

Excerpts from Joy Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective* (Brandeis UP; forthcoming in November 2018)

From Introduction: Shipwrecked with God

I'm often asked how I reconcile being religious with being transgender. For me, there has never been a conflict between them. As long as I can remember, I felt that I was female, and as long as I can remember, I have sensed God's presence.

I've become used to talking about being transgender, but no matter how much I talk about my relationship with God, it still makes me squirm to say "I feel God's presence." I grew up surrounded by people for whom God is "God," an empty word, an outdated superstition, a target for rage about the Holocaust and other tragedies, a symbol of ideals that human beings find hard to live up to. Even at Hebrew school and synagogue, I dared not let anyone guess that, to me, God was not an abstraction but someone who was there, invisible but as real as cold or warmth or humidity.

No one else I knew seemed to experience of God as a living presence. But when I read the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, what Christians call "the Old Testament," that was the God I found there. The Torah portrays God as passionately involved with human lives – not just with extraordinary individuals like Abraham and Sarah, but with everyone. God doesn't buy or sell, but insists that human beings do so honestly. God doesn't have parents, but is concerned about how we treat ours. God doesn't live in space or time, is not subject to famine or plenty, day or night, birth or death, but wants us to give meaning to the seasons and places of our lives.

But the Torah also makes it clear that though God is present and personally involved in human lives, God is not human. God has no face, no form, no beginning or end, and can't be understood in any of the terms we use to understand ourselves and our world. As God tells Moses at the burning bush, God is what God is, and will be what God will be (Ex. 3:14).

This invisible, incomprehensible but undeniably present God is the God I grew up with, not because my family was religious (they weren't), not because we read the Torah together (we didn't), not because religious teachers or leaders taught me to think of God this way (they didn't teach me to think about God at all), but because, as long as I can remember, this was the God to whom I woke and with whom I fell asleep, the God to whom I whispered and whimpered, pleaded, and sometimes screamed.

To me, God was not a mystical experience; God was a fact of life, like my parents. But I felt closer to God than to my parents. My parents, like other human beings, identified me with my male body. To them, I was a boy named Jay, and both because I loved them, and because I was terrified of being rejected if they guessed the truth, I did my best to act like the boy they thought I was.

God never mistook me for the body others saw. God knew who I truly was, and understood how alone I felt, because God, like me, had no body to make God visible, no face human beings could see.

Unlike God, apart from gender, I wasn't so different from the kids I grew up with. Like other children, I ate and slept and went to school, rode my bike, played, was self-centered and sometimes cruel, careless of the truth and others' feelings. Even though I knew that the way I looked on the outside didn't express who I was on the inside, I still judged others by the color of their skin, the fitness of their bodies, the shabbiness or sharpness of their clothes, and assumed that, unlike me, other people really were the boys or girls, men or women, they appeared to be.

But despite the many ways I was like other children, I always felt I was something else, something which had no name or place in the world. Nowadays, I would say that because I didn't fit into the gender binary that defines everyone as either male or female, I couldn't feel that I was really part of humanity. But when I was child, all I knew was that my sense of being female made me different in ways that were shameful and dangerous, ways that kept others from seeing or understanding or loving me. Present but invisible, I felt like a ghost, hidden within and haunting the boy everyone thought I was.

Of course, none of us are exactly who we seem to be. Few people old enough to think about it would say that their bodies perfectly express who they are, or that they always feel and act in ways that fit others' ideas of who they ought to be. Gender and other identities are always compromises that require each of us to sacrifice some of our messy individuality in order to fit into our families, friendships, and communities.

But when it came to gender, I couldn't make that compromise. I could, and did, act like the boy I was supposed to be, but I couldn't feel that I was really was that boy, couldn't identify myself with other boys, couldn't feel like I was really present in any relationship, because every relationship was based on gender. I wasn't just my parents' child; I was supposed to be their son. I wasn't just a kid on the block; I was supposed to be one of the boys. I wasn't just a Jew; I was supposed to be a Jewish male. And so, even though I was surrounded by people who thought they knew me, I grew up feeling invisible, afraid, and alone.

