

Jewish identity, like all identity, is a narrative construct, a by-product of story. The Jewish story is rooted in the call to leave behind the conditioning of nationality, ethnicity, and parental bias\* in order to see the world anew and to become a blessing to all the families of the earth\*\* by working tirelessly for global peace and prosperity (Genesis 12:1–3; Micah 4:3–5). A Jew is a person who makes this story foundational to her sense of self-worth, meaning, purpose, and how she lives her life. A Jewish community is a network of Jews who together live this story into the world through shared action: religious, cultural, social, political, etc.

The challenges we Jews face today—intermarriage, assimilation, Biblical and Talmudic illiteracy, abandonment of *mitzvot*, etc.—are symptoms of a greater problem: the loss of story, and the loss of personal and corporate meaning and mission that comes with losing our story. Either we Jews matter to the world or we don't, and if we don't there's no reason to be Jewish at all. Jewish survival is not a value in and of itself:

It isn't enough that Israel be My servant, it isn't sufficient that I lift up the tribes of Jacob and restore the remnants of Israel. I will also make you a light to the nations in order that My salvation may reach the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:6).

Jews and Judaism are not ends in themselves, but means to planetary salvation:

And nations shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up sword against nation, and people shall never again know war. Instead they shall sit unafraid beneath their grape vines and fig trees. And all people shall walk in the Name of their Gods as we walk in the Name of YHVH (Micah 4:3-5).

The salvation the Jewish story promises is a world without war, thirst, hunger, and fear; a world in which people are free to pursue their own search for meaning and purpose in their own way. The obligation the Jewish story places upon Jews is the endless work of actualizing this salvation: As Rabbi Tarfon said, “It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task, but neither are you free to abandon it” (*Pirke Avot* 2:21). Authentic Judaism—Judaism rooted in this story—is a path of justice, kindness, and humility (Micah 6:8) leading to global peace and prosperity, and everything we Jews do as Jews must further this goal if we are to legitimately call what we do Judaism.

This view of Jews and Judaism leaves lots of room for denominational differences, and personal and communal creativity and experimentation. But it requires all Jews to reclaim, teach, embody, and live our story and the salvation to which it obligates us. And we're not.

Rather than work toward a redemptive future we focus on imitating a romanticized past. Rather than proclaim the cosmic God of creation and creativity, we focus on a tribal God obsessed with chosenness, blood, land, and conformity. As survey after survey of Jewish life shows, a growing majority of postmodern and postethnic Jews see Judaism as a narrow, jingoistic celebration of tribal self-aggrandizement rather than a catalyst for global salvation. For these Jews Judaism is shallow, tedious, insular, meaningless, and anything but compelling. For them—and for me—either Judaism aids in the salvation of the world, or it doesn't; and if it doesn't, we have no need to preserve it at all.

The future Judaism toward which I work is one that reclaims our story and lives the challenge of being a blessing to all the families of the earth. This Judaism is rooted more in the existentialism of Job and Ecclesiastes than the tribalism of Exodus and Leviticus; more in Spinoza than Akivah, and more in Buber than Rosensweig; more in universalism than parochialism; more in aggadic creativity than halachic conformity; more in the iconoclasm of the early Abraham than the authority of rabbis; more in the intrinsically cooperative nonzero worldview of Micah than the intrinsically violent zero-sum worldview of Moses.

But whether you find my Judaism of value or not, it is the story you must reclaim, and reclaim it soon.

- To these I would add religion, gender, race, and all other elements of constructed identity.

\*\* All of them: mineral, vegetable, animal, human, etc.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro

## The Divine Feminine (transcript of a lecture)

What we are talking about is the divine feminine. Before I go into the text, let me just lay this out in a larger frame. Karl Jaspers coined the term “Axial Age,” which refers to a period in human history 800 B.C.E (before the common era) to 200 B.C.E. During that 600-year period, religions all over the planet, the ones we know about and have records for, underwent transformation. They basically moved from magic to compassion, from reliance on ritual to reliance on deeds of love and kindness. You see in Judaism a focus on Leviticus, on the priesthood, on sacrificing animals, and then you compare that to Micah, chapter six, verse eight, where Micah says, “What does God require?” He goes through a whole list of things that God seems to require in Leviticus: animal sacrifice, oils. And then he says, no, what God requires is “do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” And that is part of that first Axial Age where people went and said there is more to religion than these priestly requirements and priestly deeds. And in Hinduism you had the Vedas, which were very priest-oriented, and then you get the Upanishads, which is about philosophy and how to live your life and achieve sat-chit-ananda (being, consciousness, and bliss).

So there is this huge shift – and it happens everywhere on the planet – and it happens in most places at very bad times. For example, when it happens in China, you are moving from the rituals – the indigenous magical traditions of China – to Taoism, and it happens during the Warring States Period. Everybody is fighting everybody else. Confucianism rises then, and Lao Tzu, and Taoism arises then. Wherever it happens, it seems to happen in times of breakdown, not in times where everything is peaceful.

