Breath of Life

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GOD AS SPIRIT IN JUDAISM

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To my three loves

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Introduction

LET'S GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER

I OFTEN FIND MYSELF IN THE STRANGE POSITION OF DEFENDING GOD. As a rabbi, I encounter many people who think of God as a quaint throwback to earlier times, a fantasy that sensible people gave up in the twentieth century. They are usually too polite to ask: "Don't you know about the Big Bang and evolution? Do you really believe there's a big man up there in the clouds controlling our world?"

In our era of science and technology, when humanity has mastered so much of our world and can explain many previously mysterious phenomena, belief in God seems antiquated to some—or stubborn. Like the child with her hands clamped over her ears who does not want to hear that it's bedtime, those of us who still talk about God are accused of shutting out the facts.

Some people I talk to do not trust organized religion for its contribution to war and human conflict, and for the times when religious institutions have placated suffering populations or promoted discrimination rather than changing unjust conditions. Some who are angry at religion think of belief in God not only as misleading but also as dangerous. I find that sometimes just using the word *God* carries the risk of losing my listeners, who will assume that I'm a different kind of person than they are. They will

hear in that one word the message that I'm a Believer, capital *B*, someone who has stopped thinking because she knows she has all of the answers.

What's strange about this position is that I'm not very different from my wary listeners. I am fascinated by science, intrigued by the latest theories about our universe. If anything, I think too much, employ reason to a fault. I, like them, have more questions than answers. I too am critical of the role that religious institutions have played in perpetuating human suffering and war, but I also know that religion has given meaning to countless lives, including my own. There are hundreds of thousands of people working today to alleviate poverty and fight injustice because they were inspired by their religious traditions to do so. At its best, institutional religion demands that we reach for the very best we have within us, striving to create human societies grounded in justice and seeking peace.

I grew up in a home with little conversation about God but with constant conversation about politics. My parents sent me to prepare for bat mitzvah because that's what good Reform Jews did, but what they really wanted me to be was the junior senator from the state of Florida. I found no meaningful inquiry about God in my Miami synagogue of the 1980s. No one would expect that the quiet young woman who dropped out of synagogue life after becoming bat mitzvah, the Yale political science major, would be on this side of the God conversation.

I have no grand tale to offer here, no pivotal epiphany. It's just that I began to pay attention to the experience of being alive, started to ask questions about the purpose of my life, and felt drawn to dig beneath the surface for meaning. There was a

camping trip in a Southwest canyon, walking out by myself on the path, a stark blue sky colliding with the jagged edges of red rock cliffs, enormous crunchy black beetles scuttling across the road, trees rustling all around, birds swooping, and the motion of river nearby but out of sight. A sudden feeling of joy, of floating, of utter belonging. Sky and cloud and cliff and grass and river, tree and wind and leaf and rock and bird—all intimate cousins, belonging to each other and to me from before time and again now. I saw that we are all part of a greater oneness. I felt it; I knew it beyond questions, beyond thinking.

There was the time after my father had a stroke. The physical therapy room of the hospital. Amputees, quadriplegics, stroke victims. He, down on a mat, paralyzed, afraid, trembling, trying to move his left arm. Me, eleven, crushed, panicked, trying to help. And then the noise of the room went still; a softness came between us, in the lock of our eyes, a fearlessness. And he moved, reached out his paralyzed arm, and held my hand.

There is that moment we've all experienced: looking at a night full of stars and seeing ourselves from the perspective of the dark and sparkling cosmos, suddenly so small as to be forgotten, so insignificant as to be a miracle. We feel, we sense that there is something beyond us, running through us, pulling us, holding us. For me, this isn't belief. It is knowing. I use the word *God* as the shorthand for what I know is there. The presence that we all experience. What we sense, perceive, intuit, feel beyond the material world.

When this mystery became compelling to me, I knew I needed to find my way back into a synagogue. It took me until I was twenty-four years old to gather the courage to do so, and there

I found old, familiar words and melodies pointing at these same experiences and questions, seeking after this same mystery. In the Jewish approach to the study of Torah, I found a legacy of open-ended, curious, creative inquiry into the meaning and purpose of our existence. Ten years later, I decided to become a rabbi. And here I am, writing about God, writing about spirit, writing about the Jewish tradition.

This book is part of a series by Paraclete Press about God as Spirit. While the other volumes address God as Spirit in Christian, Evangelical, and Orthodox thought, this book traces the idea of God as spirit through the Hebrew Bible from the perspective of Jewish tradition, with the hope of speaking meaningfully to both Christian and Jewish readers. Though our two heritages have a great deal in common, there are key differences in the way that we view God and read the Bible. Let us begin with some explanation about the Jewish way.