But I was alone with God. All the things that cut me off from other people – my lack of a body that felt like mine, my inability to fit into gender categories, my sense of being utterly, unspeakably different –made me feel closer to God. God knew who and what I was. God had created me, fitting my mismatched body and soul together. God was always there, day and night, as I tried to live and sometimes tried to die. We were an odd couple, me struggling with a body that didn't feel like mine, God existing beyond all that is, was, and will be. But when it came to relating to human beings, God and I had something in common: neither of us could be seen or understood by those we dwelt among and loved.

from Chapter 3: Close Encounters with an Incomprehensible God

Wendy, Maimonides and Me

When I was in fourth grade, I walked home from school almost every day with a girl named Wendy.¹ Wendy was smart, bookish, aware of her differences from other children but not afraid to speak her mind. I felt closer to Wendy than I had ever felt to another human being. We didn't play together, we talked, and as we swung our empty lunch boxes under the flaming maples, I could almost believe that I was just a girl with another girl, that I was seen, known, and had somehow magically become who I really was.

But I knew I was pretending. Wendy couldn't see me as a girl. She could only see me in the terms the little sliver of world we were walking through had taught us to use to make sense of human beings. In many ways, those terms brought us together, helping us recognize how alike we were: pale, freckled, curly-haired kids in the same grade, bookworms who preferred reading and talking to almost every other activity, members of families who lived in houses, and, though I never thought about it, people who were white.

Wendy and I seemed so much alike that grown-ups sometimes mistook us for siblings. But I felt closer to Wendy than to anyone in my family – and closer to being myself when I was with her than with any other human being.

But no matter how similar we seemed, in terms of binary gender, we were absolutely different. There was only one girl walking home under the maples. The other child, to Wendy and to everyone else, was a boy named Jay.

¹ I also talk about this friendship in my memoir, *Through the Door of Life*. (Madison, WI: U. of Wisconsin Press, 2012. 25-26.

As the leaves fell and disappeared beneath upstate New York snow, I imagined telling Wendy who I was really was. The snow banks melted; the trees budded. Night after night, I fantasized that tomorrow would be the day when some miracle would enable Wendy to see the invisible girl haunting my boy-body. Our lunch boxes swung; the grass turned green; our shadows, almost identical in the warming sun, tangled and fused and disappeared in the deepening maple shade. When the school year ended, Wendy moved away to another state.

Why didn't I come out to Wendy? She was not only smart and thoughtful, she was the daughter of anthropologists (though I'm not sure I knew what that meant). But even if I said to her, "Wendy, I'm really a girl," I knew that in our world that couldn't be true. Being a girl meant having a female body; no one with a male body could "really" be a girl. I could have told her I was "transsexual" – I had learned that word – but I couldn't have explained what transsexual meant. The idea of gender as something distinct from sex was just beginning to be developed in the far-away grown-up world of feminists and psychological researchers, and if I had heard of sex, it was as something dirty, something that my parents didn't want me to know about.

But even if I could have explained the difference between gender and gender identity and physical sex, telling Wendy that I was a transsexual wouldn't have been the same as showing her that I was a girl like her. In fact, I would have been revealing that not only wasn't I like her, I wasn't like anyone either of us knew: that I was different in ways that made me other than male or female, boy or girl, that made me something that didn't make sense in the terms that defined her and everyone else we knew. If I let her keep seeing me as a boy, I could continue being her best friend, but if I didn't, I was sure our friendship would be over. When Wendy realized how strange I was, she would see me as a stranger.

To come out to Wendy would be to come out not as someone even more like her than she

thought, but as someone who didn't fit the terms of humanity, as someone who, though I didn't know the word then, was what I would now call *queer*.

I knew only one other person who was queer, and that person – God – was much, much queerer than I was.