I will argue that the return of the divine feminine (and I will define that for you as we go along) is part of a second Axial Age, which also comes at a time of a lot of negativity. I live in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, which is ground zero for anti-Muslim activity. People in my town are the most fearful of Muslims, and if you ever saw the CNN special with Soledad O’Brien, that was my town. Those are my neighbors. What I experience where I live (and it is much broader—it is the world combined) is a lot of negativity, a lot of violence, a lot of people hoping for Armageddon. A lot of people who believe that the rise of Islam is only going to be – must be – defeated by the return of Jesus, the Second Coming, and the war that is going to come with that. They feel that Israel and the United States must take the lead in that war. All you have to do is watch the news and you know that there are many people who say we have to bomb Iran, just to turn that war effort on.

The first Axial Age came in a similar kind of time. There are all kinds of conflicts going on, and it shifts all religions toward the Golden Rule. Karen Armstrong, in her giant book *The Great Transformation*, spells this out in tremendous detail, or should I say horrendous detail, because there is so much detail. She documents all this and then she hints, but does not “argue” for it, because she is a historian and she cannot write about this until it is history – that we might be in the beginning of a second Axial Age, another turn in the human consciousness. I suggest, without any evidence (except the three things I am going to offer), that it is true. Like she says, you can’t beat compassion. Once you get to love and kindness, what else is there? We have the Golden Rule. No one is going to come up with a better Golden Rule—a “Platinum” Rule.

She hints that the application of the Golden Rule will expand. Most likely, the people who wrote “Love your neighbor as yourself” from *Leviticus* originally had in mind their Jewish neighbor. Certainly not the Hittites, the Amorites, and all the “ites” that we Jews wiped out. We were not loving them. So the neighbor was probably your Jewish neighbor. But as it progresses, the rabbis expanded it, and Jesus expanded it. When you read Jesus quoted in Matthew as the second of the two great commandments, you do not get the sense that he only means fellow Jews.

Then there is the statement later in *Leviticus*, “Love the stranger as yourself.” So even in the biblical text there is expansion, but in the second Axial Age, you get this expansion from loving the narrowest tribal concept to loving on a broader scale. Armstrong suggests that we are moving into an even broader scale – that it is all people, regardless of labels. I would say that we are actually going even broader, and it is all beings. It is nature

as well as other human beings – animals, nature – the whole spectrum of living beings. That is what we are going to love as ourselves, because that is our self.

Remember, just so you are clear (because where I live, no one ever gets this, so hopefully it is just a “duh” statement for you): *Leviticus* says, “Love your neighbor as yourself;” it does not say “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” People who say that use it as a cop-out. “Well, I do not love myself enough yet. So I really cannot love my neighbor because I really do not love myself. So I am going to spend most of my life loving myself, and when I get that right, then I am going to start loving my neighbor.” That is not what the Bible says. The Bible says, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now, I take that as a deep, contemplative understanding of the nature of self. My neighbor, whether it is nature or a fellow human, is all part of a singular system in which I am included. That is myself, right? For example, so we are clear on this: I could not exist without my lungs. None of us can exist without our lungs. If you took them out of your body, you would be dead! But the lungs, in and of themselves, do not function. If you take a lung out and put it on a table, it is not doing anything, it is just a dead organ. So, the lung needs the rest of the body. But even that is not good enough, because what makes the lung valuable? What does a lung do? It pumps oxygen, right? But it does not make oxygen; nothing in your body makes oxygen. It makes carbon dioxide and methane.

So if your lungs do not make oxygen and your body does not make it, where are you going to get the oxygen to pump? Well, that comes from photosynthesis. You need plants and trees to do that, and if that is true, then the plants and the trees and the sun are part of my body. I could not exist without them. But, the plants and the trees cannot exist without the rest of the planet, and for the sun to do what it does for earth, earth needs to be exactly where it is in relation to the sun, and that only happens because of gravity, which requires all the other planets. So the whole solar system has to be exactly where it is for my lungs to work, and without that, I die.

Why do I say they are my lungs and not identify the whole solar system as my body or myself? Because it is. We are realizing that and so, ultimately, I think we are realizing that the whole universe is my body, and I have to love all beings then, as part of that singular reality. So, it is growing, it is expanding from the narrowest, to the larger, to the entire cosmos. That is the second Axial Age.