THE WORD *GOD*

What do we mean when we say "God"? When, in a moment of crisis or despair, we call out, "Please, God!" to whom are we calling? When, in relief or appreciation, we say, "Thank God!" to whom are we expressing gratitude? When we enter our houses of worship to offer the service of our hearts, whom or what are we addressing? When we question whether God exists, whom or what are we doubting? Is it the bearded king on the throne of heaven, the earth as his footstool? Is God a being: living, breathing, like us? Is God physical in any way, embodied, anthropomorphic ("shaped like a human")? Or is God strictly immaterial, ethereal, spiritual?

Nearly every English speaker on earth, regardless of religious affiliation, uses the word *God*, whether out of deep conviction or idiomatic expression, whether as referent to a specific image or in the absence of one. Christians and Jews translate our sacred texts from Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin, and we find ourselves with this one word in English to describe the source of the universe and the sovereign of all that lives. This one word, and the fact that we share a sacred text, the Hebrew Bible, enables us to speak to one another and to feel that we understand one another. Because we have the same Scripture from which we read, we have the impression that when Christians and Jews say "God," we all mean the same thing.

But what do we mean?

In the ancient cultures out of which Judaism grew, gods looked and acted like people. They had faces, arms, hands, and genitals. They were male and female, and they coupled with one another. They became angry and needed appeasement; they had loyalties, agendas, and dramas. They were superhumans, with human traits writ large.

In the Hebrew Bible, one can see the influence of these cultures on the descriptions of God that have human attributes. God says, "Let us make the human in our image." God walks through the Garden of Eden. God saves the Israelites with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. God becomes angry; God feels compassion. In the prophet Isaiah's vision, God is sitting on a throne. This anthropomorphic God concept continues in post-Biblical Jewish tradition. In all Jewish blessings said to this day, God is referred to as *melech ha'olam*, "sovereign of the world."

However, Judaism's primary innovation was its understanding that God cannot be reduced to any thing we know—not a body, an object, or a natural force. The Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) uses familiar imagery to appeal to people whose sole reference points were idols, but it does so to teach the very destruction of idolatry. The second of the Ten Commandments prohibits the creation of an image of God: "You shall have no other gods besides Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them" (Exod. 20:3–5). How is it that the creation of an image of God was so offensive that it ranks in the top ten of all six hundred and thirteen *mitzvot* (commandments) that appear in Torah?

As we reach out for God, it is human instinct to make images, to shape forms, to create intermediaries that enable us to imagine what God might look like, or to evoke in us some feeling of affection or comprehension. This is the very danger that Torah is warning against, for even if we know that the image or statue or fetish is not really God, we can easily become confused and transfer in our minds some measure of God's greatness and power to the image we have created. And in so doing, we risk the illusion that God is our creation when, in reality, we are God's creation.

The problem is not with the imagery in the mind's eye. Our minds will make images forever; and the shifting, changing imagery of our vibrant imaginations helps us to relate to the ineffable. The problem is when we fix an image. When we shape God in stone or wood or paint, we exercise control over God's image and features. We tame God into something finite, as if the infinite One were within our control. We reduce God in our imagination

to a thing, which impoverishes our perception of who and what God is. It is the externalized, shared, fixed image that is dangerous because it falsely limits what is infinite.

Moses Maimonides, a twelfth-century rabbi physician, was the greatest elucidator in Jewish history of the prohibition on idolatry. He teaches that to worship any created thing, or to make something a mediator between us and the Eternal One, is idolatry. Even if the use of that intermediary is to direct one's heart to the Eternal, it concretizes the intangible and stands between us and God.[1] This is why Judaism insists that God has no shape or form. This is why we must not attempt to represent God by what is found in the heavens, the earth, or the sea—for nothing that we find or know can adequately represent the unknowable One.