Unlike Wendy, God saw through my body, and understood what and who I was even though I couldn't explain it. God loved all of me, not just the male persona Wendy called her friend. But though in many ways I felt closer to God than to Wendy, God and I didn't have much in common. I had a body that concealed who I was; God had no body at all. Even though my body hid my female gender identity from Wendy, having human bodies gave us a lot in common. Unlike God, Wendy and I were both born, grew, breathed, ate, laughed, slept and moved from one place and moment to another. Our hearts beat, our stomachs growled, we felt lonely and happy and angry and afraid, we remembered pasts and imagined futures and dwelt in the bubble of now that shimmered between them. God didn't play, eat, watch TV, sleep, get bored, or ride bikes, and even though God was always there, God wasn't there the way Wendy and I were. When I was lying in bed talking with God, I wasn't anywhere else, but God wasn't just there with me, God was ... I didn't know where. God didn't seem to have a where. God was inside me and all around me and also, though this was very hard to imagine, completely beyond me, existing in places and times and ways that had nothing to do with me.

God never talked to me the way God talks with people in the Torah, didn't split seas for me or work other nature-disrupting miracles for my benefit, but otherwise, the God I saw in the Torah seemed basically the same as the God I knew in my life: invisible, bodiless, everywhere and nowhere, alive and present but not in ways that made sense in human terms. One minute, God is creating the world, the next, God is destroying it with a flood. On this page, God promises Sarah and Abraham a son; a few pages later, God tells Abraham to kill him. That was the God I knew, a loving, dangerous,

incomprehensible God who kept me from killing myself one night and woke me the next morning to a life as a boy I couldn't bear to live. I made no sense in terms of binary gender; God made no sense in human terms at all.

When I was growing up, I generally assumed that God, like my gender, was something I couldn't talk about with other people, but I did have one conversation about God. My family was camping, as we called it – staying in a fold-out tent hauled by our powder-blue Ford to a campground filled with mosquitoes, families, trailers and fire-pits. My father loved to sit by the campfire at night, strumming the guitar he never played at home and singing folk songs he had learned, my mother recently revealed, so that he could attract girls. (“It worked with me,” she said.)

On this camping trip – I must have been 11 or 12 – the people singing around the fire included a man who had some kind of professional involvement with Judaism. My parents, who, apart from my father's occasional insistence that God was nothing more than wishful thinking, rarely talked about religion, encouraged me to talk with him.

As though he had been waiting to do so, the man rose from the campfire. We picked our way between legs and marshmallow-laden sticks and headed into the darkness. Soon we had left trailers, campfires, and electric lights behind, and were following his bobbing flashlight beam along a dirt path overhung by trees that led around a lake. The dark, thick with branches and insects, was barely diluted by the moonlight splashing off the thicker darkness of the lake.

I don't remember how our conversation started, but it wasn't long before we were talking about God. How, I asked him, over and over, posing the question in every way I could think of, could God could be all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good and so on, and still allow the Holocaust, not to mention all the other suffering in the world?

It was thrilling to be able to talk about God and I was flattered by his attention, but I was also

very bored. I didn't care about the questions I was asking. I knew that God was God, no matter what human beings suffered or did to one another. The terms I was using – words like “omnipresent,” “infinite,” and “eternal” – made God seem like an idea that could be logically worked out instead of a living presence. That wasn't the way I experienced God. God wasn't all-good, all-this or all-that; God just was.

Though the man's smooth, deep voice was unfailingly patient, I could tell that he too was bored. I wonder now if I sold him short. Maybe he would have been interested if had I come clean about my relationship with God; maybe he would have understood. But I never considered doing that. God and I met in a wilderness I was sure that he and all the other men and women who identified with their bodies and lives that went with them couldn't imagine, a wilderness where God and I could recognize one another without forms, hold one another without arms, be present to one another without needing to be visible to anyone else. Because my relationship with God seemed as incomprehensible as my relationship with gender, I betrayed God the way I constantly betrayed my female gender identity: I pretended to be someone I wasn't, presenting myself as a kind of Jew, one searching for faith and struggling with belief, I was sure the man would recognize and understand.