There are three signs of the coming of the second Axial Age. I believe it started in 1893, in Chicago, at the World’s Columbian Exposition. At the Exposition, something happened among humans that had never happened before in the entire history of humanity. Representatives of every religion came together in Chicago for a separate gathering called the World’s Parliament of Religions. You had India, China . . . the whole planet showed up. Not only were there representatives, but there were, with one exception, male and female representatives. Men and women from these different traditions came to speak together at this huge conference. Only one religion refused to send women – Judaism. In 1893, the Jewish women were so angry that they were not included that they started the Jewish women’s movement. So in 1893, all the religions came together to share their deepest truths in peace, in harmony, in dialogue, and in conversation. It was just amazing. In the past, every time religions met, they met through armies. This time, they met simply through their representatives, and the opening and closing speaker was Swami Vivekananda from India, who was the founder of the Ramakrishna Order of Vedanta Hinduism. He opened by saying, “My brothers and sisters, I welcome you in peace” and went on to talk about how, from his perspective, all the gods are manifestations of one god, and that we are all practitioners of a universal truth, each with our own specific way of doing it. And everybody just applauded him! They just welcomed this message at the turn of the twentieth century. So that is the starting point, the first of my three examples.

The second one came in December of 1968 when the Apollo 8 astronauts photographed the Earth floating in the blackness of space – that iconic image of the earth in outer space. We had never seen it like that before, and I think that was a revelation. A revelation from God, if you like, through our technology, that revealed the true

nature of the planet. A nature that is not what Genesis tells us—the planet as layers of water and land—and not a flat Earth, like we thought for so long. But here it is, what Carl Sagan called this pale blue marble floating in the blackness of space.

And what you did not see was probably more important than what you did see. What you did not see was the Rand-McNally version of the world. When I was growing up, Rand McNally showed me that a) the world was flat; b) America was bigger than any other country on the entire planet; and c) it was always in the center of the world. All the countries were demarcated with thick black lines, and each one with its own color. America was always pink, and it bothered me because the Chinese and the Russians, they were pink. We should be blue! Maybe it was some pinko statement by the Rand McNally Company, I don't know. It was clearly defined—here is this country, there is that country—but that is not reality. Reality is this incredible single-organism Earth, floating in the blackness of space, what Buckminster Fuller called Planet Ocean. If you look at the photograph, or if you cut up the globe so you can lay it flat, it is basically one land mass surrounded by one huge ocean. Fuller created a map called the Dymaxion map, which actually shows this. So the photograph of the Earth is the second example that tells me something amazing is going on: first, the religions coming together in deep dialogue, and then the revelation of the true nature of the planet as Planet Ocean.

The third thing is the return of the divine feminine. It is a return in some traditions, while she has never left in others. And it is a little different than God is worshipped. It looks like the goddess in every woman and the god in every man, but I am not talking about specific goddesses as if there are actually gods and goddesses, because that is not what I think.

The return of the divine feminine is tied to the idea of the feminine divine. That is reversing it, right? Look at the relational aspect of God, the fact that the world is this giant mother who is birthing us, and changing our language from the patriarchal to— not necessarily to matriarchal, but to something that transcends both. Understanding that, as we will see in the text, that God has masculine and feminine – which Genesis suggests, you know, male or female, he created them, meaning humanity, and if we are in the image of God, and we are male and female, then perhaps God is male and female. But Judaism along with other religions (like Hinduism, specifically) tend to have this notion of a Transcendent manifesting as the Immanent, and the Transcendent they often talk about is male and the Immanent as female. So, the world we encounter, the spirit we encounter, the divine that we encounter, is actually, from this emerging paradigm, somehow feminine, and by that, I think we are talking about relational.

But let me be clear about what we are not talking about. It is always very dangerous when a guy talks about the divine mother because then it is a projection of his mother, and we have to be careful about that. I hope I am not doing that. The divine feminine, the divine mother that we are talking about is not the Jewish mother or the Italian mother who is always taking care of you and doing everything for you. It is not the tree in *The Giving Tree*. You know, the story of the tree that has become a stump out of love for the boy. That is not the divine mother, but just a very enabling tree that allows itself to be abused by this boy.

This issue is about a mother who can be terrifying, who can go out and slaughter, metaphorically, all of our illusions. The mother is the one who brings us wisdom, but it is a harsh wisdom—not a Hallmark card's wisdom. Not puppies and daisies and cute babies. It is a harsh wisdom that life is exquisitely beautiful and exquisitely horrible at the same time.

So, the return of this figure in our language, in our mythology, and in our organized religion is what I really want to talk about tonight and put specifically within a Jewish context or a Biblical context. And the texts we are going to look at have been around for a long time, but are not lifted up the way I want to lift them up and not engaged the way I want to engage them. So let me just lay out what I am going to say, and then I will try to prove it, and then you can try to disprove it.

You are more than welcome to believe; I have absolutely nothing to sell. You can accept what I have to say or

not accept it, I really do not care. What I care about is sharing stuff that I love, that I think is interesting, and that is what I get to do. But if you do not agree, that is okay. Don't feel threatened, like now you have to believe what I believe. You don't, and what I believe is just what I believe! So who knows if it is ultimately true?