Since the days of Maimonides, all references to God's body are understood by Judaism as metaphor, as figurative language that enables us to relate to God. When a Jew reads of God's strong hand and outstretched arm bringing us out of Egypt, we understand the language to be poetic, describing God's might and saving power. When we remind ourselves that humanity was created in the image of God, we do not mean that God has a pinky finger, but that we have a sacred dignity about us, and we should treat one another with that in mind. When we read of Moses speaking to God *panim el panim,* "face to face," we understand Torah to be describing an unrivaled intimacy between our great prophet and the Holy One.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY *SPIRIT?*

When we hear the phrase, "God as spirit," I would imagine that most Christians think of the Trinity, and within Trinity the Holy

Spirit. For Jews, the phrase "God as spirit" is less clear. Jews do not believe that God has three Persons. In fact, every time we pray, Jews all over the world speak our central statement of faith—*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*. "Hear O Israel, Adonai our God, Adonai is One" (Deut. 6:4). The oneness of God is our central and most important tenet. It would seem, then, that God as spirit is a point at which Judaism and Christianity diverge. If Jews believe in one, indivisible God, what does it mean to say, "God as spirit"?

When I first took on the project of writing this book, it was difficult to explain to other Jews, particularly other rabbis. "What are you writing?" they'd ask.

"I'm writing a book about God as spirit in Judaism."

"God *as* spirit in Judaism?" they repeated, their brows furrowed, a puzzled look in their eyes. "What does that mean? . . . What will you say?"

The phrase "God as spirit" raises concerns for Jewish listeners because it sounds Christian. Let's start with the word *as*. The word *as* sounds like God turns into different forms, one of which is spirit. As we've seen, the most important idea, after the idea that God cannot be compared to anything, is the idea that God is one. If God is one, and God is indescribable, how can God manifest in different ways? In order to make sense of the concept in Jewish terms, it helps to remember that God has many different names and faces in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition. For example, during the Rabbinic period (in the first six centuries of the common era) and later, God is seen as having a feminine, indwelling presence called the *Shekhinah*. The Rabbis of the Talmud call God *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* and *HaRachaman*, meaning

"The Holy One, Blessed be He" and "The Compassionate One," among many other names. Our tradition sometimes describes God as the lord of a great army, sometimes as a parent. If we can see God in all of these different ways, we can also see God as spirit. In this light, "God as spirit" can mean spirit as a name for God, as a metaphor for God, as a possession of God, or as a human experience of God.

The next issue is the word *spirit*. The English word *spirit* comes from the Latin *spiritus*, which means "breath"—and in Latin is often associated with soul, courage, and vigor. The Latin is an adaptation from the Greek *pneuma*, meaning "breath" and "incorporeal presence," associated with consciousness, mind, and intelligence. The word *spirit* we use in English today has retained these associations, most commonly meaning the nonphysical parts of a person. Spirit is related to breath, but it is more than breath. We say "inspiration" to mean both the intake of air into our lungs and the spark of vision, idea, and motivation. While "respiration" is breathing, "aspiration" is goal or passion.

Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman writes: "What most Western thought takes as spiritual rhetoric is largely foreign to Jewish spiritual discourse. . . . The language of spirituality (like the language of theology) is a foreign implant for Jews. It is not that Jews have no ideas that correspond to . . . Christian theological topics . . . but it takes a sort of translation process to arrive at what our parallels are. . . . It is not as if Jews can't use those words, but it takes work to make them fit."[2]

Over the last thirty years, as Jewish spirituality has become increasingly popular, a growing number of Jewish leaders and writers have been working on translating the language of

spirituality for Jewish use, to make the words fit. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner calls spirituality "the immediacy of God's presence." Rabbi Arthur Green defines spirituality as "the striving for life in the presence of God and the fashioning of a life of holiness appropriate to such striving." Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer says, "Spirituality, as I understand it, is noticing the wonder, noticing that what seems disparate and confusing to us is actually whole." Rabbi Kerry Olitzky says, "Spirituality is the process through which the individual strives to meet God."[3] Through the work of these rabbis and others, the language of spirit and spirituality is now available for Jews wanting to express their experience of the holy.

As we explore the complex notion of God as spirit in Judaism through the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish commentaries on it, we will find that the language of spirit has always been present in our tradition. The Hebrew word most often translated as spirit, *ruach*, is everywhere in Torah—it appears 378 times throughout Tanakh. Onomatopoeic (rhhuu-ahhh), *ruach* is life-giving breath, a simple wind, and the spirit that animates creation. Each time our lungs fill and empty, it is *ruach* that enters and escapes. As we watch our sleeping children, it is *ruach* that lifts and lowers their resting bodies. It is *ruach* that rushes past us on a mountain crest, gently flutters the leaves of an Aspen tree, and stings our faces on a blustery winter day. According to Torah, it is *ruach* that prompts ecstatic prophecy, endows us with understanding and skill, and girds us with courage and the strength to lead. It is *ruach* that God gives us and takes away, so says Ecclesiastes. *Ruach* is beyond us, around us, and within us. It is as natural as breath and as supernatural as God's own self. *Ruach*, the creative

force present at the first moment of the formation of the world, is associated with God, with nature, and with humanity.