I can't remember his name, but I can still see him when I close my eyes: tall, broad-shouldered, clean-shaven, with short hair and a square jaw. He didn't, as we say, “look Jewish,” but he definitely looked male, at ease in his body, his clothes, his heterosexuality, his place in the mid-1960's American version of the gender binary. To be human, I thought, was to fit that binary. He was clearly human. God and I were not.

Now I know that I *am* human, and I know that despite his comfort with being a man, he must not have completely fit the terms of binary gender either, because he, like me, was made in the image of God, and so he, like me, was more than human terms can comprehend.

When I was growing up, my father liked to tell me that human beings create God in our own

image. I didn't think much about it then, because to my father, I knew, God was just an idea, and not a very good one. But now I realize that my father was right. Though I experience God as a living presence, because I think and talk about God in human terms, my conception of God reflects my conception of humanity – and even when I thought that humanity did not include me, my conception of God was based on the ways in which God, like me, was inhuman.

My father would probably have seen my acknowledgment that my conception of God reflected my conception of humanity as yet another sign (for him there were many) that there is no God, only words that we mistake for God. Like other people, I am imagining God in my own image, and then telling myself God *is* the things I say to myself about God. Judith Plaskow has a more optimistic interpretation. Though she would agree with my father that our conceptions of God are always rooted in and limited by our conceptions of humanity, for her, that means that when we expand our definition of humanity, we have the chance – Plaskow would say the obligation – to expand our conceptions of God, to understand God in terms of the perspectives and experiences of people we previously ignored or excluded from our idea of what it means to be human.²

But even though I have expanded my definition of humanity to include people who, like me, do not fit the terms of binary gender, God seems as queer to me as ever – inhuman, incomprehensible, unlike anything I can say or know. Though it is only recently that people have begun to refer to God as queer, there is a long theological tradition, often called “negative theology,” devoted to the idea that God cannot be described or understood in human terms. For example, the great medieval rabbi, philosopher, and physician Moses Maimonides spends many pages of his *Guide for the Perplexed* teaching his readers to recognize what I would call God's absolute queerness – God's absolute difference from human beings.

² Plaskow is referring specifically to the fact that when we recognize that Jewish tradition conceives of God in male, patriarchal terms which reflect the idea that only men are fully human, we can see that expanding our definition of humanity to include women creates both the possibility and need for new ways of conceiving of God. See Plaskow, Judith. “The Right Question is Theological.” In *On Being a Jewish Feminist*. Ed. Susannah Heschel. NY: Schocken, 231.

Though Maimonides, unlike my father, believes that there is a God who has nothing to do with what we say or think about God, like my father, Maimonides is dismayed by the tendency of religious texts and people tend to describe God in human terms; like my father, he is skeptical and scornful of the conceptions of God implied by those descriptions; and like my father, Maimonides sees conceptions of God in human terms as both empty and deceptive, reflections not of God but of human limitations and self-centeredness. But unlike my father, Maimonides believes we can and must free ourselves from these conceptions, by reminding ourselves that the only thing we know about God is that God is not like anything we know:

There is absolutely no likeness in any respect whatever between [God] and the things created by [God]; that [God's] existence has no likeness to theirs; nor [God's] life to the life of those among them who are alive...³

Had Maimonides been able to intervene in my childhood relationship with God, he would no doubt have told me that I was wrong to identify with God as a fellow outsider to human roles and categories, because, as he says here, there is no similarity between God and God's creatures. Unlike God's, my difference from others, Maimonides would have told me, was not absolute; despite my queerness in terms of gender, I was basically similar to other human beings.⁴ My body was a human body; my life was a human life; even my feelings of difference and isolation were common human feelings. My sense that God and I were similar in our invisibility and incomprehensibility reflected my naivete and lack of philosophical sophistication. Like those who imagine God as a man with a long white beard, I was imagining God in human, humanizing terms that made God seem closer, more comprehensible. You are God's creature, my imaginary Maimonides would said, and as God's creature, you have nothing in common with your Creator.

³ Maimonides. *Guide for the Perplexed*. Trans. Shlomo Pines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963. Book I, Ch. 35, 42a.

