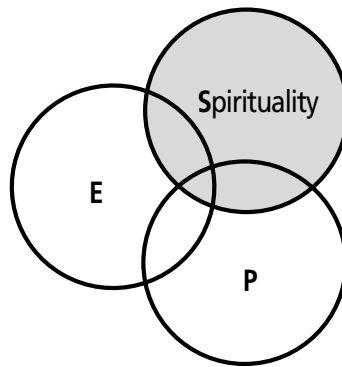


## Chapter 3

# “I’m Not Even Sure I Believe in God”

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Broaching the subject of God is something most Jews don’t seem to do very often. Few people (except children) would ask another person, “Do you believe in God?” After all, when was the last time you had an open discussion with another person — even a close friend — about God? I think many would find such a discussion socially awkward and even rude. In our society, it’s almost as if sex is an easier topic to talk about. It seems most Jews consider faith to be a very private matter.

However, when I asked people to share their thoughts about God, they seemed anxious to speak to me about the subject. Speaking about God and spirituality consumed a large percentage of the time in many of the discussions I had. Several people told me this was the first time in many years that they had candidly discussed God with anyone. As the floodgates opened, I got the impression that unfortunately, silence on the subject of God is the case for many — even though they have a desire to reveal their thoughts. Perhaps the reason those who spoke to me shared so much is that they knew that everything they said would be held in confidence. Or perhaps people felt

comfortable because we often spoke in terms of spirituality as opposed to using the word God. I have a suspicion that a big reason was simply because I asked and was willing to listen.

Whatever the reasons, I often heard two sentiments expressed. First, many (though certainly not all) almost seemed to want to talk about their doubts about God. Second, many expressed that Judaism was not addressing their spiritual needs.

In this chapter, you will get a flavor of these and the other issues I heard about God and spirituality. You may be comforted to learn that you're not the only one who has doubts. In addition, you'll see that spiritual questioning is very Jewish and does not make you a "bad" Jew. There are also thoughts in this chapter and the next about how Judaism might speak to you spiritually.

## **Rob**

When Rob was a teenager, he said that he was such a complete misfit and mischief maker in religious school that he was thrown out. Then, in an attempt to "rehabilitate" him, he and three other "screwball" students were given a private education from the rabbi at his temple. They studied "Sex and What Judaism Had to Say About It." Rob loved not only the subject of sex ("I was a teenager, after all"), but also the way the rabbi integrated Judaism into the subject. That class, however, was his only contact with the rabbi, and when it ended, so did his Jewish education and virtually any formal association with Judaism for the rest of his life.

"My rabbi would probably be surprised to learn that I ended up becoming an ob/gyn. On the other hand, maybe he wouldn't be surprised."

Rob is 37 and has ambivalent feelings about being Jewish because he has such a hard time believing in God. Being a doctor has furthered his difficulty with the idea of God. On the one hand, seeing "the miracle" of birth so often makes him wonder about a God and creator. On the other hand, "being a

person schooled in the sciences and who relies on empirical data" makes thinking of God the creator "seem like a giant fairy tale."

With this ambivalence, he said, come simultaneous contradictory feelings of being ashamed and not ashamed of his questions about God. He mentioned that our discussion was probably the first time in decades that he had seriously spoken to anyone about his thoughts and feelings about God. He added, "That's sad, especially since I enjoyed this discussion — it was kind of a relief to express my doubts."

Rob: To tell you the truth, I'm not even sure I believe in God.

*Gil: Do you think that makes you unique?*

Rob: Maybe... I guess I'm not sure. I might even be an atheist. I'm probably more of an agnostic—deep down. I'm not sure if people invented God or vice versa. I do know that all of this doubt makes me feel like I'm not much of a Jew.