Carl Jung said that the most important thing of the second half of the twentieth century was the return of the mother archetype. Bede Griffiths, the Catholic monk who went to India and helped expand the Hindu-Catholic Ashram in India and make this amalgam between these two traditions, said the most important thing in Catholicism is the elevation of the divine mother. Even Pope Benedict, without getting permission, started talking about Mary as the co-creatix. Now that is bizarre. In a religion like Catholicism that is highly patriarchal you have God the father, God the son, and God the Holy Spirit, and they are really all male figures. In no trinity outside of Catholicism or Christianity do you find an all- male trinity.

There is always a mother figure somewhere, or the gods are paired up with goddesses, like in the Hindi tradition of Brahma Vishnu and Shiva. And with Shiva, for example, he is the immobile transcendent but his energy that operates in the world are Shakti energies, feminine energies. And it is very similar to what Judaism is saying in that the Transcendent is considered masculine, but the manifestation of the Transcendent in our world is considered feminine. But in the church, you cannot keep the goddess out. You cannot keep the feminine out. The human psyche needs it. It makes no sense to have just a masculine deity. You need the feminine because we have those two forces in us.

So, they elevate Mary higher and higher. I am, I guess you could say, a friend of a movement of nuns (Catholic sisters) called the Daughters of Wisdom. I cannot be a Daughter of Wisdom, but I can be an adopted son. They were started in 1704 in France by Father Louis de Montfort. He understood Jesus to be the expression of Sophia, what we will call Chochma in a minute, in the Hebrew Bible. And Mary is sort of the ground in which wisdom is developed, the birth process of wisdom. It is all about reaching Jesus through Mary, about achieving wisdom but going through its source – like there is a larger womb out of which wisdom comes, and that is Mary. So you go even deeper than Jesus and into Mary. Really radical stuff. There are Daughters of Wisdom all over the country. I am attached to the one in Litchfield, Connecticut, and when I went there for the first time ten years ago, I went into their sanctuary – a beautiful space, very nice, very simple – and looked around for the crucifix, and there was no crucifix. Instead, there was this humongous Mary floating in space. This concrete thing was floating in space, and she is standing on the moon – her naked feet are on the moon. She has a Namaste-kind of hand gesture, and she is looking down from the moon on to all of us sitting in the pews. It is so moving. I asked them, “Where is Jesus?” And they said, “Oh,” and opened a drawer and said, “we keep him in a drawer for when the priest comes back, but we do not go through Jesus. We go to his mom, we go through the source of Jesus himself, which is Mary.” You see all these sisters just entranced by this incredible icon of the mother of God. Incredibly powerful. And I am Jewish! You know, we are supposed to say, “Eh, mother of God, give me a break . . .” But it is beautiful, powerful. I was as entranced as they were, which is why I associate myself with them to the extent they let me do that. And their whole thing is the wisdom literature. That is what they study.

So, my argument is this is happening almost everywhere. Islam is having the most trouble with it; they are the most patriarchal or the most transcendent, but their God is really beyond gender, so it is hard for them to do that balance. But in their mystical stuff, especially Rumi and Hafiz, with all the talk about the beloved, there is a sense of trying to bring back that feminine energy.

In Judaism, again you have a very patriarchal system. I know you can argue this and it is painful, but women are second-class citizens in classical Judaism of old. They cannot be witnesses, they cannot be rabbis. It is a patriarchal system; that is the way it is. And you can say that is God's will—fine. For me, God's will is whatever the people who invented God's will is going to be. So, whoever came up with the theology that said this about women—that is what those people believed. I do not think it is God's will; I just think it is Judaism's

will based on the founders, the people who created it at that time.

So these are very patriarchal gods. But when they talk about encountering the divine, they use feminine gendered nouns. They did not have to do it—they could not help themselves. That is my argument. They were in charge of the language. They were in charge of the religion. They could have called God whatever they wanted to call God, but they chose to use feminine nouns to describe their experiences of God. For example, “Shekhinah,” the presence of God, is a feminine word. Why would they do that? I am arguing that somehow, when they experienced the presence of God, it was, whatever this means, a feminine experience. Whatever that meant to them, I do not know, but somehow, it must have spoken to them because that is how they articulated it. When they speak about a soul and spirit, all of the words are feminine. I am sure they could have invented a masculine word (we will see that is what happens in Greek). When they talk about hearing the voice of God, they use the term “bat kol,” the daughter’s voice. Why did they do that? Because that is what they heard! Somehow, they heard a feminine voice. I do not know what that means because I cannot get back into their heads and ask them, but they use these feminine terms because they had some kind of divine, feminine experience.

I believe it comes from the Book of Proverbs and the figure of Hokmah. How many of you have read the Book of Proverbs? Go home, read the Book of Proverbs. If it looks too long, just read Chapter 8, especially starting with Verse 22. I am just going to read some of this, and then I am going to ask you some questions about it, so just listen for a little bit. The question is, “Who else does this sound like?”

In chapter 8, verse 22, suddenly this woman appears in the text, speaking in the first person singular, and it is all grammatically feminine. Just listen to what she has to say: “God is my source, and I am his first creation. Before time, I am. Before beginnings, I am. There were yet no oceans when I was born, no springs deep and overflowing. I am older than mountains, elder to the hills, the valleys, and the fields. Before even the first lumps of clay emerged, I am.”