And there is more than one Hebrew word in Tanakh that is translated as spirit. Unlike *ruach*, which is an impersonal, creative force, *neshamah* is exchanged in the nurturing relationship between Creator and created. *Neshamah* belongs to the essence of God and the essence of humanity. *Neshimah* means "breath"; *neshamah* means "soul." Our souls and our breaths are intertwined and interdependent, coming from God, dwelling in us for a short time, and returning to God each night and upon our death.

Given the Jewish evolution beyond God as body, it is easy to see why *ruach*—spirit, breath, wind—and *neshamah*—breath, soul—are such immediate concepts in relation to God in Torah. Spirit is ungraspable, invisible, without shape or form. Wind is one of the few forces that we all feel, experience, and relate to even though we cannot see it and it has no shape. We feel breath every moment of every day; we live by it, but it has no image. For a religion bound by lack of imagery in description of God, these concepts are intuitive—and fundamental.

It is therefore tempting to suggest that God in Judaism is all spirit, a universal spirit, the origin and aggregate of all spirit. But we will see that it may not be that simple. It is very rare in Tanakh for God to be compared to spirit. More often, it seems that God has spirit, or gives spirit, or takes spirit back. To say simply that God is spirit might be another reduction of the mysterious infinite One. Our words and concepts for the nonmaterial world are so few and undeveloped that we run the risk of oversimplifying with our limited vocabulary. We use words, ideas, images—all of the tools we evolved animals

have to communicate—but all of these are simply our best but imperfect efforts to describe something indescribable.

When Moses, the shepherd-in-exile, allows himself to be drawn off course by the bush that is all aflame but not consumed, when he turns aside and listens, the God he encounters does not define itself as spirit.

"Who should I say sent me?" the reluctant prophet asks of the One.

"*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*" is the response. "I am that I am."

God says: I exist. You cannot comprehend me, but I exist. The Hebrew word for God is *Elohim*, the plural of an ancient Semitic word for god, *el*. The Jewish people's special name for God, the unpronounceable four-letter name that appears throughout the Hebrew Bible, hints at breath, wind, and spirit but points to a mystery beyond them. Known as the tetragrammaton, these four letters—*yod*, *hey*, *vav*, *hey*—are related to the verb "to be." The root of the word—*hey*, *vav*, *hey*—is the Hebrew word for the present, as in the present tense. A *yod* before a Hebrew verb in Modern Hebrew brings that verb into the future, but in Tanakh it generally shows continuing action, turning an action completed in the past into something ongoing. Therefore, it is possible to read the tetragrammaton as the present becoming forever, from "what is" to "what always will be."

Human beings like to give others names, and we are good at it. When the first human being is created, God leads it around the Garden of Eden, inviting it to name all of the animals. When we know something's name and are able to speak that name, we gain some measure of power over it. We are able to objectify what we name. In contrast, The Name, the four-letter name of God,

is beyond our power of naming. Tradition has it that by the first century no one but the High Priest in Jerusalem knew how to say The Name, and he only did so one time each year, on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur. He did this only in the holiest city, Jerusalem, in the holiest edifice, the Holy Temple, in the holiest space within the holy Temple, the Holy of Holies. The High Priest prepared himself for days, purifying his body, his speech, and his thoughts in order to speak God's name in the Holy of Holies, the place of God's dwelling, the location of the ark of the covenant.

Rather than pronounce the tetragrammaton, Jews developed a convention of saying "Adonai," meaning "My Lord," to refer to the name. Thousands of years later, when vowels were added to the text of the Hebrew Bible, the vowels of "Adonai" were placed under the four-letter name to indicate that the reader ought to substitute "Adonai" for the name. These vowels, combined with the letters of the unpronounceable name, led to incorrect renderings such as "Jahovah." Instead, the four-letter name of God retains a mystery and power that cannot be tamed with our speech. By remaining unpronounceable, the name points to a magnitude beyond the limits of our capacity for expression. But, *if* we could hear God's name expressed, *yod-hey-vav-hey* would sound like wind, or breath, or spirit. Expressed without vowels these four letters together would be a deep, released breath, like wind moving through cliffs, like spirit hovering.

