Discussion Guide for Lights in the Forest: Rabbis Respond to Twelve Essential Jewish Questions

Edited by Rabbi Paul Citrin

Study Guide by Andrue Kahn

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On God

1. What is your concept of God, and how has your view changed through your life?
2. What is God's relationship to suffering and evil?
3. What is the connection between God and ethical values?
4. In our science-oriented society, how do you speak of God's role in nature and in history?

p. 3-4 Rabbi Kenneth Chasen was inspired to reconsider his relationship to God by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's quote stating that "Under the running sea of our theories and scientific explanations lies the aboriginal abyss of radical amazement." What has led you to feel a sense of radical amazement? What memories stand out as moments that have led to you sensing the greatness of the universe?

p. 7 Rabbi Kenneth Chasen makes a distinction between the "hows" of science and the "whys" of religion. What is your sense of this distinction? How has Judaism influenced what "whys" you ask, and what answers to these "whys" have you found? Where have you found them?

p. 9 Rabbi Mike Comins sees the divine life source (*chiyut)* flowing through the world and his body as a way to connect to God. How and when have you experienced or sensed *chiyut*? How does it relate to your understanding of God?

pp. 13-15 Rabbi Paul Kipnes struggles with the issue of evil and suffering in the world in relation to God's oneness, and sees it as a problem intimately tied up with humanity's free-will. How do you conceive of the problem of evil and suffering in a world if there is an all-powerful, omnipresent God? What is difficult about it for you? How do you explain the experience of separateness in the world?

p. 16 "Our role in life—as Jews who struggle with God—is to determine what *imitatio Dei* (imitation of God) means," writes Rabbi Paul Kipnes. How do you work to

"imitate God?" Does it add meaning to your life? If you do not, how do you relate to the idea of God in your everyday life?

p. 19 Rabbi Zoe Klein states that she sees God as both Author of All Metaphor and as a Fiction Writer, while some linguistic purists claim that metaphors are "abuses" of language. How does metaphor help you to relate to God? Do you find it helpful or distracting? When have you seen metaphor employed as an abuse of words in this way?

p. 26 "Everything is God. God is everything, and more," claims Rabbi Jason Rosenberg. Does this idea of God speak to you? Why or why not? How is a pantheistic view possible in a world so clearly divided and separated?

p. 27 Rabbi Jason Rosenberg states, "Where there is suffering and evil, God isn't." Where have you found the brokenness that is "a lack of God?" How can there be lack, emptiness, evil or something other than God in a pantheistic worldview?

p. 29 Rabbi Jason Rosenberg describes the complexity of the processes by which we receive food as pointing towards the divine interconnectedness of God, and that this interconnectedness is what we bless before we eat. How does viewing blessing as a way to contemplate the complexity of the universe help you to find meaning in the performance of blessings? What does it add? What meaning do you find in the act of blessing?

p. 31 In discussing ways in which Jews view God, Rabbi Ariana Silverman writes that she is "disheartened by how many Jews think that the only legitimate understanding of God is the man-on-a-throne image presented in the Bible." What is your take on the man-on-a-throne image of God? How does this version of God impact individuals' lives? In what ways is this image helpful or harmful?

p. 32 Rabbi Ariana Silverman writes that she "[experiences] God in Jewish study and stories." Which elements of the Jewish tradition have led you to an experience of God? What about those specific elements of our tradition evoked this experience?

p. 35 Rabbi Ariana Silverman describes an experience of feeling the interconnectedness of nature bringing her to an experience of God's presence. When have you sensed the interconnectedness of the world and of life? Where does God fit into this interconnectedness?

p. 37 "God is not a Being, but a Force; not a personal or providential God, but a Source from which to draw strength and inspiration," writes Rabbi Suzanne Singer. How does a fully impersonal God, or God as a force, mesh with your conception of the divine?

p. 39 Rabbi Suzanne Singer states that "Levinas believes that the Torah's ethics are not simply obligations but are essential to who we are as human beings. It is only by adhering to the Torah's ethics that we can reach our full God-given potential." How does your experience of humanity and religion connect to Levinas' understanding of ethics as essential to humanity? How do ethics play in to your daily life?