*Gil: Why?*

Rob: Are you kidding? Here I am not sure I believe in God, and I have to ask, "What kind of Jew am I?" Feeling this uncertain about God, it's hard for me to take much of Judaism very seriously. If I go to the synagogue, I open up the prayer book and I ask myself, "Who am I praying to? Who or what is this God? I can't relate to this." And the rituals and the laws, even the few things I occasionally do — like when I go to a Passover seder—I find I'm asking myself, "What am I doing here anyway?" I feel like a complete hypocrite.

*Gil: So for you, being unsure or ambivalent about God is a nonstarter. If your faith in God is at best a question, everything about Judaism feels like hypocrisy or a waste of time.*

Rob: Let me put it this way, I'm not a religious or observant person. I'm not into Jewish ritual, prayer, or the temple. I have a hard time going

forward with religion or observance feeling as I do about God. I sure don't feel like much of a Jew.

*Gil: What would you say if I told you that you're very much a Jew?*

Rob: I'd say, "What do you mean?" In fact, I think I'll say that. What do you mean?

*Gil: Your questions about faith are not unique — they are very Jewish. I say that based on my own personal experience of having some of the same questions. When I began to look for answers, I was pleasantly shocked to find that I was not alone. For thousands of years, Jews have struggled with many of the same questions.*

Rob: Great, so they were also lousy Jews.

*Gil: That was my first reaction too. I used to think that having doubts about God made me a bad Jew. But I've learned that that's a misconception about Judaism. Judaism cares a lot more about a person's behavior than about their belief. But after exploring this business of faith, I now understand why most Jews don't know this.*

Rob: What do you mean?

*Gil: I came up with a phenomenon that explains this. I call it the "Christianization of Judaism."*

Rob: What in the world is that supposed to mean?

*Gil: In Christianity, if you don't believe in Christ, you're not a Christian. End of discussion. But in Judaism, not having faith in God does not disqualify you from being a Jew. On top of that, questioning about God is very much a part of our tradition. Our name is very different from "Christian," which is literally a believer in Christ — or for that matter, "Muslim," which comes from the Arabic word for "submission" — to God's will.*

Rob: So we're called Jews, so what?

*Gil: We're also called the people Israel. The word Israel in Hebrew means wrestler or struggler with God. So if you struggle with questions about God, you're living up to your namesake: You're a member of the people Israel. You're doing something that is very Jewish. But living in societies dominated by gentiles, many of us Jews have picked up the idea that if we have questions about faith, that makes us bad Jews. It just isn't so.*

**Rob:** There is something comforting in that.

*Gil: It was to me. I found something else that made me feel even more comfortable that I think you, too, will appreciate. I had a teacher once who told me to stop calling myself and others good or bad Jews. He had a much better idea.*

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**"I used to think that having doubts about God made me a bad Jew. But I've learned that that's a misconception..."**

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**Rob:** I'm listening.

*Gil: He said to use the term serious Jew. Serious Jews are people who actively struggle with their Judaism. I think being actively serious is good.*

**Rob:** I like that. I have often thought of myself as a second-class Jew. I mean, I don't really practice any Jewish ritual or often go to temple. Actually, inside I probably think of myself as a bad Jew — though somehow that doesn't seem right.

*Gil: I think judging a person's Jewishness by how many times they pray or perform ritual is dangerous. Better to me is to think in terms of a seriousness continuum. On one end is active; on the other end is passive. To me, actively being serious or struggling with my Judaism is a place I feel good about.*

Rob: I like that much better than calling myself a good or bad Jew, and I'm feeling actively serious now. But I can't believe many rabbis would buy your idea about faith. Are you telling me that rabbis are not sure they believe in God?

Gil: *I've never polled rabbis, but I have spoken to rabbis who have told me that they have had doubts about God at different points in their adult lives. I'd like to talk more about that, but first can I ask you: When you say you're not sure you believe in God, what exactly are you calling God?*

Rob: It's easier for me to tell you what I don't believe in. I don't believe in a God who is an old grandfather figure with a long white beard who is pulling puppet strings and intervening in my life or the world. All I need to do is look at the Holocaust or all of the other evil in the world to destroy that God idea. The Holocaust was so horrible, how could you not question if there is a God — and if there is, what kind of God allows such evil to happen?

