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God Is One

Kol B'ru-ei ma'alah u-matah
yagidun y'idun kulam k'ehad
Adonai Ehad u-sh'mo Ehad.

"Let all creatures above and below
say and bear witness as one:
God is One and God's name is One."

This is the refrain of a devotional, mystical poem written by Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Gabirol about a thousand years ago in Spain. While Christians often say that God is Love, and Muslims proclaim five times a day that God is Great, Jews affirm again and again that God is One, repeating it in the *Sh'ma* twice each day. At the end of Yom Kippur tomorrow evening, we will declare that God is One as the culmination of our prayer and fasting on this holy day. But for me, this past year has been a very difficult time to say that God is One. With all the division and strife, the hatred and violence, the polarization and demonization that I see all around me, can I really, with a whole heart, declare that God is One? What would it even mean to say that?

In one way of looking at it, the idea that God is One is blindingly obvious. After all, isn't that the basis of Judaism? The ancient *midrash* imagines our spiritual ancestor Abraham, before he has ever had direct contact with God, observing the universe and its many forces in wonder. Impressed by what he observes, Abraham says, "Could this universe have no manager who makes it work? Surely it could not work by itself!" Hearing this, God reveals God's existence to Abraham as the sole manager and ruler of the world.[1] Maimonides comments:

> Abraham had no teacher, nor anyone to inform him, being deep inside Ur of the Chaldees among foolish idolaters. His father and mother and all the people were idolaters, and he would worship along with them; but his mind searched to gain understanding until he grasped the way of truth, knowing rightness through his correct understanding. He knew that there is one God, and God directs the sphere, and God created all, and in all of existence there is no god but the One…[2]

[1] Bereshit Rabah 39:1. This is known as the "Parable of the Illuminated Palace." It imagines a traveler on a long trip who sees a palace lit up at night. The traveler wonders, "Could there really be such a well-run palace with no one to run it?" At that moment, the manager of the palace peeks out of the window and says, "I am the manager who runs the palace." In the same way, Abraham's wonder at the world and his intuition that it must have a manager prompts God to reveal God's self to Abraham.
[2] Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 1:3

In this version of the origin of Jewish monotheism, the idea that God is One is self-evident from even a cursory examination of the universe, and it only requires Abraham's curiosity and the exercise of his rational intellect to uncover this truth.

But I'm not the only one who has ever looked at the world and felt it difficult to say that God is One. In fact, so much that we see in the world seems to point in exactly the opposite direction. Our experience of the world is discontinuous, disorganized, and chaotic. We struggle to make sense of all of the disparate sensory inputs that are coming at us every minute; to organize them in any meaningful way, we have to train ourselves to ignore most of them. And this is the world in which God is One? Other human beings, their inner thoughts and motivations hidden to us, interact with us in ways that we can't predict, driven by a bewildering variety of natural inclinations, cultural variations, and ideological stances that flow over us endlessly, as we strive to form our own ideas, beliefs, and actions. And this is the world in which God is One? Even the universe itself, which is often cited as evidence of God's existence, fails spectacularly to sort itself into well-ordered categories and easily understood processes. Instead, existence seems to tend toward, well, chaos. And this is the world in which God is One? And then there's Torah, the Teaching given to us by God that is supposed to guide us through this confusing place. In it, the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet make up 600,000 words that spawn millions of discussions, interpretations, and arguments, which fill endless books and thousands of years of debate. And this is the world in which God is One? Everything about our experience of life, people, the universe, and Torah is diverse, different, plural, and complex – the opposite of One. But for mystics like Ibn Gabirol, that is exactly the power of the statement that God is One: it is mysterious, difficult, even paradoxical, the greatest paradox of all time, a mystical leap of faith, full of potential meaning if we can grasp it.

What could we mean when we say that God is One? How could that very simple statement about God hold worlds of meaning for us as it does for mystics like Ibn Gabirol? How could it hold meaning even amidst the brokenness and disjuncture of this world, and even if we are really not so sure about this whole God thing in the first place? I have three ideas to throw out for you to consider along with me.