BIBLE WITH A JEWISH LENS

Putting the pieces together, we are beginning to see God from a Jewish perspective: singular, without image, with a name that

hints at spirit. As we embark on this exploration of the Jewish idea of God as spirit, there are a few ideas to impart about how Jews interact with Torah. Jews don't read Torah; we delve into it. The blessing for the study of Torah describes the act as occupying oneself, as engagement. We study Torah as an archaeologist excavates a dig site. Our assumption is that the surface layer gives us only a small fraction of the treasure contained within. We seek out hints, clues, associations, metaphors, and hidden meaning. Never in Jewish history has there been only one correct reading of a verse of Torah. Every phrase, every word, is laden with possibility, and our tradition holds that multiple interpretations can coexist as true.

It is therefore important that we keep in mind that for Jews Torah does not stop at the edges of the scroll. The meaning of any word in Holy Scripture is not fixed or finite; it is shaped by both the words that surround it and the generations of interpreters that fill the white space around it. The Kabbalists, the Jewish mystics of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, called Torah black fire on white fire, to say that meaning is burning in the letters and in the space around them. It is not possible to understand Judaism by reading the Hebrew Bible on its own. Just as the Hebrew Bible provides only the first chapter to Christianity and is read by Christians through the lens of the New Testament, so too the Hebrew Bible provides only the first chapter to Judaism and is read by Jews through the eyes of Rabbinic Judaism: the Midrash, the Mishnah, and the Talmud, which were redacted between 200 and 600 of the Common Era. Intergenerational inquiry changed the lens through which we read the text. Each new generation adds its own questions,

concerns, and perspectives. The conversation taking place across the generations itself becomes Torah.

Therefore, the Torah found in these pages is read through the lens of Jewish tradition as recorded in the centuries and millennia following the Biblical era in the writings of the early Rabbis, in the commentary of the medieval rabbis, and in the literature of modern and contemporary rabbis and scholars. Even the categories by which we will look at God as spirit in Judaism are shaped by the many generations that followed the Biblical authors.

CREATION, REVELATION, REDEMPTION

When the Rabbis of the first century of the Common Era developed the fixed prayers that were said morning and evening, they identified three central themes of the Jew's relationship to God: creation, revelation, and redemption. Morning and night in the liturgy, Jews express gratitude to God for the creation of the universe, for revelation through Torah and *mitzvot* (commandments) at Sinai, and for our liberation from Egypt, which serves as a symbol of our eternal hope for future redemption. These three themes shape the way that Jews see God. Let us take a moment to describe each of these themes, as it is through them that we will explore God as spirit in Judaism.

Creation. We look out at the vast cosmos, or we see the splash of purple in the center of a wild snapdragon, or we feel the sensations of our bodies—and we meet God. This is the relationship of creation. We exist, we experience, we wonder at what we find here, and we look for its source. We have a sense of origins, of coming from and belonging to something larger. We marvel at

the intricacy, the harmony, and the balance in the ecosystems we encounter. The range and diversity of species dazzles us. This is the dimension of creation. In this book we will ask: what is the role of God as spirit in the day-by-day creation of the world?

Revelation. Given this spectacular world in which we find ourselves, how should we live? Human beings are not only a part of the unfolding drama of creation, but we are also conscious of it. We have questions. We want to learn. Not only do we want to know who made this world, but we also want to be in relation with that Who, and we sense that He/She wants to be in relation with us. Abraham heard a voice, followed it, and learned a way of life. Since then, Jews have understood ourselves to be in covenant with God, in a committed relationship of learning and action. We ask: what is our role in this world? What is a good way to live? We learn to restrain our desires in order to prevent harm to others. We learn that there is a middle path between excess and poverty and that we have obligations to others and to the weakest among us. We learn to balance between work and rest, and we learn to find harmony with the land. The word *Torah* means "teaching," or "guidance." We are always asking questions and learning with the goal of doing good. This is the dimension of revelation. In this book we ask: what is the role of God as spirit in the giving and receiving of revelation?

Redemption. When we see the splendor of the created world and seek understanding about how to live in it, we become aware that the world is not only beautiful but also broken. When we look more carefully, we see suffering, injustice, and oppression. The dimension of redemption is the commitment to give of ourselves to make the world whole again. It is the belief that God is

working through us to repair what's broken and to relieve suffering. It is the belief that there will be a time when the world will be whole, when all will unite in a system of harmony and equality. It is the understanding that this is the purpose of our lives—to wonder at the majesty of creation, yes, to seek intimate relationship with the One and learn about how to live, yes, but ultimately to act in such a way that our lives are instruments of God's will to repair the broken world. Through our lives, we will contribute to the bringing of the messianic age, a time when all will be one. In this book we ask: what role does God as spirit play in the ongoing work of redemption?