Gil: *I don't know.*

Rob: That's it? Don't you have any better answers?

Gil: *Hey, I'm just a person. I don't have any voodoo or on-line connection to God. I wish I did. In the meantime, I have to rely on a low-tech solution — I have to guess. Also, I read other people's answers.*

Rob: So what do they say?

Gil: *To me some of the most thought-provoking answers have come from Holocaust survivors. After all, these are the people who actually*

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**“One daughter  
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*experienced the atrocities of the Nazis. Some survivors never were able to accept the notion of God again. Yet others did. Survivors have different answers. One daughter of Holocaust survivors told me that her father regained his faith in God because the Holocaust taught him that he could not believe in people.*

Rob: Hmmm, that's a powerful answer.

*Gil: I thought so. Another survivor I heard had a similar answer. Her explanation was that God is not a baby-sitter. The Holocaust was the work of humanity.*

Rob: Now that you bring these explanations up, I remember in high school reading the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel; he was also a survivor. There is a haunting scene about a boy who is being hanged by the Nazis in front of the other inmates and someone shouts out, "Where is God?" And Wiesel answers, "God is up there on the gallows." I was never sure if that meant that God was dead or that God was suffering along with the victims of the Holocaust.

*Gil: That's a good question. I don't know either. An answer I have heard about God suffering with the victims is that God does not intervene to stop the evil of people. If we want goodness to prevail, then people must stop evil — when we do, God rejoices along with us.*

Rob: I think that last part is nonsense. The Allied army stopped the Holocaust, and God had nothing to do with it.

*Gil: At the same time, if you wanted, you could argue that God was on the side that ultimately won and prevailed over evil. I have heard the argument that the Jews were slaves in Egypt for 400 years before God rescued them. By comparison, World War II lasted only six years. Unfortunately, of course, there is no way to know or prove any of this with absolute certainty.*

Rob: It's hard for me to fathom what Holocaust survivors have gone through, and I'm really amazed that anyone could find faith after that. But for me, I guess those answers are just very difficult to accept. You

know, you can take some of this rationale to the other extreme too. For example, I have heard of rabbis explaining that the Holocaust was a punishment God placed on the Jewish people for their misdeeds. I can't believe that. I have a friend whose family experienced a tragic accident that was random — it could have happened to anyone. When they asked a rabbi about it, he said something about it being God's will. They were badly hurt and alienated by that thinking. And I don't blame them. I just don't believe in a God like that.

*Gil: Well, is there something you do believe in?*

**Rob:** I guess I believe in nature somehow. When I see mountains or the ocean or even a nature program on television, I do feel a certain awe that is beyond words. I sense there is some force or a life force out there, and it's bigger than me. But I can't come up with an explanation beyond that. And I wonder whether we have made up this idea of God to make us feel more comfortable because we can't come up with any explanation for so much of what happens.

*Gil: What you just said reminds me of your question about rabbis believing in God. You should ask a few rabbis to explain to you what kind of God they believe in. You will probably be surprised by the answers. I was. And I emphasize the plural: answers. Within Judaism there have been many conceptions of God. There's even a book out today called Finding God: Ten Jewish Responses.*

**Rob:** Ten?

*Gil: It startled me too. I learned two main things from the book. First, within traditional Judaism, generally speaking, there is the belief that one God exists. The second thing is that there is a lot of uncertainty about what that God is. There are many thoughts and images of God within Judaism — so many that you can probably find some of the same questions and ideas about God that you share. I did. For example, one of the greatest rabbis and thinkers in Judaism — Maimonides (he was also called the Rambam) — believed that you can*

*only say what God is not. For example, he believed that God does not control the world, does not interfere in the workings of nature, and does not intervene to stop evil.*

Rob: That sounds like something I might accept, but I'd need to hear more.