⁴ Of course, Maimonides would probably not have understood why I felt different, since he shows no sign of questioning binary gender or patriarchy. He not only refers to God with masculine pronouns, but assumes and asserts that only men are fit for true metaphysical, philosophical or spiritual understanding. But this fantasy dialogue imagines a Maimonides who not only understands but accepts my transgender identity.

Maimonides was as great a doctor as he was a thinker; I hope he would not have prescribed a rigorous diet of negative theology to a suicidal child who felt close to no one but God, because I am not sure my relationship with God could have survived his instruction.⁵ Would I still have felt God's presence if I constantly reminded myself that everything I thought about God was wrong? Would I still have poured out my heart to God if I knew, really knew, that God and I had nothing in common?

But whether or not Maimonides's critique of the way I thought about God would have been good for me at the time, Maimonides would have been right. Other people couldn't recognize or understand my female gender identity, but, compared with our absolute difference from God, we were all basically similar creatures. No matter how different I felt, the gulf that separated me from Wendy and other human beings was nothing compared to the gulf between me and God.

Had Maimonides had taught me the principles of his negative theology, he would have made sure I knew not only that God was nothing like me, but that every word I used for God was wrong. God, Maimonides insists, cannot be described in language, even the language of the Torah. Language works by implying similarity, but God is One, unique, unlike anything else in any way.⁶ According to Maimonides, the terms in which I thought of God when I was a child were not only inaccurate, they betrayed the very queerness that made me feel so close to God, by implying that God is queer the way I was queer, instead of acknowledging that God is absolutely queer, utterly different from me and

⁵ Actually, *The Guide for the Perplexed* suggests that Maimonides might have felt duty bound to teach me negative theology: "The negation of the doctrine of the corporeality of God and the denial of [God's] having a likeness to created things and of [God's] being subject to affections are matters that ought to be made clear and explained to everyone according to his capacity and ought to be inculcated in virtue of traditional authority upon children, women, stupid ones, and those of a defective natural disposition, just as they adopt the notion that God is one, that [God] is eternal, and that none but [God] should be worshipped" (*Guide for the Perplexed*, Book I, Ch. 35, 42b).

⁶ As one of Maimonides' many statements of negative theological principles details:

For [God] does not possess quantity so that there might pertain to [God] a quality pertaining to quantity as such. Nor does [God] receive impressions and affections so that there might pertain to [God] a quality belonging to the affections. Nor does [God] have dispositions so that there might be faculties and similar things pertaining to [God]. Nor is [God] ... endowed with a soul, so that [God] might have a habitus pertaining to [God] – such as clemency, modesty, and similar things – or have pertain to [God] that which pertains to animate beings as such – for instance, health and illness. It is accordingly clear to you that no attribute that may be brought under the supreme genus of quality can subsist in [God]... (See *Guide for the Perplexed*, Book I, Ch. 52, 60a.)

everything I knew.⁷

Though I wouldn't have understood the intricacies of Maimonides' theology when I was a child, I think I would have realized he was right that that my words misrepresented God. I told myself that God was there, but I knew God wasn't there the way I was, present in one place and time and not in any other. I told myself God understood me, but I knew that God understood me in a way that was unimaginably different from the way I knew myself. I couldn't have explained it the way Maimonides does, but I knew that the words I used for God didn't describe God: they were only gestures, waving from the patch of life I knew toward a vastness I could never understand.

But even though I knew my words for God completely misrepresented God, I went on using that language, for the same reason that I never stopped Wendy from talking to me as though I were a boy: no matter how badly human terms misrepresented us, Wendy needed them to relate to me, and I needed them to relate to God.

Maimonides would disagree. He sees the refusal to use words for God as a sign of the highest

⁷ Maimonides argues that even when we say that God exists – a statement Maimonides himself makes, and that many religious martyrs have died to demonstrate – we misrepresent God by suggesting that God shares the quality of existence with, and thus is similar to, other beings:

How ... can a relation be represented between [God] and what is other than [God] when there is no notion comprising in any respect both of the two, inasmuch as [even the term] existence is, in our opinion, affirmed of [God] ... merely by way of absolute equivocation. (See *Guide for the Perplexed*, Book I, Ch. 52, 61a.)