Sounds like . . . Jesus. John’s Jesus says, “I am the way,” but “Before Abraham was, I am.” It sounds very, very similar to me. It is as if John’s Jesus is speaking as Hokmah, almost like you have Hokmah’s wisdom in Hebrew (Sophia in Greek). Clearly feminine. I suggest that Jesus fully embodies Hokmah Sophia. He, not to be overly dramatic, is Hokmah in drag. He is in a male body because you cannot be in a woman’s body and pull this off in first century Roman-occupied Jewish Palestine. No one is going to listen to you – except Dan Brown, and that does not happen until much later. So, I argue that Jesus is, in fact, wisdom incarnate. But wisdom is a woman. Therefore, I think John is borrowing from Proverbs.

A couple of verses later: “When God set the heavens in place, I was there. When God fixed the sea’s horizon, I was there. When God made firm the sky and set the fountains that feed the sea, when God bound the ocean with shore and the land with sea, I was there.” She is the first of God’s creations and, as we will see in a second, maybe the way God actually created all of this.

She says in verse 29 (all in chapter 8): “I was God’s confidante and architect, a source of endless delight, playing before him without ceasing, rejoicing in creation, delighting in humankind.” In Hebrew, it is ambivalent whether she is God’s child or God’s master craftsman, so I put them both in. In a sense she may be both. It is as if (and now I am borrowing from Hinduism) she is the Shakti energy, the divine energy. And what flows from God is the first of God’s creations and through her, the world is manifested. To know her is to know how the world works.

Let me take a different text altogether, from the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon, chapter 7. Solomon says, “Simply, I learned about wisdom,” the following: “The design of the universe, the force of its elements, beginning and end of time, changes in the sun’s course, variation of seasons, cycles of years, positions of stars, natures of animals, tempers of beasts, powers of winds, thoughts of humanity, uses of plants, virtues of roots; such things as are hidden I learned, for wisdom, the artisan of all, taught me.”

Solomon argues that what you learn from wisdom (and he is the most wise) and what you learn from Chochma Sophia is the very nature of nature. But if you listen closely, he also learned what women knew and men did not. Especially near the end. “The uses of plants. Virtues of roots.” These are things we used to kill women for because they knew this witchcraft stuff. They were pharmacists, but it scared the crap out of us men. That cannot be right! Stop boiling the eye of newt! So perhaps she is the means by which the world was created, and to know her is to know the nature of creation. Medicine and science, right?

She says, “I am true counsel and resourcefulness. I am right understanding and fearlessness. Through me kings reign kindly, and lawmakers pass just laws. Through me princes rule lightly, and judges decide without bias.” It is not that she has gotten rid of the patriarchal society, but she guides it in wisdom, justice, and compassion. Then she says, still all in chapter eight, “I love those who love me and show myself to all who seek me.” Again, it sounds to me like Jesus. Seek and you shall find, right? Anyone who looks shall find her. “I am true abundance, enduring prosperity. My fruit surpasses the finest gold; my produce is superior to the choice of silver. I have walked the way of righteousness, the path of justice. I bless my lovers with wealth and fill their treasures with timeless things.” She is this very powerful being on the planet that you and I can tap. She is not transcendent. She is not like God up in heaven somewhere. She is this world. Not just is it, but she is in it, with it, as it. So it says in Proverbs, chapter three: She is the divine order patterning all creation, from the ancient oceans to the morning dew.

She is a very, very powerful presence, but she is not passive. As I read earlier, she has this delight—this longing—for humans. She sends her apostles, all women, out to find us. In the beginning of Proverbs, chapter eight, the first few verses says about her: “Wisdom is not silent. She boldly raises her voice above the din. She stands upon the most desolate peak and the busiest highway, at ever intersection, gate, and doorway.” She is everywhere. “Intersection” is out in the city. “Gate” is into your community, your neighborhood, and “doorway” is in your house. She is at all these places that you pass through all the time. Do you hear her? She is right there, and she is not sitting there passively. She is talking to you as you walk by. And she says, “Listen to me, all of you. Listen to me, for I speak noble things. Truth comes from my lips. My words are just and simple. Reason and understanding will show you the rightness of my words. Accept me, rather than silver and fine gold, for I surpass rubies. Nothing equals the gift I offer.” That gift is the gift of knowledge about how the world works, how best to engage one another. She is standing everywhere, calling to us. But then there is even more to her that relates to Jesus.

“Wisdom’s house stands . . .” This is Proverbs, chapter 9. “Wisdom’s house stands firm on many colors. It is strong and shall not fall. Within her house she prepares a fine meal, sweetens her wine with water, and sets the table with great care.” She invents table fellowship. She invents Communion. I do not know how she is actually at all of the intersections, gates, and doorways, and also cooking, but okay—she is multi-tasking.