Gil: *He had many thoughts about God. He also recognized that belief was hard for many. He compared belief to a horde of people around a castle trying to see the king. Some people believe there's a king inside, even though the size of the crowd prevents them from even seeing the gate. Others need to be in the castle to believe, and still others need to see the king to believe.*

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**"I wonder whether we have made up this idea of God to make us feel more comfortable because we can't [explain] so much of what happens."**

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Rob: Different levels of belief. I am probably on the skeptical side. It's very hard for me to feel certain about God.

Gil: *Personally, I don't know how anyone can always feel certain. Plus if you think about it, Jews have always been prohibited from even making images of God. If people are prohibited from creating a concrete image of God, it's easy for me to see how this can result in a lot of uncertainty, questioning, and doubt. In a way, then, I think that every Jew is forced to come up with an individual concept of God — though we have a lot of traditional sources we can look to for guidance. Although even within our tradition there is disagreement. For example, there have been great Jewish thinkers who had conceptions of God that were different than Maimonides'.*

Rob: Why hasn't anyone ever told me this before?

*Gil: Maybe because you never asked — at least that was the case for me. Until recently, I never asked anyone what Judaism says about God — or for that matter, what they think about God. A strange thing has happened in this modern “enlightened” time of ours: talking about sex today seems far less intimate or embarrassing than talking about God.*

Rob: I will admit, I’d feel kind of awkward bringing up “Do you believe in God?” in most settings. I sure wouldn’t do it at work or at a party... maybe at a convenience store... just kidding. I’d almost be embarrassed to ask some of these questions of a rabbi. That just doesn’t seem appropriate.

*Gil: If that’s the case for you, then you could ask any knowledgeable Jew. I think a rabbi is one of the most appropriate people to ask. After all, they have the knowledge and the training to answer. But people seldom ask rabbis or anyone else — I can only guess why. Maybe people are intimidated because they think rabbis have such strong faith. Or maybe in this science-based world, asking questions about God and spirituality, as you put it, feels awkward or embarrassing.*

Rob: That’s true. We expect all of our answers today to be provable in the laboratory, or in survey or sales results. It seems that the answers we seek today should be measurable or logically explained.

*Gil: I think you’re right. Yet everyone knows that we can’t explain everything with pure data. Still, somehow we want to be able to see God if we look through a microscope somewhere. But dealing with issues of the spirit, spirituality, our innermost thoughts and souls is not science — it’s much closer to art.*

Rob: Then why are we taught as kids such simplistic and black-and-white ideas about God, miracles, and God appearing to our ancestors? For example, I was a kid when my grandmother passed away, and I remember hearing over and over about how God was now taking care of Grandma and that I didn’t need to worry about her being sick anymore. Like God was some kind of person.

*Gil: That was probably because you and I and all kids ask tough questions of our parents. Like about the death of a grandparent, or about tornadoes, earthquakes, and accidents. We give kids answers because they need comforting. I think we give simple answers because we think kids won't understand or because we're not sure of the answers ourselves. After all, how would you answer your children if they were very upset and asked you, "Why did Grandma die?"*

**Rob:** I see your point, but what about the Bible? The way God is portrayed: He appears, He intervenes, He makes miracles happen, He's a He... The Bible is always using human attributes to describe God, like angry, jealous, merciful. How do you explain all of that?

*Gil: I'd explain it the same way I explained what we tell kids. In truth, we adults tend to speak to each other about God using the same terms we use when we talk to children — I think for the same two reasons: First, we're struggling for answers ourselves, and second, we use language and images that we can understand or at least partially grasp.*

**Rob:** I still don't see how anyone can accept the way the Bible speaks about God. In this day and age, it's just so unbelievable — at least to me.