p. 45 In addressing the question of the traditional Jewish covenant with God, Rabbi Lance Sussman speaks about the idea of "a national social contract" as opposed to "a God-sanctioned universal moral covenant." How do these conceptions differ for you? How would believing in one or the other change your approach to life?

p. 46 Rabbi Lance Sussman sees no conflict between contemporary Reform Judaism and science. How does his argument resonate with you? What conflicts do you see between science and religion today? Should science have a say in ethics, and vice versa? Where should they remain separated, and where is there crossover?

p. 50 Rabbi Andy Vogel writes, "Awareness of the Oneness of all Being, of which we are a part, raises our compassion and our sense of ethical responsibility to all." What do you do to maintain perspective on your life in comparison to the rest of the universe? How do you maintain a balance between a healthy ego and a healthy level of humility?

p. 52 "Judaism affirms our urge to respond to God, to act, to take responsibility for our lives," writes Rabbi Andy Vogel. How do you respond to this sacred responsibility for life? What would this mean on a practical level? What is different or unique about this responsibility for Judaism?

p. 56 Rabbi Max Weiss writes, "God enters human history when we bring God into human history." What do you think he means by this statement? How does a God that is reliant on human action mesh with your theology? How can we bring God into human history?

p. 58 Rabbi Or Zohar lays out a model of relating to God based on human interactions. What do you think of this model? How does human interaction help model our relationship to God? Where does it fail?

p. 64 Rabbi Elaine Zecher shares with us that she "[has] learned that [she] has to work at experiencing God. In study, in prayer, in meditation, and in acts of loving-kindness, God becomes manifest." In what ways and by what methods do you work to experience God? What has worked? What hasn't?

p. 66 Rabbi Elaine Zecher states, "For many of us, serving others is the definition of our spiritual selves. And yet in the course of taking care of others, we need not neglect nurturing our inner lives and our awareness of God's presence to sustain us in this sacred work." How does one strike the balance between maintaining the self and serving others? When does self sacrifice become self neglect?

p. 70-71 The issue of good and evil is one which Rabbi Joshua "Yoshi" Zweiback struggles with throughout his essay. In what ways is this struggle familiar or unfamiliar to you? How do you define good and evil? Where do we find definitions that apply to God, or does God transcend these concepts?

Wrap-Up Questions, Section One

1. In what ways does developing and investigating God concepts help you to relate to Judaism? How does it hinder your connection to the tradition? Which of the responses in this section are the most helpful in creating your own personal God concept, and why?
2. How do you anchor the value systems that order your life? What does theology do to help you in defining these systems? What does Judaism do to help you? What are the biggest challenges you face in this regard?
3. How does one define a God that is natural or supernatural? What does being "beyond nature" mean to you? How does Judaism support or not support either conception of God? Which of the responses offered here are the closest to your own definition of God, and why?

Section Two

On Our Humanity

1. What does it mean to be created in the divine image?
2. What does the concept of gender contribute to our understanding of being human?
3. The terms "grace" (חֵן, *chein*), "salvation" (יְשׁוּעָה, *y'shuah*), and "love" (אַהֲבָה, *ahavah*) have been important concepts in Jewish religious vocabulary, but are frequently associated with Christianity. What can these terms mean in our contemporary Jewish lives?
4. What is your concept of soul and afterlife?

p. 75 Rabbi Lee Bycel shares his story of visiting Eastern Chad, where the level of suffering led him to wrestle with his conception of all of humanity being created in the divine image. What does our awareness of suffering in the world do to humanity? How does it shape our relationships to each other and to God?

p. 80 "We best prepare for the afterlife by learning how to embrace the unknown in life and believing that no matter how dark the night, light will come in the morning," writes Rabbi Lee Bycel. In what ways to you deal with the innate human fear of the unknown? How does one prepare one's self to accept the unknown?

p. 83 Rabbi Micah Citrin writes that "*Chein*, grace, is what we experience in life in spite of ourselves, regardless of what we deserve." In what common things that we usually take for granted can you find the *chein* of God towards creation?