Now listen to the rest of it: “She sends her maid to the towers and rooftops to shout her invitation.” She has apostles, but they are all women. And this is the invitation: “To the simple, they say, ‘Enter here.’ To the foolish, ‘Eat my food. Drink my wine. Give up your folly and live. Walk in the way of understanding.’”

Listen to the simple, direct experience: “Enter here.” Wherever you happen to hear the voice of the maid—or maybe even her voice at the intersections, the gates, and the doorways—wherever you are when you finally hear it, just enter into that space because she is there. This means there is nowhere to go. She is everywhere. The desolate beach, the cities—her maids are out on the rooftops, wherever you happen to be. Someone—either wisdom herself or her apostles—is calling to you, and if you are simple enough (because you do not over-think it) you enter right where you are. Right in the heart of your simplicity. Just enter there.

But if you think too much—and this is a college so we probably all think too much—then she says, “Eat my food, drink my water.” That is so Jesus, it seems to me. “Give up your folly and live. Walk in the way of understanding.” Now, eat her food and drink her wine. If that is not available on the rooftops, you are going to



have to find her house. There is work to be done, but for those who are what she calls foolish, we like the work, right?

So engage in all these spiritual practices, define the divine, and God is everywhere, but we have to work to get to where God is. That is stupid. If God is everywhere, then God is everywhere! There is nothing you have to do! In fact, every “doing” takes you away, in a sense, from realizing God’s presence. Because you say, “Well, he is not here.” My theology is that God is Reality with a capital R. That God is infinite, and therefore God embraces and manifests as everything in the universe.

I love when people say, “Well, God is infinite! But he cannot be that infinite.” They say, “Well, God is infinite, but God is not me.” I gave a talk yesterday morning and a woman came up to me and said, “You don’t believe like those dummies, do you?” I said, “Not me, I am not a dummy. But what do the dummies believe?” The dummies believe exactly what I believe, that everything is part of the divine. She said, “You don’t believe that, do you?” I said, “Well, I am not a dummy.” “That is right! God is over here, and we are over here, and there is no connection!” I said, “Okay, I said I am not going to argue.” But I do not believe that. I think that God is over here, and there is only connection. There is only connection. And the struggle to find God is a struggle that is only designed by the ego, for the ego, to make it more challenging.

But really, God is the simplest thing in the world. You are already the divine manifest, you are already spoken to by Chochma Sophia. Just listen. Just wake up. Right here, right now, in the midst of whatever is going on in your life, just be awake for that right now, and that is God.

There is no place to go, nothing to do. Religion is, at its best, a giant con game. You know what I mean? The ego needs to be entranced. The ego needs to be entertained, so you do not do this, you have to believe this, to read this, to pray this. You have to do this thing; you have to do that thing. Whatever the system is, you have to do this and that is going to get you to God. But if you ever meet people who are God-realized, they may have gone that route, but when they finally get it they realize that was just to keep the ego entertained.

Because God is right here, right now. You either get it or you do not, but to spend all this time doing all these convoluted things to get God is just like saying, “Well, God cannot be here, so let me step over here. Nope, God cannot be here because I am here, so let me go over there.” It is silly, really. But part of us thinks that.

So I am not knocking religion, but just saying that it is designed to exhaust the ego. Jesus said in the gospel of Thomas, “Do not stop seeking until you find. When you find you will be troubled. When you are troubled you will reign over all.” So you do not stop seeking – that is ego – just keep looking, keep looking, and eventually, you will be so exhausted that you will find what you could have found the first instant, but you were too sophisticated. So you find it. But when you find it, you are troubled. Why are you troubled? Because you discovered that you did not have to spend all that time looking. You also find that God is open to everyone, regardless of if they are looking or not.

I love the parable of the guy at the vineyard. He drives up to Wal-Mart and gets workers early in the morning to work all day, and then he goes back to get more. When the people work to the end of the day, he pays them all the same. People interpret this in different ways, but the right way is this: regardless of how long you spend in the infinite presence of God, you get the whole thing! Because it is infinite, right? The people say, “Hey, wait a minute, I have been here for eight hours, I should get more.” That is absurd.

It is like going swimming with your friends, and some of them jump in early in the day, but you do not want to do that, so you are reading and doing nice things. Then in the early afternoon some other people jump in and are swimming around, but you do not want to do that. Then at the end when it is time to leave, you just want to get wet and go in the water for five minutes. When you jump in the lake at the end of the day, you do not get less lake than the people who jumped in at one o’clock. You get the whole lake! That is what is so troubling. We want to say, “Wait, I get more lake than you get!” That is ego.

That is not God. That is not Sophia. That is not wisdom. You get it all; whenever you get in, you get it all. That is why Jesus says at the end, “This is what the kingdom of heaven is like.” And then the capping phrase is, “The first shall be last and the last shall be first.”