*Gil: You're not the only one. This reminds me of a joke I heard about a kid who came home from Sunday school, and his dad asked him what he had learned. He said, "Dad, it was so cool — we learned that the Israelites were stuck in front of the Red Sea and the Egyptian army was rushing to kill them. Then the Israeli Army Corps of Engineers appeared and quickly built pontoon bridges and they all crossed over. Then when the Egyptians tried to cross, the Israeli Air Force came and bombed the bridges and all the*

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**"How can you expect modern, educated people to believe Bible stories and descriptions?"**

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*Israelites escaped.” And his dad said, “I don’t believe they really taught you that story.” And the son said, “You’re right, Dad, but if I told you what they really taught us, you would never believe that story.”*

Rob: That’s not bad, and I agree with that kid. How can you expect modern, educated people to believe Bible stories and descriptions?

Gil: *I think your question is very fair. From what I’ve read, the rabbis over the centuries thought about the same issue and came up with an explanation. They said that the Bible was written in the language of humans, so that the people could understand the complex thoughts found in the words. The rabbis also pointed out that the Bible is full of metaphor and poetic language, so we often need to look beyond the actual words to find meaning and understanding. They also said that the Bible has 70 faces; every time you look at it you may see a different face or interpretation.*

Rob: Those are some creative explanations by the rabbis, but it sounds to me like some rationalizations.

Gil: *I can see why you might say that, but I think the rabbis’ explanation makes sense. I’ll give you an example from another walk of life. My neighbor is a doctor. He told me that a patient from India came to see him. The patient complained through a translator that he thought he was having a heart attack. My neighbor asked him all the routine questions: “Do you have pain in your left arm? Do you feel weight on your chest?” and so on. The answer to each question was “no, no, no.” So my neighbor was about to send him home. Then the translator said, “Doctor, my friend says to tell you that he feels as if an elephant is sitting on his chest.” With this, my neighbor immediately admitted the patient, who, sure enough, was having a heart attack.*

Rob: You mean to tell me that asking about elephants is not part of your neighbor’s standard protocol of questions? He sounds like a malpractice suit in the making.

*Gil: You've now picked up a little tip in case you ever decide to practice medicine in India. As for America, that's a true story that I think shows how important the choice of language and metaphors is for understanding. That's what I think the rabbis meant when they said that the Bible was written in simple human language so humans would understand.*

**Rob:** Okay, I can accept that argument about the language in the Bible. But what about today? How are we supposed to get past simple understandings of God when rabbis, teachers, and most other adults still use simple descriptions of God?

*Gil: Well, I said that we "tend" to use this kind of language. Not all adults use those kinds of descriptions. But you still raise a valid point. I think part of the answer is that the level of the discussion is raised by all who participate in the discussion. Today, we seem to look for quick 20-second "sound bite" answers to our questions.*

**Rob:** So you think attention spans are shorter today than they used to be?

*Gil: I'm no expert on attention spans. Maybe what has changed is our willingness to talk about the subject of God. As you said earlier, bringing up the subjects of God, faith, and belief is awkward or even embarrassing. I think a lot of people would agree with you.*

**Rob:** Are you saying that I should be prepared for a long, heavy discussion if I want some answers about God?

*Gil: I wouldn't put it that way exactly. Instead, I'd say that the subject is complex and there is no one certain answer. Some people spend many years of their lives wrestling with a concept of God that they can feel comfortable with... reading, talking to other people, exploring... but this spiritual search can also be enjoyable.*

**Rob:** What's enjoyable about it?

*Gil: I find this discussion enjoyable, for example. I don't think it's embarrassing. I think it's interesting.*

Rob: It is rather personal, but I must say it is stimulating.

Gil: *For me, I find making discoveries is fun. There can be joy in learning new things and in finding that other people share my views or even disagree. Plus I enjoy making discoveries and learning new things with other people. It's also nice to find out that you're not alone in your searching. Usually for me, the whole process of talking to other people about spirituality and God is stimulating. And, at the risk of sounding a little bit like a nut, sometimes I even find it comforting and uplifting.*

Rob: I don't think that sounds nutty, but what happens if you find other people who are looking and looking and just decide they are so lost that the search is not worth it anymore?