p. 88 According to Rabbi Ben David, "To be created in the divine image is to know that in your hands is great power: power to enact change, power to heal, power to grant compassion and strength." What is your response to that idea? What do we learn about humanity from God? What makes humanity *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God?

pp. 94-95 Rabbi Denise Eger discusses the complex nature of gender in Jewish tradition. How can we use the fluidity and variegations of gender in our tradition to inform

our humanity? How does this "rainbow of humanity" enrich our world? How does it challenge us?

p. 96 *Y'shuah,* or salvation, is when, according to Rabbi Denise Eger, "with God's help, we restore our lives to wholeness and completeness." How does salvation express itself in your life? When have you experienced the feeling of salvation? Are there ways to conceive of "*y'shuah*" that would enrich your life?

p. 98 Rabbi Stephen Fuchs sees humanity as "midway between God and the other animals of the earth." What does this configuration mean to you? In what ways does it enrich our humanity? How does it affect our relationships to God and to animals?

p. 99 Creativity is, according to Rabbi Stephen Fuchs, one of the markers of humanity being created in God's image. In what ways has the human capacity for creation added meaning to your life? When is creativity a divine characteristic? When is it not?

p. 100 Rabbi Stephen Fuchs focuses on the binary conception of gender in the Jewish tradition. Why or why not do you agree with his argument? In what ways does a binary understanding of gender allow us to find meaning in our tradition? In what ways does it hold us back?

p. 101 Love, grace, and salvation are the things that humanity must earn according to classical Jewish tradition, writes Rabbi Stephen Fuchs. How might the idea of earning God's love, grace, and salvation affect your behavior? How might it affect your relationship to Judaism?

pp. 101-102 Rabbi Stephen Fuchs provides multiple lenses through which to understand death and life after death through the Jewish tradition. What tools does our tradition provide us to cope with it? Which speak to you? Which do you struggle with, and why?

p. 105 According to Rabbi Oren Hayon, "The holiest part of our humanness is that we, like God, are each utterly and undeniably unique." What is your experience of individual human uniqueness? In what ways is the separation between individuals based on perceived individual uniqueness positive and negative?

p. 107 Rabbi Oren Hayon writes, "Reproduction and intimacy are precious to God; as we explore these dimensions of human life, we become better acquainted with the Jewish truth that our bodies are not obstacles to spiritual life, but doorways into a deeper relationship with God." What is your response to this idea? How does the traditional Jewish focus on reproductive intimacy affect those who are unable or do not wish to reproduce?

p. 108 Rabbi Oren Hayon writes that he finds Maimonides' notion of the afterlife as a purely intellectual existence comforting. Do you find this purely intellectual conception of the afterlife comforting? Is there another form of the afterlife you find comforting? How does the comfort of such a belief legitimize it or not?

p. 113 According to Rabbi Yoel Kahn, the Jewish expression of *ahavat olam*, everlasting love, is most clearly seen in the interaction between God and the Jewish people around the Torah. As he writes, "Yet if Torah is the expression or articulation of God's love for us, then our engagement with Torah—our wrestling, our interpretation, our renewal—is the route through which we express our love back to God." Which pieces of our tradition ring of *ahavat olam* to you? How can those set in a firmly modern worldview genuinely wrestle with the Torah? How can we balance our contemporary sensibilities with the demands of ancient texts?

pp. 114-115 Rabbi Yoel Kahn sees the soul as the animating energy of the body. What do you understand this idea to mean? Does this take meaning away from individuality? How do you conceive of the essence of the individual?

p. 117 Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell writes, "Just as we work toward seeing ourselves as reflections of holiness, our perspective on the world changes when we begin to consider every individual, every human being, as created in God's image." By

what methods can we continually remind ourselves that all humans are made in God's image? If we are ever-changing, what does this mean about God?

pp. 118-119 Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell discusses the very complex issue of gender in our day and in Jewish history. How can one respectfully wrestle with ideas and expressions of gender or sexuality that seem alien? How can one address the discomfort often present when first encountering these phenomena?

p. 119 In discussing the concept of salvation, Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell writes, "*Y'shuah* invites deep conversation about the timing of events, encounters, and opportunities in our lives." How do you interpret coincidences such as these in life? Have you ever felt a divine hand in an experience of timely aid?