When I teach the Bible at my university I ask my evangelical students (99% of them are evangelicals, and the other 1% of them are ex-evangelicals), about this phrase, and they say, “It means that the people on the bottom will be the rulers and the people who are the rulers will be on the bottom.” Well, that does not really hold because if the first will be last and the last will be first, and if you are first, then now you are last, and now that you are last you are first, so then you are going to be last. What Jesus is saying is to stop playing first and last! Stop playing, like Paul says, Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female. Would you please cut that out? Stop with all that stuff! I think it is a giant joke! He is conning you into thinking, “Okay, we are going to work, we are going to get this,” but in the end he is destroying the categories that allow the ego to function. There is no first or last in the kingdom of heaven. There is no more or less in the kingdom of heaven.

Wisdom is saying the same thing. She says, ultimately, that “I m here for everybody.” She never talks about Jews. She never talks about sacrifice in the temple. She never talks about prayer. She never talks about anything that religion talks about. She says, just come to me. Wherever you are, I am standing there waiting for you. Just come to me, and when you do everything is going to be fine. That does not mean “fine” in the sense that you will have no trouble; it means that when you have trouble you will know how to navigate it.

In Ecclesiastes, the world is very negative, and whoever wrote the poem in the middle created this book that just does a giant “Toto” to God. You know Toto, the dog that pulls the curtain down and reveals the great and awesome Wizard of Oz to be this little man with a megaphone. Job just rips the façade away from our image of God and tells you that the world is not the way you think it is. It is all part of the wisdom tradition in Judaism. But the bottom line of what I am trying to get at is that these are the books (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom of Ben Sira) in the Hebrew Bible and then the apocrypha that speak to us of a wholly different kind of understanding of the divine, one that is not waiting for us to win anything, to believe the right thing, to do something specific. Just wake up. Just accept the gift that is given right now if you would accept it. You have to be totally simple to do that—and we are not. We are too complicated. The world is complex, not complicated. We complicate things. It cannot be that easy. It has to be hard because if it is hard, there are winners and losers.

Because if there are no losers, what is the point of winning? That is the ego’s thing.

We invent religions based on the chosen and the not chosen. I know Jews say, “Well, it does not really mean chosen”—yes it does! Because no Jew says, “Well, I think I would rather be the not chosen.”

No, of course not! You want to be the chosen. That whole thing in Judaism is a Smothers Brothers thing (for those who are old enough to know the Smothers Brothers). Our mom loves you best, right? It is good to be chosen! Better than not being chosen. But you can take it to other traditions; it is better to be saved than damned. It is better to be a true believer than an infidel. That is just how the ego works. I gotta get saved. I gotta do something.

Wisdom is saying, “What are you doing? Just knock and it will be open to you.” Jesus does not say in the gospels, “Believe this and this and this, and then I will come to the door and let you in.” It does not work that way. Even today, we were reading Matthew 25. Jesus says, “Feed the people, feed the least of these, house the least of these, clothe the least of these. That is what I am looking for.” You do not even have to see Jesus as “the least of these,” though that is what he revealed, because they say, “When were you naked? When were you hungry?” He is always naked, always hungry because we are selfish. We live in a zero-sum world where there have to be winners and losers, and I am going to win. And the only way for me to win is to make sure those people lose!

It is not an accident that we have the 99% and the 1%, and it is not an accident that we talk that way, on either

side. It is how the ego works. Wisdom is offering us something different. Jesus is offering us something different. Religion offers us something else entirely; I am not a big fan of religion. But the wisdom of these texts, the geniuses of these spiritual teachers—and I believe Jesus was a manifestation of wisdom—the wisdom of Hokmah Sophia, is of a different kind all together. And that is what is needed in the second Axial Age. She is present to everyone, and everyone is welcome at her table without labels, because it just does not matter anymore.

Karen Armstrong was right: the circle goes wider than what we had before, and that means the new spirituality, the emergent spirituality of the second Axial Age, is going to transcend religion. That does not mean religion will go away, but religion will be transformed. Judaism did not go away in the first Axial Age; it was transformed by the prophets into something it was not before. Judaism will not go away. Christianity will not go away. Islam will not go away. Buddhism and Hinduism will not go away. But they will all be transformed, and the people who are going to do the transforming are those who are tapping into Hokmah Sophia, who are tapping into universal wisdom and coming back and articulating that common awakening that they had in each of their traditions, and they will reinvent them from the inside. That is the hope of the second Axial Age. We will still have our religions, but we will be committed to one another, and will embrace one another in wisdom and through wisdom.

## Lady Wisdom, an introduction

Wisdom, *Chochmah* in Hebrew, is the first of God's manifestations and the means by which creation happens.