Gil: *Sometimes I can feel that way all by myself — that's when I really need other people. I found a great story about that from a 19th-century European rabbi. He said that a man was lost for days in the forest when he ran into someone else. He asked, "Can you show me the way?" The other guy said, "I'm lost also. But I can tell you, do not go where I have been — that leads nowhere. Let's search for the way together."*

Rob: I like that analogy, but wouldn't searching alone or with someone else include looking at other religions' concepts of God and spirituality?

Gil: *It could and does for some Jews. I've spoken to a number who have. A funny thing happens to some of these people. As they explore other faiths, they often find Judaism shares many of the same beliefs — they just didn't know that before. And they like the Jewish concepts.*

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**"The conclusion  
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Rob: Come on, you mean to tell me that Judaism's concept of God is the same as, say, Hinduism or Buddhism?

*Gil: No, Judaism does differ from other religions — but many distinctions are not black and white. Like I was saying before, within Judaism there is a vast variety of opinions and thoughts about God and spirituality. The conclusion I've reached from this is that, within Jewish tradition, knowing about God with certainty is humanly impossible. This is the conclusion that many great Jewish thinkers and rabbis have come to.*

Rob: I'm not clear on what that has to do with other faiths.

*Gil: My point is that, because of this uncertainty, you find a wide range of Jewish opinions. Within this range, you can find Jewish concepts that are compatible with other faiths. For example, I wanted to see why some Jews have been attracted to Native American spirituality. The Native American concept of God is often referred to as "The Great Spirit." But I learned that in the language of the Sioux Indians, the term for God, Wakan Tanka, can be translated as "The Great Mystery."*

Rob: How is this compatible with Judaism?

*Gil: Traditional Sioux Indians believe that humans cannot understand such a vast mystery as God and they disapprove of arguing over the exactness of God. It's one of the reasons they resented missionaries, by the way. In our Talmud, our great collection of Jewish law, there's a story about an emperor who approaches a rabbi and says, "I want to see your God." The rabbi tells him to stare at the sun. The emperor says, "I can't do that." To which the rabbi replies, "If you can't even look at the sun, which is just one of God's ministers, how do you expect to see God?"*

Rob: So the rabbi is saying that humans cannot comprehend God?

*Gil: That's the way I interpret the story. And it's also the way I'd interpret the Native American concept of "The Great Mystery."*

Rob: So what does all this say about searching for spirituality?

*Gil: I'd say two things. First, I think the search is full of discovery that can be enjoyable. Second, I've found that our tradition is rich. There is enough there to keep you exploring for a lifetime. You can look elsewhere if you want, but I think you should at least include our tradition in your searching. Just as a tease, I'll throw in that if you want a real eye-opening experience, take a look at Jewish mysticism or Kabbalah while you explore spirituality. The Kabbalah is said to reveal the secrets of the universe and God. You may be intrigued by Kabbalah's ten Divine Spheres, including a feminine notion of God.*

Rob: I am intrigued, but I've got to tell you there is nothing spiritual for me about doing any of this searching at the synagogue. The synagogue is not a place I go to access God or spirituality.

*Gil: Where do you go?*

Rob: I remember as a kid trying to “find God” — it didn't work.

*Gil: What happened?*

Rob: Actually, I was trying to see if God could find me. I was skipping out of Hebrew school, and I hid for a long time. I figured God is supposed to see everything. He's got to be watching me cutting class and he will send me a signal.

*Gil: And?*

Rob: Perhaps the signal was boredom. I got so bored I went back to class and spent the rest of the day goofing around with my friends — that's probably the closest I've ever come to having a religious experience at religious school.

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**“Why does  
Judaism insist  
that you have to  
find God at the  
synagogue,  
anyway?”**

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*Gil: But now you're an adult, and you say you don't access spirituality at the synagogue. So, where do you go?*

Rob: I don't think I go anywhere. I'm not sure I think about it very consciously either, but things do happen to me from time to time that are spiritual.