As you can see, Judaism tells a story. It is a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the beginning we came to be, in the middle we learn how to live, and in the end we contribute our lives toward justice and peace. Our challenge will be to find the thread of God as spirit woven through this story. What does God as spirit add to our understanding of creation, revelation, and redemption? What do each of these themes add to our understanding of God as spirit in Judaism? These three categories—creation, revelation, and redemption—existence, understanding, hope—form the Jewish personality, our understanding of God, and our sense of responsibility in the world. What, then, is the role of God as spirit in shaping who Jews are?

PART ONE

Creation: Breath of Life

1
Spirit Shaping Cosmos

WHEN WE BEGIN AT THE VERY BEGINNING, with the story of the creation of the world, we find a story that features God's spirit. In the deep, dark beginning of time, when all was unformed and void, *ruach Elohim*—breath, wind, spirit of God—swept over the mingled waters of heaven and earth. Chaos subsided. There was voice. There was light. Day and night, separation and order.

The word *ruach*, like so many words in Torah, is full of potential and variable meaning. Right here, in the second verse of the Hebrew Bible, we enter into the mystery of Torah's description of God. *Ruach Elohim* could be a wind created by God to subdue and divide the waters, in which case God used a natural force, an element of creation, to further creation. *Ruach Elohim* could be a breath belonging to the Holy One, like that which sustains us. Alternatively, *ruach Elohim* could describe the Ineffable itself in the act of creation, spirit-God as the source of life. Or, as Everett Fox translates, *ruach Elohim* could be the "rushing-spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters."[4]

If that's so, *ruach Elohim* is not a description of God or an aspect of God but rather a possession of God. In such a view, it is not

God *as* spirit, but God *has* spirit. We find ourselves with four possibilities: God using wind to create; God breathing to create; God as spirit creating; and God's spirit as God's creative force. In the coming pages, we will try on a few of these ideas about God and *ruach*, imagining what Torah might mean to tell us about God, the origins of our universe, and ourselves.

RUACH: GOD'S CREATIVE SPIRIT

"The earth was a formless void . . . , while a wind [**ruach**—*also "spirit"*] *from God swept over the face of the waters."* (Gen. 1:2 NRSV)

Stretch back now to a time beyond memory. In the soup of origins, in the beginning of God's creating heaven and earth;[5] there was *tohu vavohu*—chaos, void, and in the words of Rabbi Bradley Artson, "emergent, unpredictable becoming."[6] There was pregnant darkness over depths of the not-yet. There was water, water waiting for life and form. And over that water hovered *ruach Elohim*. Face to face with those dark, watery depths vibrated the creator in the form of *ruach*.

The first time we meet God, God has, or is, *ruach*. Why?

What about the function of God's *ruach* places it at the opening moment of our story? From the third verse of Genesis to the end of the story of creation, there is no further mention of *ruach*. God is simply God. God speaks. God separates. God names. God decides that it is good. The word *ruach* does not appear again until chapter 7, with the great watery destruction of all that breathes. Why does God need *ruach* at the beginning?

What we see in these first verses of Torah is that God's *ruach* has a special relationship to creation, organizing chaos and

bringing life from the depths. It is through God's *ruach* that God transforms uninhabitable space-time into benevolent, life-giving order. God's *ruach* here is an aspect of God that enables God to create. Shaping chaos into order is beyond what breath or wind as we know them can do. It seems that God's *ruach* here is God's spirit, and interestingly, God's spirit feminizes God.

A shapeless, formless, indescribable God is beyond our notions of gender. However, all Hebrew nouns are gendered, either feminine or masculine. Most nouns have a single gender—they are always masculine or always feminine. *Elohim*, the name for God we find in the process of creation in Genesis, is masculine. *Ruach* can be either masculine or feminine. At the birthing of the world, however, *ruach* is in feminine form. *Ruach Elohim* together become feminine just as God is bringing forth form out of the darkness, hovering over the depths to birth all of life. As a midrash describes it, in the beginning, God fluttered like a nesting dove over her fledgling chicks.[7]

The verb describing what God's spirit did at that opening moment of creation is *merachefet*, meaning "hover," "vibrate," "sweep," or "flutter." It is in the present tense. This implies that our creation is not a single event that happened 5,771-plus years ago "in the beginning," or 160,000 years ago as Homo erectus became Homo sapiens. Creation is an ongoing event. It happened in the beginning, and it happens now, in every moment. It happens in our backyards, with every blade of grass that pushes its way out of seed in dark soil. It happens every second in our bodies with the creation of new cells. It happens all around us as atoms collide and create new molecules. It is the great, continual birthing forth of the world in elaborate and intricate design.