In saying that we can speak of God sharing the attribute of existence with God's creatures “only by way of absolute equivocation,” Maimonides implies that God *can* be represented in human terms, as long as those terms are written and read by people who are sufficiently enlightened (which, to Maimonides, means highly educated men) to understand these terms are “equivocations” that do not accurately denote God. But he soon dispels that implication. Anticipating what twentieth-century linguists called the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, which holds that our conception of reality is inescapably shaped by the structure of our language, Maimonides argues that not only the terms but the very subject-predicate structure of language misrepresents God. (See Book I, Ch. 60.) According to Maimonides, when we make a statement of which God is the subject, such as “God exists,” even if we understand the verb “exists” as an “equivocation” that does not imply that God exists in the way that other things exists, and even if we know that God isn't like other subjects and that the predicates we use in connection to God are not like the predicates we use in connection to other subject, the very representation of God in the subject-predicate form dictated by language betrays the oneness of God by implying that God can be distinguished from God's attributes.

If God is misrepresented by the very structure of human language, God is literally unspeakable, for to speak of God in any way is to imply that God, like other subjects human beings know and speak of, is describable in terms of attributes and predicates that can be distinguished from and related to the subject. This means that the form of the statement “God is One” implicitly contradicts its content, because it implies that we can distinguish God from God's oneness – and thus implies that God is not in fact “One.”

degree of spiritual and philosophical development. To Maimonides, as to many philosophers and theologians, the closer we come to God, the more overpowered we are by awareness that God is beyond our capacity for knowledge or understanding. The closest we can come to expressing that truth is silence.⁸

While I agree with Maimonides that words cannot help but misrepresent God, I have never reached this exalted level. I needed words for God as a child and I need them now. I need to say, "God is here, God sees me, God understands me, God loves me, God hears my cry, and God answers." Even if I swore off using any other human terms for God, I, like Maimonides, would still need to say "God is." I don't say these things as meaningless pointers toward a truth I cannot understand. I say them because I mean them, because even though they are not and cannot be true of God, they are true to my experience of God, and I can't relate to God without them.

⁸ For example, Maimonides writes:

Thus all philosophers say: We are dazzled by His beauty, and He is hidden from us because of the intensity with which He comes manifest, just as the sun is hidden to eyes that are too weak to apprehend it. This has been expatiated upon in words that it would serve no useful purpose to repeat here. The most apt phrase concerning this subject is the dictum occurring in the Psalms, "Silence is praise to Thee," which interpreted signifies: silence with regard to You is praise [Ps. 65:2]. This is a most perfectly put phrase regarding this matter. For of whatever we say intending to magnify and exalt, on the one hand we find that it can have some application to Him, may He be exalted, and on the other we perceive in it some deficiency. Accordingly, silence and limiting oneself to the apprehensions of the intellects are more appropriate – just as the perfect ones have enjoined when they said: "Commune with your own heart upon your bed and be still" [Ps. 4:4]. (See *Guide for the Perplexed*. Book I, Ch. 59, 73a-b.)

from Chapter 3: Close Encounters with an Incomprehensible God

“Shall Not the Judge of the Earth Judge Justly?”

I doubt I would have survived my childhood if I had not felt God's presence. But though I never doubted that God was there, my relationship with God was troubled. God, my creator and sustainer, had given me a body that didn't feel like mine. God was the reason I lived in fear and hiding, the reason I felt invisible and unloved. God was the source of the pain that came from the mismatch between my body and my soul, a pain that sometimes became so great that I was sure that either it would kill me or that I should kill myself. God alone knew how bad I felt, and God alone was the source of my suffering, and God alone could save me by changing my body to fit my soul.

Night after night, I begged God to change my body; night after night, God did nothing but murmur “I am here.”