I am the deep grain of creation, the subtle current of life.  
God fashioned me before all things;  
I am the blueprint of creation.  
I was there from the beginning, from before there was a beginning.  
I am independent of time and space, earth and sky.  
I was before depth was conceived,  
before springs bubbled with water,  
before the shaping of mountains and hills,  
before God fashioned the earth and its bounty,  
before the first dust settled on the land.  
When God prepared the heavens,  
I was there.  
When the circle of the earth was etched  
into the face of the deep,  
I was there.  
When the stars and planets soared into their orbit,  
when the deepest oceans found their level  
and the dry land established the shores,  
I was there.  
I stood beside God as firstborn and friend.  
My nature is joy, and I gave God constant delight.  
Now that the world is inhabited, I rejoice in it.  
I will be your true delight if you will heed my teachings.  
(Proverbs 8:21–31)

She is, to borrow from the Latin of Baruch Spinoza, both *natura naturans*, the creativity implicit in the very nature of reality, and *natura naturata*, the results of that creativity—creation itself. Or, to borrow from Chinese Taoism she is *tzu-jan*, that which of itself is so. Chochmah is what is, and how what is is what is. Chochma “pervades and penetrates” all things (Wisdom of Solomon 7:24). As *natura naturans*, Wisdom is “intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, active, incisive, pure, lucid, invulnerable, gracious, keen, irresistible, loyal, trustworthy, all-powerful, all-pervading, and all-penetrating,” (Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-23 NRSV). As *natura naturata* Wisdom is

the structure of the world and  
the activity of the elements;  
the beginning and end and middle of times,  
the alternations of the solstices and  
the changes of the seasons,  
the cycles of the year and  
the constellations of the stars,

the natures of animals and  
the tempers of wild animals,  
the powers of spirits and  
the thoughts of human beings,  
the varieties of plants and  
the virtues of roots; ...  
all that is manifest and all that is hidden.

*(Wisdom of Solomon 7: 18–21)*

Jewish Wisdom teachings are fundamentally humanistic. One is not asked to worship Wisdom or to follow the commandments of God found in the Hebrew Bible. The goal is simply right action:

Do not hold back from helping others;  
share what you have without reservation.  
Do not say to the needy:  
*Ask me again tomorrow,*  
when you can do something today.  
Do not sow seeds of evil nor betray those who trust you.  
Do not quarrel even with those  
that do not have your best interests at heart.  
Do not envy the violent nor imitate them,  
for one who strays from the path of peace  
turns away from all that is holy;  
only the upright are intimate with God.  
The houses of the wicked are condemned,  
but the homes of the just are blessed.  
Do not underestimate the power of association:  
align yourself with scoffers and you will scoff;  
practice humility and you will be appreciated.  
The wise inherit honor, the legacy of the fool is disgrace.  
*(Proverbs 3:27–35)*

Where do these obligations come from? Are they prefaced by, “Thus spoke the Lord God”? No. There is no need to reference God as the author of Wisdom. There is no sense that these teachings are good and right because God ordains them as such. On the contrary, they are good and right because any wise examination of life will reveal them to be good and right. There is no focus on observing *mitzvot* (divine commandments), or conforming to ritual norms. Wisdom is gleaned from life experience rather than ritual observance.

How do you become wise?

“Search for Her and seek Her out, and She will reveal Herself to you. When you lay hold of Her do not let Her go. Take your rest with Her at last, and She will become ecstasy for you,” *(Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, 6:27-28 NRSV)*.

Chochma is not a reluctant guide or a hidden guru. She is not hard to find, nor does she require any austere test to prove you are worthy of her. Rather she “stands on the hilltops, on the sidewalks, at the

crossroads, at the gateways” (Proverbs 8:1-11) and calls to you to follow her. Wisdom’s only desire is to teach you to become wise. Her only frustration is your refusal to listen to her.

The way of Wisdom is study, observation, and clear perception. What you study, observe, and perceive is Wisdom as well, for she is both the Way to and the Way of. Wisdom “knows and understands all things,” (Wisdom of Solomon 9:10) because she is the creative energy through which all things arise. To know her is to know the Way of all things. But you cannot study Chochma in the abstract, for there is no abstract with her. You study Chochma by studying life and the myriad living beings that comprise life.

The ultimate gift of Wisdom is overcoming the existential sense of alienation Judaism posits as the core human dilemma. In the parable of the Garden of Eden God sees that humanity, having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (essentially the Tree of Duality), has become *achad mimenu* (Genesis 3:22), usually translated as “like one among us.” The Hebrew, however, literally means “unique from us,” or “one separate from us.” Becoming *achad* means that humanity can no longer see itself as a part of the divine whole. Instead, humanity imagines itself to be apart from rather than a part of both God and nature.

This is what Albert Einstein called “optical delusion:”

A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

God expels Adam from the Garden because God fears Adam would eat from the Tree of Life and would in this way be forever locked into this optical delusion.

Chochma is the cure for the disease of *achad* (alienation) and the optical delusion that supports it. Seeing through the illusory duality that is *achad* (imagined alienation from the whole), we awake to *echad*, the unity of all things in, with, and as the nondual Reality Judaism calls God, YHVH, the Happening is all happening. Embracing Wisdom is one way Judaism offers to achieve this goal.