One of the most extraordinary features of God's spirit, God's creative force, is that some of its creations also have spirit, enabling God's creations to create as well. Another midrash describes God's role in creation as that of an unparalleled artist: "A mortal may draw a picture, but the picture cannot draw a picture in turn. But when the Holy Blessed One draws a picture, God's picture makes other pictures. God made a woman, and the woman gives birth and produces others like herself."[8] Here again, God is cast in a female role, as *ruach Elohim* is in feminine form, possessing the power to create those who will in turn create. We see the role of God's *ruach* from generation to generation. It is God's *ruach* that enables God to create. God creates us, bestows upon us God's *ruach*, and enables us to create.

According to these images given to us by the Midrash, not only was God's *ruach* fluttering like a dove over her hatchlings when all was dark, formless, and void; not only is God's *ruach* the sculptor of the animating dynamic of the created order; not only does God's *ruach* continue to hover over every living thing, bringing forth millions of new creations every moment; but God's *ruach* rests on us too, giving us the extraordinary ability to create. Soon we will see how *ruach* is shared between God and humanity and serves as a creative force in human beings as well.

GOD'S SPIRIT AND THE BIG BANG

For many centuries, most Jews have understood the creation story in *Bereishit*, the Book of Genesis, to be a nonliteral, nonhistorical accounting of the beginning of the world. Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, the most authoritative Torah commentator in all of Judaism, lived in France in the eleventh

century. He said the following of Genesis 1:1: "This verse does not intend to teach the sequence of creation." Rashi parses the use of the word *bereishit*, "in the beginning," to show that chapter 1 of Genesis cannot be read as a sequential accounting of the creation of the world. One point in his proof is that the text implies that water preceded earth and gives no account of the creation of water. Rashi deduces: "You are therefore forced to admit that Scripture did not intend to teach anything of the earlier or later sequence of creation."[9] In addition, it is not at all clear that Genesis 1 is literally describing seven days of creation. Immediately following the account of creation, we read, "These are the generations of heaven and earth when they were created, on the day [*yom*] Adonai God made earth and heaven" (Gen. 2:4). If we read the word *yom* literally as one day, we have a problem: were heaven and earth created in seven days, or in one? Therefore, we are forced to conclude that *yom* is not literally a twenty-four-hour day, but a day is metaphor for an unspecific period of time.

We also find that the text can coexist with our contemporary understanding of the universe when we follow a more accurate translation of Genesis 1:1 instead of the familiar "In the beginning." What the Hebrew says (and is now reflected in most modern translations) is "When God began to create . . ." This phrase implies that the following verses are the steps God took in the creation of this earth while not precluding the earlier creation of the universe and other bodies in it.

Like poetry, the first chapters of Genesis use evocative and abbreviated language to describe where we come from. When understood metaphorically, this language need not be at odds with our latest scientific theories of the Big Bang and evolution,

but instead they offer complementary wisdom about our origins and the origins of the universe we find ourselves in. If the Big Bang explains what happened, Genesis interprets what creation means.

The Big Bang theory dates the origin of our universe to roughly fifteen billion years ago.[10] In *God and the Big Bang*, Jewish scholar Daniel Matt describes the scientific understanding of the first moments of our universe. According to Matt, scientists say that the Big Bang took place in a vacuum—space had no matter but was full of potential energy particles.[11] Through a fluctuation in the energy, a vibration formed a tiny bubble—hot, dense, and smaller than a proton but with all the mass and energy of our universe.[12] As the bubble cooled, it expanded rapidly, creating the radiation of the Big Bang. For the next 300,000 years, the universe was a mixture of radiation and particles, a soup of chaotic energy, thick and opaque like fog. Finally, the universe cooled sufficiently for photons to oscillate at a lower frequency, freeing electrons to form orbits around protons and neutrons, creating stable atoms of hydrogen and helium, which would eventually form galaxies. Only then, when matter and radiation separated, did the soup thin and become transparent, and photons become visible as light.[13]

If we overlay Torah's creation story with the story from science, we might read it as follows: "In the beginning of God's creating, there was *tohu vavohu*, a chaotic soup of energy. There was thick and opaque darkness over the endless depths of the vacuum of nothing. Then *ruach Elohim merachefet al pnei hamayim*—then the spirit of God vibrated over the soup. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and matter and radiation separated, and there was light."