I didn't have the power to make God relieve my anguish, but though I didn't realize it then, I did have another power: the power to make sense of God's incomprehensible actions in human terms, to tell myself why God was making me suffer, to decide what my suffering meant about me and about God. Because I was a child, the sense I made was simple: either God was bad for hurting me, or God was hurting me because I was bad. I knew God wasn't bad, so, I decided, God must want me to suffer because I deserved to suffer. Since I had never done anything to deserve this suffering, I must be suffering because I was essentially, irredeemably bad. God was not ignoring my pleas; God was passing judgment upon me.

Don't get me wrong: I never thought that God was punishing me for having a female gender identity, because I didn't believe that God would punish me for being what God had made me. But bad children, I knew, deserved to be punished, and since I was being punished, it must mean that to God, who knew me inside out, I was truly bad. I couldn't convince God to end my anguish, but I could turn

my pain into a sign of God's presence and God's justice, so that whenever I was hurting, I interpreted it as God saying, "I am doing this to you, and you deserve it."

The terms I used were childish, but in trying to make sense of my suffering, I was exercising the kind of power Abraham exercises in his dialogue with God about the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah – the power to define God's role in the human world:

Then the LORD said [to Abraham], "The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin is so grave! I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me; if not, I will take note." Abraham came forward and said, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly? (Gen. 18: 20-25)

Abraham, like me, assumes that though God is responsible for human suffering, God's actions are not arbitrary, cruel, or incomprehensible (or, as I put it when I was a child, "bad"), that they make sense in terms of human morality. But unlike me, Abraham has a clear idea of God's role in the suffering God is about to cause: he sees God as the Judge of all the earth, and therefore bound, like human judges, to render judgments that human beings can recognize as just.

I never tried to figure out exactly why I deserved my suffering, but Abraham defines specific standards for whether God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah can be considered just in human terms:⁹

And the LORD answered [Abraham], "If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." Abraham spoke up, saying, "Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes: What if the fifty innocent should lack five? Will You destroy the whole city for want of the five? And [God] answered, "I will not destroy if I find forty-five there." But he spoke to [God] again, and said, "What if forty should be found there?" And [God] answered, "I will not do it, for the sake of the forty." And he said, "Let not my Lord be angry if I go on: What if thirty should be found there?" And [God] answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." And he said, I venture again to speak to my Lord: What if twenty should be found there?" And [God] answered, "I will not destroy, for the sake of the twenty." And he

⁹ Though Abraham assumes from the moment God raises the subject that God will destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, God only tells Abraham that God is going to see if the cities are as bad as God has heard.

said, “Let not my Lord be angry if I speak but this last time: What if ten should be found there?” And [God] answered, “I will not destroy, for the sake of the ten.” When the LORD had finished speaking to Abraham, [God] departed; and Abraham returned to his place. (Gen. 18: 26-33)

Unlike my attempts to intercede with God, in this dialogue, God responds to what Abraham says. But though God accepts Abraham's proposals, God doesn't tell Abraham any more than God told me about how God judges humanity. After raising the subject of Sodom and Gomorrah, God simply agrees to every standard of judgment Abraham proposes.¹⁰ God never makes counter-proposals, explains God's own standards of judgment, or even says whether God agrees with Abraham that God is obligated to act in ways that human beings will see as just. It is Abraham who dubs God “Judge of all the earth,” defining God's role in terms which, according to Abraham, oblige God to meet human standards of justice. It is Abraham who sets the standards by which the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah could be considered just, Abraham who keeps tightening those standards, and Abraham who ultimately decides that is just to destroy the cities even if nine innocent people are swept away along with the guilty.¹¹

Though Abraham does not assume that God's divine idea of justice will conform human standards – if he did, he wouldn't keep proposing his own – he doesn't seem to notice that God never actually accepts either the role of Judge of all the earth, or Abraham's claim that God shouldn't and wouldn't sweep away the innocent with the guilty.¹² Indeed, the Torah does not tell us whether God tries to determine how many innocent people live in Sodom and Gomorrah. The cities are destroyed

¹⁰ God invites Abraham to participate in the process of judgment through an act of social *tzimtzum*. God presents to Abraham as a being whose knowledge, like a human being's, is limited by space and time and that the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah depends on a fact-finding mission. God's localization in time and space invites and empowers Abraham to weigh in in a way that would not have been possible if God had presented the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah as yet another revelation of a future that, from God's divine perspective, is already certain.