*Gil: Like what?*

Rob: There are actually many things. Like when my kids were born. I cried... I was just overwhelmed. I had to say there's got to be something bigger than me here. At the time, my wife said for her it was painkillers. But seriously, there are things — like when I deliver a baby — that seem miraculous to me — when I can't explain what I'm experiencing. Like I said, nature is like that. Seeing a mountain. Or even little things, like some mornings when the grass is first cut. Sometimes I look at my fingers and I can't believe they work the way they do. I often marvel at the way the body heals from surgery. And I know this is going to sound mushy and sentimental, but I also feel it when I see a great movie and someone falls in love. That, to me, is spirituality. Or I read in the paper that someone has the inspiration or superhuman patience to invent something mind-boggling and fantastic like a gene therapy for some medical problem... I also know that I've felt something bigger than me during dark times... like when my mother was dying. That was... I don't know... Now that you have pushed me, I guess I often have a feeling that I'd say feels spiritual.

*Gil: Exactly what do you mean by feeling spiritual?*

Rob: As I said, it's hard to put into words, but the closest I could come would be that I feel awed, amazed, attuned to how mysterious and unbelievable things are. When things are bad, I feel alone and frightened. When things are good, I feel grateful beyond words. There, that's what spirituality feels like to me. Now maybe you understand why the synagogue doesn't work for me. None of these feelings come up at the synagogue for me. Why does Judaism insist that you have to find God at the synagogue, anyway?

*Gil: Let me react by asking you to react to something. Tell me what you think of this prayer from one of the Eastern religions. It goes something like this: "May it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grasses, among all growing things, and there may I be alone and enter into prayer to talk with the one that I belong to."*

**Rob:** My reaction is that, in general, I like it. This is what's missing from Judaism. I wouldn't have guessed it's Eastern, though. I would have said that it came from California. Not really. I would have guessed that it was Native American because it seems so connected to nature and the Earth.

*Gil: No, it's Eastern all right. The Eastern religion this prayer comes from is Eastern European — Judaism. It's a prayer from one of the greatest rabbis of the last few centuries; his name was Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav.*

**Rob:** Wait a minute, are you telling me that a rabbi was advocating praying outside among the trees and not in a synagogue?

*Gil: I suspect this rabbi would say to pray both places. All I'm trying to do is respond to your comment about Judaism insisting on finding God only in the synagogue. That is far from Jewish thinking... Judaism says that there are many places to find God and to try and connect with that spirituality. For thousands of years, Judaism has emphasized that nature is one of those places. And so is your bed, when you lie down and when you get up, and when you eat, work, and play — countless places. A few minutes ago, you told me the many places you have experienced spirituality. Your experiences are consistent with Judaism's thinking about spirituality.*

**Rob:** I'm not sure I understand.

*Gil: What I mean is that when it comes to spirituality and God, Judaism says specifics are hard or impossible to describe. But in general, our tradition says there is something greater than humans. Call it God, call it a life force, call it the spirit in your soul or spirituality. What to call*

*"it" is difficult — but we know it when we feel it. Nature is one of the places where many people feel it — that there is something greater than humans. But just as you described, you can feel the awe of spirituality everywhere. Judaism says the same thing.*

Rob: But if I want to feel that awe, I've got nature to remind me. Why do I need Judaism?

Gil: *I think that is a great question. One answer I've come up with is that there is a lot more to Judaism than spirituality. Even if the idea of God is difficult to accept, Judaism still offers ethics and peoplehood. As for me, I have found that the Jewish concept of spirituality makes sense. When I feel lost, it helps me feel less lost. And I really like the idea that my questions and searching are kosher — so to speak. It's okay; in fact, it's very Jewish.*

Rob: My doubts and questioning are okay. I like that too. I've never felt very confident in my faith in God, but I think I've always kind of believed that there is some kind of indefinable force in the world that is greater than me. After all, I don't think I created myself. But I must say I never knew that my vague concept could be considered acceptable by Judaism. There's something appealing and comforting in all this.