One of the mysteries that commentators have focused on in understanding these verses of Torah is how God created light on day one and the sun and stars on day four. Given that all of the light we see comes from the sun and the stars, what is the light created on day one? Over the millennia, rabbis have suggested that the light at the beginning was a mystical light, sparks of which are in every living thing today. Our scientific theories now tell us that in the creation of the universe there was light long before there were stars. What if the rabbis were right—what if the creation of light, the light that emerged before the sun and the stars existed, was the souling of the universe?

How might we imagine the role of *ruach Elohim*, the spirit of God, in this new/old creation story? When the spirit of God vibrated over the murky soup of chaotic energy, what happened? The word *merachefet* ("vibrates" or "oscillates") is fascinating here. All of existence oscillates—matter (in the form of subatomic particles) and energy, light and sound. Our bodies are continually oscillating in the rhythm of our heartbeat and breath. Everything around us is pulsing, beating out a steady rhythm. Often in the natural world rhythms become entrained, meaning that they find the same or related frequencies and wavelengths, to be in a kind of harmony with one another. We might read Torah to say that the oscillating spirit of God hovered over the frenzied soup of primordial energy entraining it into stable and steady vibrations of matter and radiation, from chaos to order, from darkness to light.

As we imagine God's spirit vibrating over the chaos of the early universe, we also know that the universe was expanding. Long before we knew this from astronomers, Judaism's mystics imagined it, with God's *ruach* as the cause.

BREATH OF THE WORLD

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Spain, a mystical tradition arose in Judaism called Kabbalah. Through study, analysis, fasting, and pious prayer, the Kabbalists sought the mystical secrets of God and the universe hidden within Torah. One Kabbalistic interpretation of the creation story imagines God creating the universe with breath. This vision of *ruach Elohim*—a vision that aligns remarkably with the Big Bang theory—sees God breathing the universe into existence. "When a glassblower wants to produce glassware, he takes an iron blow-pipe, hollow as a reed from one end to the other, and dips it into molten glass in a crucible. Then he places the tip of the pipe in his mouth and blows, and his breath passes through the pipe to the molten glass attached to the other end. From the power of blowing, the glass expands and turns into a vessel—large or small, long or wide, spherical or rectangular, whatever the artisan desires. So God, great, mighty and awesome, powerfully breathed out a breath, and cosmic space expanded to the boundary determined by divine wisdom, until God said, 'Enough!'"[14]

Here God, like the great artist described in the previous midrash, knew the size and shape for the beginning of the cosmos, and breathed out until cosmic space expanded to the size necessary for the creation of the world. From there, God could separate light from darkness and create the world that we know. The psalmist also describes God breathing the universe into being. "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, by the breath [*ruach*] of his mouth, all their host" (Ps. 33:6). Because this psalm draws a parallel between "word" and *ruach*, we can say that when God speaks to create the world in Genesis 1, it is God's

ruach at work. What are words but shaped breath? In the Second Book of Samuel, David describes that power of God's breath in the creation of the world. "The foundations of the world were revealed by your roaring, Adonai; at the exhale of the breath [*nishmat ruach*] of your nostrils" (2 Sam. 22:16; Ps. 18:16).

In a moment, we will see that in Genesis humanity was created through God's breath, a breath that is both breath and spirit. Here the Kabbalists and the psalmist are imagining that it was not only humanity that was created with God's breath but also that God created the entire universe by breathing into it. From this view, the *ruach Elohim* present at the beginning of creation was God's breath sweeping like a great wind through the cosmos, expanding space so that shape, order, and eventually life could be born. As astronomers today can prove, the universe continues to expand, which allows us to imagine God continuing to breathe into the universe, not only bringing life into all creatures but also breathing existence into the cosmos.

The fact that the three concepts associated with *ruach* in the Bible—breath, wind, spirit—share the same Hebrew word indicates that they are not entirely distinct. Though we might experience them as three different phenomena, according to the Bible they are more clearly related than we might imagine. This teaches us the possibility that the relationship between our breath and the wind that blows past us, between our breath and our spirit, between our breath and God's "breath," and between our spirit and God's spirit, are all closer than we think.

A nesting dove, a stabilizing vibration, a breath sweeping through the universe: no matter what we compare it to or how we imagine it, Torah begins with the assertion that, at the first

moments of creation, God's spirit was there to birth and breathe the world into life. Soon, humanity would be born into that magnificent, multifaceted world; and as we'll see, God's spirit was there to birth and breathe us too.