to use its "brain" to solve an algebraic problem or to understand human psychology. These phenomena are beyond the fly's dimensions of comprehension. Similarly, God is dimensions beyond what man can understand. Man has enough trouble grappling with concepts like infinity and relativity. How can he then hope to fully comprehend the God who is responsible for them? Even Moshe Rabbeinu, whose Jewish spiritual intellect was supreme, was not capable of total insight into God and His ways. If we cannot grasp all aspects of God, it is because of man's limitations, not God's.

Therefore, it is absurd to say that God does not exist because He cannot be seen. Only physical entities can be seen through man's limited vision, and God is not a physical being. If God had a fixed physical form, it would limit Him, and He would not be a boundless, omnipotent Deity.

God then, cannot be seen or touched. Still, that does not mean that He is not present. We can neither see love nor touch hate, but love and hate certainly exist in the world. We cannot hold on to an isolated electric current, or put it into a dish with our bare hands. Nevertheless, we can see the effects of such a current, such as the heat and the light it can produce. In that way, we know that it exists. In this same way, we can prove God's existence through His manifestations-His worldly creations, His guiding of history- even if we cannot see God Himself.

Further insight into the ways and nature of God come from His holy communication to man: His Torah. The Torah's many references to God's supposed physical attributes-telling of His "outstretched arm" or His emotions-may seem puzzling. As we just mentioned, God is limitless, so He cannot have a body. Rather, say our Rabbis, the Torah describes God in physical terms to make God more understandable to man. In this way, man can form at least a limited concept of God within man's own level of understanding. (In the same way, we describe inanimate forces in human terms -"Mother Nature," "Father Time"- to make them more comprehensible to children.) And from the Torah's discussion of God's "characteristics" and "feelings" man can take a hint as to how God wants him to behave. If God is described as being modest, kindly, and forgiving, these are attributes He seeks in man.

It is in this sense that man is created "in God's image," as the Torah states. The notion that man looks exactly like God can't be correct, for God has no body. Rather, say our Sages, man resembles God in a spiritual sense. Man is endowed with **free will**, with the ability to tell right from wrong, to be kind or callous. Plants or animals don't have a choice of how to behave; man does. It is up to man to behave righteously. If he does, he can begin to have some notion of God's essence.