First, when we say that God is One, we might mean that God is singular, one and not two, not four, not many. That is how some people interpret the *Sh'ma*, as a strong statement that there is only one God and no more – *ein 'od*. Despite what the *midrash* says about Abraham, this understanding of God as singular seems to develop in stages in the Bible. At first, the dominant belief seems to be that each people has its own god, and Adonai is simply the god of the Israelites, just as the Egyptians and Canaanites have their own gods. For example, God self-identifies as "the god of your fathers" to Moses in order to address Moses's curiosity about who God is – or more properly, which god is

this to whom Moses is speaking.[3] Later, we see a developing belief that while there may be other gods, Adonai is the strongest and most powerful god, the One that can defeat all the others.[4] This idea is the origin of some of the phrases with which we address God in our prayers to this day, such as *Elohei ha-Elohim*, "the God of gods," or *El Elyon*, "God most High." These comparative terms presume that there are other, less powerful gods over whom God rules. Only later, in the book of Deuteronomy – the same book that contains the *Sh'ma* – do we start to see an emerging belief that all other so-called gods are not really gods and that God is really the only God there is.

What are the implications of the view that God is singular, one and not many? If there is really only one all-powerful Source in the world, then everything and everyone in the world comes from it. That is, all of us, however much we differ from each other, have one transcendent Source. As the ancient rabbis teach about the common origin of humanity, this makes it very hard for us to claim superiority over one another or to insist that God loves us more than some other group.[5] We all have the same relationship to the Creator: we are creations of the same God. This insight works the other way, too. If there is only one God, then all who are praising, worshipping, or otherwise following after a divine Source are in fact relating to God, the same God to whom we address our prayers. Many of the medieval rabbis taught, for example, that no matter the many differences between us, Muslims pray to the same God as Jews and thus cannot be considered to be idolaters.[6] And even in the Torah, when God warns the Israelites not to follow the worship practices of the peoples whom they are about to encounter, the reason given is not that those practices are wrong but that such practices do not belong to the Israelites; they have been given to other peoples.[7] In other words, God has designated different ways for different peoples to relate to the One God. This is less a doctrine of "chosenness" or "election" than, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has argued, a philosophy of "dignified difference" that argues that Jews, like all peoples who connect to a divine source, have a particular way of doing so to which we are obligated and by which we are judged.[8] To see God as singular is to see ourselves in the Jewish community as just one part of a larger effort by all of humanity to reach out

[3] See Exodus 3:5 and following.
[4] See, for example, Numbers 33:4.
[5] See Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.
[6] See, for example, Maimonides, "Letter to Obadiah the Proselyte," assumed to be a letter to a convert from Islam: https://torahjew.blogspot.com/2011/05/maimonides-letter-to-obadiah-proselyte.html There was, it should be acknowledged, disagreement on this point in medieval times, particularly in regard to Christians.
[7] See, for example, Deuteronomy 4:19.
[8] See Rabbi Sacks's excellent book, The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations (Continuum, 2002).

for something transcendent, something that can add meaning and depth to our lives. A singular God connects us all in powerful bonds in this joint quest.

Second, when we say that God is One, we could mean that God is unique, unlike anything else in the universe. This is another way that people often understand the *Sh'ma*, as a statement of God's distinctiveness. And this, too, we see in the Torah, as God is distinguished from humans, who might waver or change their minds,[9] from kings, who are only subjects before God, the "King of Kings,"[10] and, in the Ten Commandments, from anything and everything that is in the skies above or on the earth below, none of which deserves human worship as God does.[11] The idea that God is unique developed into a whole school of thought about God called "negative theology," which argues that we learn the most about God by learning what God is not.[12] For example, God, unlike everything else in the universe, is not governed by time. Only God always was, is now, and always will be. God, unlike everything else that exists, does not have a material form. Only God does not have defects, only God could possibly be all-knowing, all-loving, or all-powerful in the precise ways that humans are not. Within this understanding of God being One, God's distinctiveness from all else we know is God's primary attribute.

What significance does this view of God as unique hold for us? When we strive to understand God through knowing what God is not, we begin to see God as the photographic negative image of humanity, the place where all of the things that we long for and fail to see in the world find their home. Pure justice, pure love, the pure ideals of any sort that are so difficult to find in human beings are central attributes of God. While God's uniqueness can have a tendency to distance God from humanity, it also elevates the ideals we carry to the level of Plato's "forms" – perfected versions of our highest yearnings that may not be instantiated in the world but that can nonetheless provide us with inspiration to reach for them in our lives, even if our efforts will ultimately fall short. This is what people mean when they say that God is the Source of justice, the Source of equality, the Source of love, the Source of comfort.[13] The uniqueness of God prods us to reach beyond our own flaws to grasp at perfection, and the world is better for our striving.

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[9] See Numbers 23:19.
[10] See 1 Samuel 8:7.
[11] See Exodus 20:4-5.
[12] Negative theology is also called "Apophatic Theology" and is said to have its origins as early as Plato. Philo of Alexandria (1st century BCE) was an early Jewish proponent.
[13] This was a key component of the theology of Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism.