p. 121 Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell believes that "in the end, each moment has meaning, even when we ourselves cannot parse that meaning." In what ways do you interpret your life as meaningful? The lives of your loved ones? Of those who have passed on?

p. 122 "Human beings partake of the divine image in three principal ways: through the power of creation and destruction, the faculty of speech, and the ability to love," writes Rabbi Jay Moses writes. What is your response to this idea? When have you felt that you were partaking of the divine image?

p. 124 Rabbi Jay Moses shares his belief that, "When we can harness the mysterious power of gender, using it not as a tool of power or subjugation, overcoming the innate distance and alienation its overlay can impose upon us, we can achieve our most sublime states of human existence: redemption and peace." In what ways have you found gender an empowering aspect of your life? In what ways has it been a disempowering one?

p. 125 In relation to how we conceive of God, Rabbi Jay Moses explains, "As religious people, we need a God to whom we can relate in human terms, even as we know

that those terms apply to God only metaphorically." How do you conceive of God in personal, anthropopathic terms? Literally? Metaphorically? Somewhere in between?

p. 125 Rabbi Jay Moses relates a mystical conception of God, writing, "The mystics of our tradition teach that each of us has within us a divine spark. This spark is what connects us to our ultimate Source, God, the great light that gives off the sparks. A related image is that God is the root system of our souls." Does this imagery resonate with you? Why or why not? How do you conceive of "the Source?" How do you experience and express this?

p. 127 Rabbi Debra Robbins shares a list of names for God that she uses to help us understand what it means to be created in the divine image. Is there a name or title of God that you most closely identify with? In what ways do you emulate this aspect of the divine?

p. 129 Rabbi Debra Robbins shares her belief that, "We are the descendants of this community, of Moses *and* Miriam. It is time to stop wandering and struggling. There is room for all the voices, for all the ideas, for the leadership of men and women." Which voices are missing in our community today? How can we help these voices be heard?

p. 130 In recounting her grandmother's understanding of *chein* (grace), *ahavah* (love), and *y'shuah* (salvation), Rabbi Debra Robbins writes, "She talked with God, in the synagogue and at home, praising and petitioning God to see with *chein* (inherent goodness or grace) those who needed it, to shower *ahavah* (boundless love) on her loved ones, to bring *y'shuah* (salvation), to intervene in life, like in biblical times, with redemptive miracles to free us from narrow places of personal struggle." In which ways are you most comfortable affirming *chein, ahavah, and y'shuah* in your life? In which ways are you least comfortable?

p. 137 Rabbi Judith Schindler shares her understanding of how our energy survives beyond death, writing, "My father was my teacher and mentor, who taught me how to craft sermons and eulogies and how to be a rabbi. When exhaustion overcomes me and I don't know how to find the words to soften the pain of those experiencing a tragedy or inspire a congregation on a holy day, a divine energy and my dad's energy move me forward." When have you felt yourself being moved forward by a power beyond yourself? How do you envision our individual energies as carrying on after our physical bodies are gone? In what ways have you felt moved and how do you hope to move others?

p. 138 "To say that we are made *b'tzelem Elohim* is to make a radical statement of human equality, a vital message in a world driven by invidious distinctions that weigh the value of some over others. The concept of creation in the divine image cuts through and ultimately invalidates all human classifications, providing a 'God's-eye view' that reminds us that each soul is infinitely precious," writes Rabbi Stanton Zamek. If we view all humans as equally divine, how then do we account for the heinous acts of some individuals? How are we to respond to the individuals who commit these acts?

pp. 138-139 Rabbi Stanton Zamek sees the Jewish conception of the soul as a call to humanity to manifest the God-given purity within us into the world. How can we express our souls during our lives? By what methods do you most meaningfully express yours?

pp. 141-142 Covenantal love "is a love that asks more from us and from God than feeling alone. It is a love that is to be demonstrated through action," writes Rabbi Stanton Zamek. How do you express your love for God? Do you see others do it differently?

p. 145 Rabbi Ben Zeidman states that the "piece of holiness within each and every human being explains why we have obligations to take care of our world." What is your experience of humanity's divine calling? When and where have you

witnessed human behavior that displays our inherent obligations to take care of the world?