¹¹ Though God ends the dialogue, Abraham makes it clear that 10 people is his last and final offer: “And he said, Let not my Lord be angry if I speak but this last time: What if ten should be found there?”

¹² Contrary to Abraham's insistence that it is unlike God to sweep away the innocent with the guilty, the Torah often portrays God as executing judgments, such as the ancient flood that destroys most life on earth, in which innocent and guilty suffer the same fate. Even the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah includes children who could not justly be considered guilty.

after two angels visit Sodom, are assaulted by a mob, and lead Abraham's nephew Lot, Lot's wife, and their daughters to safety. As a result, it is not clear that Abraham's definition of doing justly had any more effect on God's judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah than my childhood pleas had on God's decision to leave me in a male body.

Like me, Abraham speaks to God from a position of powerlessness: not only does he know that he cannot control what God does, he fears that he is acting presumptuously and risking God's rage every time he proposes a new standard for God's judgment. But though neither of us had the power to change God's actions, both of us – Abraham, God's intimate, and me, a lonely, terrified child – had, and exercised, the power to define God in human terms. Abraham used that power to define God as Judge of all the earth; I used it to define God as the unyielding judge of me.

Whether or not God agreed with our definitions, God did not dispute them, and so we were free to believe them, and live our lives accordingly. Indeed, God never speaks up for or against human definitions of God. As a result, all of us, whether we are saints or secularists, suffering children or religious extremists who murder in God's name, have the power to interpret God's actions, define God's role in the world and in our lives, and make sense of God in our own terms.

Those terms may not affect God's actions, but they can certainly affect ours. My decision that God had doomed me because I was bad led me both to passively accept my misery, and to ignore my own moral responsibilities: I knew that no matter what I did, I would always be bad, and so I felt little motivation to live up to ideals of goodness. By contrast, Abraham's naming of God as Judge of all the earth drove Abraham to propose stricter and stricter standards for God's judgment, despite his fear that he was making God angry.

Abraham doesn't risk God's wrath out of affection for Sodom and Gomorrah (his assumption that God is going to destroy the cities suggests that he has too has heard the outcry against them) or even out of concern for his cousin Lot, who would not necessarily be protected by God's agreement to

spare the cities if ten innocents were found there. Rather, Abraham defines God as a Judge he expects to judge justly because that is the meaning he wants to find in God's actions. As one of Abraham's descendants, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., might say, Abraham bends the arc of God's relationship with humanity toward justice, prompting us to judge God by human standards of justice, to see God's presence as manifested through justice, and, by implication, to see injustice as hiding or driving God away.

Though the Torah makes it clear that God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah as punishment for the communal brutality we see in the story of the angels' visit, some religious traditions interpret God as condemning the cities for what came to be called sodomy – sex between men. These traditions define God in terms of homicidal homophobia, prompting us to see God's presence not in justice but in the murder of gay people and in the destruction of those who accept them. I never read the Torah that way, but as a child, I too perverted the human power to define God: I saw God as a Judge whose idea of justice included torturing a child, and projected onto God my own childish morality, imagining that God, like me, sees everyone as essentially, unchangeably good or bad, not matter what we do or how we grow and change.

Few of us have had Abraham's experience of hearing God agreeing to our standards for divine justice. Whether we name God judge or torturer, healer or hater, punisher or protector, God usually responds with silence. That silence can be maddening, heart-breaking, enraging; it may lead us to feel that God is not there at all. But God's silence gives each of us the power – the awful power – to define God's role in our lives and in the world in ways that, whether or not they affect God's actions, certainly affect our own.