Third, when we say God is One, we could mean that God is unified, whole and complete, not separated into parts. This is yet another way that people understand the *Sh'ma*. When we say, *Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad"* – "the Lord our God, the Lord is One" – we are saying that God is both the cosmic Creator of the universe and the voice inside of ourselves that prods us to do right, that God is both transcendent and immanent.[14] God contains and reconciles all of these apparent contradictions. Again, we see this in the Torah when God is portrayed by turns as an inventive Creator, a stern Judge, an encouraging Counselor, a commanding King, a gentle Comforter, and more. This varied narrative does not represent a succession of different gods, a massive inconsistency, or an invitation for the "real" God to stand up. God unifies all of these qualities and roles into One without separation or contradiction. If that makes God a paradox, then so be it – God is a paradox, and understanding God, as the mystics teach, requires opening our minds to that paradox of unity in complexity.

What are the implications of seeing God as totally unified, admitting of no divisions or oppositions? The primary one is recognized by the prophet Isaiah, speaking in God's name:

> "They shall know from the East to the West that there is none besides Me; I am God and there is no other. I form light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil; I, God, do all of these things."[15]

If God is unified, then there is no God of Light and God of Darkness, and there is no God of Good and God of Evil – there is only the One God who is the common source of both light and darkness, good and evil. This idea was so provocative, even to the ancient rabbis, that when they inserted this quote from Isaiah into the morning service that we say every day, they couldn't quite bear to actually include the idea that God creates "evil" – *u'vorei et ha-ra'.* Instead, they softened the quote by saying that God creates "everything" – *'oseh et ha-kol.*[16] Ok, I get it, seeing God as the source of evil is a hard pill to swallow, but that's how radical it is to say that God is ultimately a unified One, the Source of all. We cannot pick and choose which God we would like to address or deny that God is implicated in the worst things that happen in the world as much as in the best without doing violence to the idea of a unified God. The ancient rabbis taught,

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[14] The name "Elohim" is often interpreted to refer to God as transcendent Creator, while the name "Adonai" is interpreted to refer to God as the immanent voice of conscience and prod to change within us.

[15] Isaiah 45:6-7

[16] Given the ancient rabbis' willingness to change even the words of the Hebrew Bible when they are inconvenient to their theology, it is interesting and somewhat perplexing that liturgical changes in prayerbooks of the last century – from Reconstructionism and Reform Judaism to the Masorti movement in Israel – have caused such controversy.

"Bless God for the bad as well as for the good," for God is responsible for both.[17] We cannot praise and glorify God for goodness and pretend that some other force is responsible for all evil; nor can we excoriate God for all of the bad things in the world and pretend that goodness has its source somewhere else. God is a radical One-ness that we may always struggle to understand but cannot separate into component parts any more than we can do so with life itself.

I hope you're getting used to the idea that there are some very useful and important insights that can come out of taking the idea that God is One seriously, even in our divided world. But now I want to get to the really tough part: If God is One, and we human beings are made *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, then in some way, humanity is One, too. I know, this is even harder to wrap our heads around. The rabbis of the Talmud explain it this way: We meditate on the idea that God is One by saying the *Sh'ma* twice a day. On weekdays, we even go a step further. We take the words of the *Sh'ma*, write them on small strips of parchment, and encase them in boxes – *tefillin* – that we wear on our arms and foreheads, just to get the idea of God being One into our hearts and minds. But, the rabbis ask, if we are wearing *tefillin* and we are made in the image of God, doesn't that mean that God is also wearing *tefillin*? And if so, what is in God's *tefillin*?[18] (Yes, these are the kinds of questions that the rabbis ask.) They answer that in God's *tefillin* is a different verse from the Bible: *U-mi ch'amcha Yisrael goy ehad ba-aretz?* – "And who is like Your people Israel, a people One on the earth?"[19] They explain:

> The Holy Blessed One said to Israel: "You have made me a unique entity in the world, and I shall make you a unique entity in the world. You have made me a unique entity in the world, as it is said: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.' And I shall make you a unique entity in the world, as it is said: 'And who is like Your people Israel, a people One on the earth?'[20]

Keeping in mind that God is has a relationship with all of humanity – and remembering Ibn Gabirol's statement that "all creatures… bear witness as One" – I want to read this statement in the broadest possible way, referring to all of humanity. If God is One, in all the ways we have been exploring, then we humans, made in the image of God, are One in precisely the same ways. What are the implications of that? How could knowledge of

[17] Babylonian Talmud B'rachot 54a.
[18] Babylonian Talmud B'rachot 6a: "Rabbi Nahman bar Isaac said to Rabbi Hiya bar Abin: What is written in the *tefillin* of the Lord of the Universe? He replied to him: 'And who is like your people Israel, a people one on the earth?'"
[19] 1 Chronicles 17:21.
[20] Babylonian Talmud B'rachot 6a.

our human oneness transform us, how could it help us change, and how could it help us live?