Wrap-Up Questions, Section Two

Where do you see humanity fitting in to the universe? Where do we stand in relation to the rest of the planet? How does our relationship to God or the divine affect this? Which of the responses offered in this section most spoke to you, and why?

How is gender a useful category today? How does it affect your life and your identity? How does Judaism influence this? Which of the related responses offered in this section made the most sense to you, and why?

What are your beliefs in relation to the afterlife? What kind of experiences have you had that either give you confidence or shake your confidence in it? Does Judaism inform your idea of the afterlife? How did the responses offered in this section affirm or challenge your views on these ideas?

Section Three

On The Jewish People

1. As liberal Jews who value religious autonomy, how are the concepts of "covenant" (בְּרִית), *b'rit,* and "commandment" (מִצְוָה), *mitzvah,* relevant to us? In what way is the Torah sacred text for us?

2. What is a Jewish definition of "being religious" or "having faith"? How does communal prayer fit into the definition?

3. Does the Jewish people have a unique vocation among the nations? Do you affirm hope in a "messianic age" (יְמוֹת הַמָּשִׁיחַ), *y'mot hamashiach*?

4. Are Jews obligated to enter into dialogue with members of other faith communities? If so, on what basis and toward what end?

p. 153 Rabbi Geoffrey Dennis writes, "We are born embedded in circumstances beyond our control: genes and gender, geography and family, resources and law, what we know and what we don't. We grow in a chrysalis of inherited relationships—personal, political, and cultural." How do you view your freedom as having been limited by your circumstances? Which has had more power in your life, freedom or circumstance? How does the idea of being limited by circumstances impact on your sense of self?

p. 155 The Jewish people "are less like a group of co-religionists and more like a global aboriginal people with its own unique, endless, and endlessly varied spiritual tradition that informs the way in which we move through the world," Rabbi Geoffrey Dennis believes. What is the difference between Judaism as a religious tradition or an ethnic heritage? How does the balance between the two play out in your mind and in your life? What is the challenge inherent in such a belief?

p. 160 Rabbi Dena Feingold states that our side of the *b'rit*, or covenant, with God is to practice mitzvot, which are "sacred obligations to history, peoplehood, and heritage that we observe, as our hearts dictate, growing in such observance, by

study and practice, throughout our lives." What is your response to this idea? What sacred obligations have you committed to in your life? How do you interpret your side of the *b'rit?*

p. 164 Rabbi Michael Friedman shares his belief that "Jewish ritual helps us to be our best selves." Which mitzvot do you most connect with? In what ways do they make you feel more human? What is your personal experience of Jewish ritual? How do these rituals affect you emotionally, mentally, and spiritually?

p. 171 "Jewish tradition greets the concept of 'chosenness' with ambivalence," writes Rabbi George Gittelman. What do you think about this statement? How do you conceive of Jewish chosenness and enact it?

p. 173 In regard to interfaith dialogue and outreach to other faith communities, Rabbi George Gittelman states, "Any obligation Jews might feel to enter into dialogue with members of other faith communities arises from our liberalism and not from traditional Judaism." What is your opinion of the Jewish people's responsibility to the non-Jewish world? How do you share your tradition with others? Do you feel that you get along in spite of the differences, or with help from them?

p. 175 Rabbi Jeff Goldwasser asks, "Have you ever noticed how liberal Jews rarely, if ever, define themselves as "religious?" Why or why not do you agree with this statement? In what parts of your life do you consider yourself religious? What other words would you use to describe your relationship to Judaism?

p. 180 Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch states, "The concept of mitzvah must include obligations to the Jewish people." How do you feel about the concept of general Jewish responsibility to other Jews? What is your responsibility to world Jewry? To Jewish neighbors of differing Jewish backgrounds? How does it differ from your responsibility to non-Jewish neighbors?

p. 180 Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch believes that "[liberal Jews] do not seek unfettered autonomy. Rather, we aspire to maximal personal and institutional autonomy

limited by and serving the needs of the Jewish people." How do you understand this idea? How do you balance your personal autonomy with communal responsibility?