Gil: *I was also comforted when I learned what Judaism says about God. I now think that I was being too hard on myself by calling myself a nonreligious bad Jew. I was not terribly observant, that was true — but now I realize that by searching for spirituality and questioning about God, I'm being a serious Jew. I think searching and being serious is good.*

Rob: For me, "finding spirituality" isn't easy to do. As I said, the times I have found it, I wasn't really looking for it. But I do often wrestle with my many doubts and questions. This idea of being an actively serious Jew is new to me. It does seem to be a constructive and positive way to think about myself as I struggle.

## Key Points to Hold Onto

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### Chapter 3: “I’m Not Even Sure I Believe in God”

- Jews are called the people Israel. *Israel* means “wrestle with God.”
- Having doubts and questioning the nature of God is very Jewish.
- Rather than “good” or “bad” Jew, think in terms of “seriousness.” Serious Jews actively wrestle with their Judaism.
- While Judaism believes in one God, there is great uncertainty within our tradition as to “a” definition of God.
- Looking for quick, simplistic explanations of God in Judaism is unrealistic (notwithstanding the fact that we tend to give kids simple explanations). Still, the search can be enjoyable.
- Judaism definitely recognizes that spirituality can be found outside of the synagogue. Nature is one example.

## Afterthoughts

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The first time I heard the idea of being a “serious” Jew (in a class taught by Dennis Prager), I immediately found value and comfort in the concept. Many people who read this chapter expressed a similar reaction to me. However, in one of the focus groups I held with people who had read the manuscript, some of the participants said that, in their opinion, “serious” was not good

enough. They said that if you think seriously but never act, then you’re not really being serious. Their point seemed valid to me, so I modified the concept in the dialogue and in my head, to strive to be an “actively serious” Jew.

Another point people commented to me about was whether a person could really be Jewish if their faith was weak or nonexistent. They wondered how a rabbi would react to that idea. In response, I cited a story told by Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book *To Life*. Rabbi Kushner writes that when he was a student in rabbinical school, a professor asked the class to name the ten greatest Jewish figures of the 20th century. They wrote names like Freud, Einstein, Theodore Herzl, and other great scientists, writers, and statesmen. When they had finished, the professor said, “Now, next to the person’s name, list the synagogue he attended each week.” The professor’s and Kushner’s point in telling this story was that the Jewish world and even these rabbinical students considered these figures to be great Jews — but not because of their Jewish faith or religious observance.

Finally, some have asked me how I define spirituality and how I define God. First, I must say that I am not a theologian, nor is this book a philosophical examination of deity. Still, the question is fair. In keeping with Jewish tradition, I say that I constantly struggle for answers. To me, God and spirituality deal with matters of the spirit, matters of conscience, matters of the soul. They are matters that are beyond my comprehension and are bigger than I am.

I will go out on a limb and say that I think there is such a thing as the human soul (even though I would have a hard time explaining what that is to my kids, or to an adult, for that matter). I also think that human souls need spiritual nourishment. I will also take the risk of putting in writing my belief that our souls can receive strength, comfort, and guidance from a source greater than we are that defies explanation. How does that happen? Does that really happen? Did I and others make all of this up so we could feel more comfortable with our mortality or smallness? I don’t know. I continue to grapple.

The conclusion or conclusions you reach about God and spirituality are your business and are difficult or impossible to prove. Still, I hope you have seen in this chapter that while Judaism maintains the concept of one God,

struggling with our spirituality, a definition of God, and the many questions that are a part of this mystery is very, very Jewish.

Many told me that they experience little or no spiritual sustenance and struggle at the synagogue or temple, or through prayer. The next chapter takes a closer look at these complaints.

## **Questions From This Chapter You May Wish to Ponder**

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- When it comes to God or spirituality, how would you articulate what you do and do not believe in?
- Would you be willing to honestly discuss your thoughts about God or spirituality with another person? Whom? Why?
- Do you consider yourself to be an actively serious Jew? Why or why not?