What would it mean if we were all One in the sense that we were unified, all of our complexity and contradiction contained within ourselves? In many ways, and especially at this moment, this is the easiest understanding of Oneness to imagine applying to human beings. We know that we are made of good and bad wrapped up together. Contradictory impulses, speech, and action are the mainstays of our existence; consistency, it turns out, is simply not a human trait. The rabbis teach that angels are literally single-minded beings; they can only hold one thought in their heads at a time. We learn in a famous passage in the Talmud that when the Egyptians are drowning in the sea as the Israelite slaves escape, the Israelites break into song and praise of God. In the heavenly realm, the angels also want to sing, but God silences them: "My creatures are dying, and you want to sing?"[21] God points out that the situation is complex; there is both rejoicing at the Israelites freedom and mourning that it comes at the cost of others' lives. The angels could not express this conflicting mix of emotions and reactions; they could sing in celebration or cry in sadness but not both. But human beings are different. We can contain contradiction. We can sing and mourn, cry and laugh, despair and hope with one heart. If the angels are single-minded, we are many-minded. But too often, we see this as a weakness and try to rid ourselves of our contradictions. We silence and hide parts of ourselves in a vain effort to be somehow "pure" in our beliefs and our actions. The idea that we might be unified challenges us to see ourselves differently, to accept the contradictory forces and impulses that are part of our nature, and to see those operating in ourselves and others in ways that can actually move us forward without the need for a false consistency. How much would that change how we deal with conflict?

What would it mean if we were all One in the sense that we are unique, that there is nothing like human beings on the earth? This is not to denigrate other forms of life but simply to recognize the distinctively human traits and characteristics that have shaped this world, for good and for ill. One implication of seeing humans as unique is that we shoulder a huge responsibility for the state of the world and for our treatment of its creatures. By any standard, we have not born this responsibility very well. The *midrash* teaches that God warned humanity at the very beginning to take good care of the world, because if we destroy it, there will be no one to repair it after us.[22] Yet instead of respecting the world and its delicate balance of air, water, and land, animals and birds and plants, we have treated the world recklessly. The idea that we might be unique challenges us to take up the responsibility for the world anew, while still

[21] This story is found in the Babylonian Talmud in both Megilah 10b and Sanhedrin 39b.
[22] Midrash Kohelet Rabah 7:13.

remaining humble about our ultimate place in the universe. How much could that change how we treat the world and its creatures?

What would it mean if we were all One in the sense that we are singular, one and not two, not four, not many? This is perhaps the hardest of these meanings of One to imagine applying to humanity, but let's try for a minute. When I taught introductory classes in cultural anthropology when I was in graduate school, the students would often object that there was no way to talk about humans as groups because each person is an individual. To help them get their heads around the idea of culture, I would ask them to imagine that we are looking at two human beings very closely. Clearly, at this level, each human is unique, and the differences between them seem stark and impossible to overcome. But now let's zoom out a little to see not one human being but 10. We start to see a lot of similarities that begin to balance out the differences. Now let's zoom out more, to a hundred people or a thousand. At this level, we start to see broad similarities that begin to outweigh the differences. Let's continue to zoom out, and let's go all the way, to try to see every human in the world in one frame, all 7-plus billion of us. When we zoom in, all we can see is our differences, but when we are all the way zoomed out, we see that we really are One. When we act against another person, we are acting against ourselves, and when we care for another, we are caring for ourselves. We are all parts of the same body and the same soul. Seeing ourselves as really One, one and not two or 7 billion, challenges us to see our differences and our similarities at the same time, to be zoomed in and zoomed out at once. How much could that change how we treat other human beings?

If we can see humanity as One, it can help us see how we can live more fully, more justly, and more lovingly together. If we can see God as One, it can help us make meaning of this very complex and confusing world. At this time when we are searching for ways to transform ourselves, may these two goals themselves become One. May we become more fully One, as we say and witness to each other as One: God is One and God's name is One.

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