p. 183 "Judaism's concern is with the particular—the Jewish people— that practices a universal purpose: to 'do what is right and just' (Genesis 18:19), to 'repair the world under the sovereignty of God' (siddur), to be 'a light to the nations, opening eyes deprived of light' (Isaiah 42:6–7)," writes Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch. How do you feel about Jewish particularism? What are its tensions with contemporary universalistic conceptions of humanity? In what ways do you like Jewish particularism, and in what ways do you not?

p. 188 Rabbi Bruce Kadden asserts that the Jewish people has always "looked towards the future." What do you think he means by this? What is the future that you envision for the Jewish people? What part do you believe that you will play in this?

pp. 189-190 In a call to greater interfaith dialogue, Rabbi Bruce Kadden shares his belief that there are many core values shared by world religions. What do you think that these shared core values are? Where do these shared values come from?

p. 192 Rabbi Rachel Mikva states that she believes, "The power and sanctity of Torah are uncovered precisely in digging through the rough parts." How do you engage with the problematic pieces of our tradition? How are you empowered to be a part of the chain of interpreting these "rough parts"? In what ways do you feel limited in your participation?

p. 193 In discussing what it means to be a holy person, Rabbi Rachel Mikva lays out a framework for being holy based on Jewish traditional text. What is your understanding of holiness? How can you attain it? What practices do you have that make your life holy?

p. 195 Rabbi Rachel Mikva writes, “Jews have a unique vocation, profoundly bound up with living and learning Torah.” What do you view the role of the Jewish people to be in the world? How does it fit in with the other nations? How is it innately different?

p. 168 Rabbi Evan Moffic shares his belief that the covenant of the Jewish people is enacted by taking part in the “journey that began before us, continues after us, and is carried forward by and through us.” Where do you see yourself fitting into the continuing journey of the Jewish people? How does this define your role in the covenant?

p. 202 Rabbi Joseph Skloot shares two different midrashim about the Jewish relationship to God, one teaching us that Judaism is a matter of will and autonomy, one that it is a matter of fate and constraint. Which version of the midrash of Jewish acceptance of the Torah do you connect more with? What does it elucidate for you?

p. 203 Rabbi Joseph Skloot believes that “theology is hardly the sum total of Jewish experience.” How do you understand what he means by this? What is theology’s role in Judaism? Where do you find theology to be meaningful in your conception of Judaism?

p. 206 Rabbi Joseph Skloot shares the history of interfaith dialogue within the Jewish world. What place does interfaith dialogue hold in your life? What role might it play? What are the gains from exploring our similarities? Our differences?

p. 210 According to Rabbi Joshua Stanton, all Jews today must be seen as actively choosing Judaism for themselves. What does this idea mean to you? How have you expressed your agency in this regard? What is it that makes you a part of the Jewish people? What would it mean to choose not to be?

p. 213 Rabbi Joshua Stanton frames the Torah and mitzvot as guiding values for contemporary Jews. In what ways do you use our tradition to help you to make decisions in your life? Have you found Torah, in the large-scale meaning of the

word, to be a helpful guide? What do you rely upon as a primary guiding framework in life?

pp. 213-215 Rabbi Joshua Stanton shares a poetic piece that investigates how we view our relationship to the rest of the universe. What do you see as the center of your universe? How does this center play into your life?

pp. 220-221 Rabbi Mary Zamore states that she believes that it is up to humanity to use our God-given tools to bring about a messianic age. In what ways do you see yourself as contributing to bringing about the messianic age?

Wrap-Up Questions, Section Three

How do you relate to the Jewish people? What does it mean to be Jewish? How have the responses offered here affirmed, changed or challenged your ideas in this regard?

What does being in a covenant with God mean? How does the Torah fit in to this relationship? What might it mean for you personally? In what way is this idea a struggle for you?

Is there a form of messiah or messianic age that you believe in? What do you think is needed to achieve such an age in our world? How have the responses offered here added to your understanding of these ideas?

What kind of relationship do you have with other religions? With people of other religions? How does this influence your relationship to Judaism? Which of the responses offered here have been the most helpful to your understanding of these issues?