

The Great, Mighty, and Awesome God Isn't What S/He Used to Be

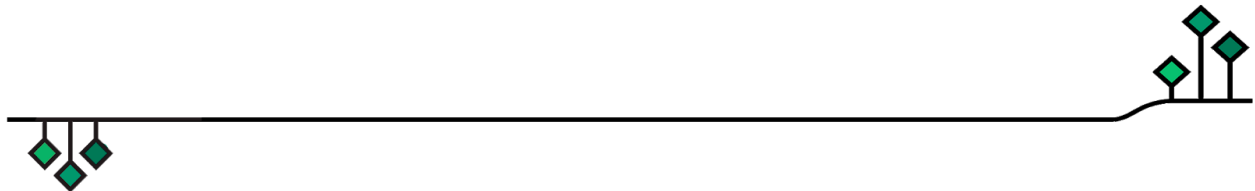
R. Yitz Greenberg – ygreenberg@hadar.org

Parashat Eikev 5781

Our *parashah* contains a praise of God which the Talmud considers the crowning title of the Deity: “For the Lord Your God is the God of Gods and the Lord of Lords, the God **Who is Great, Mighty, and Awesome**, who favors no person and will take no bribes” (Deuteronomy 10:17). This title will be familiar to Jews who pray, because it is invoked to describe God in the opening blessing of the Amidah,¹ the central prayer in the Rabbinic tradition. In the Bible, this refers to God’s complete control of history. However, since Rabbinic Judaism’s understanding of God’s activity in the world is fundamentally different, the Rabbis who placed this description in the Amidah actually **reversed the meaning of the biblical words**. Exploring this shift can help us understand the remarkable continuity of our covenant mission, combined with the profound transformation in our religious roles and responsibilities over the centuries.²

¹ This silent standing prayer, also known as the Shemoneh Esrei, starts “You are blessed O God, our Lord and Lord of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, **the God Who is Great, Mighty and Awesome...**” *Koren Siddur*, p. 109.

² This treatment of the text is primarily based on the treatment in Babylonian Talmud Yoma 69b, starting with the words: “But Rav Matanah said the great mighty and awesome God” (citing Nehemiah 9:32 as restoring this



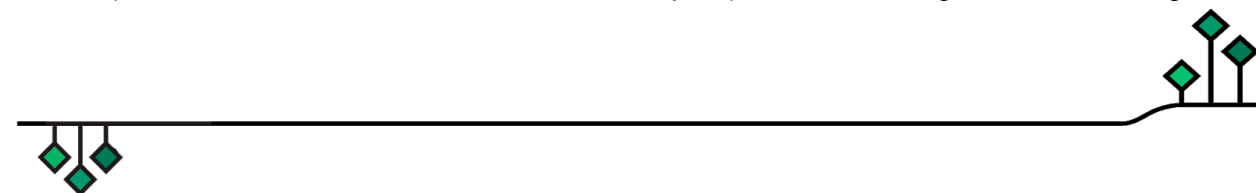
The biblical celebration of God's greatness, might, and awesomeness in this verse reflects the biblical view, that the Creator of the Universe—of a vast but impersonal Nature—is also a caring God, a God who wants to turn this planet into a paradise but, out of love, engages human beings as partners in this covenant of *tikkun olam*. In this biblical phase, God is All Powerful and very controlling. Although God self-limits in establishing a natural order with its operative laws, God dominates human life and tightly regulates human behavior; God holds all the reins in divine hands. For example, when the Israelite slaves in Egypt despair and basically accept their fate,³ God sends Moses and Aaron to arouse them and liberate them. When Pharaoh pursues the Israelites to re-enslave them, God intervenes with visible miracles that shatter the superior Egyptian army.

Throughout the Bible, when the Israelites are faithful to God, the Lord redeems them and assures their victory, even over superior armies. God gives directions for policy and guidance for living, in revelation from heaven and through prophets who bring divine instructions at key policy turning points. The Israelites have only to obey—and/or repent for backsliding—and God will take care of the rest. There is no force that can stand up to the Lord. Therefore, as long as the Israelites do God's will, they are assured of victory, of homeland, of security.⁴

phrase, after Jeremiah and Daniel had deleted part of the title; see below). The broader issue—that the Jewish covenant operates in stages and that human responsibility and accountability increases at every stage (Biblical, to Rabbinic, to Current)—is argued at length in my forthcoming book, *The Triumph of Life*.

³ Not literally. The Torah says that the passive unresisting Israelites nevertheless cry to God out of their hard labor and suffering. This evokes God's care for them and the divine promise to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob to redeem their children from slavery (Exodus 2:23-25).

⁴ See the patterns in the Five Books of Moses, and in the early Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.

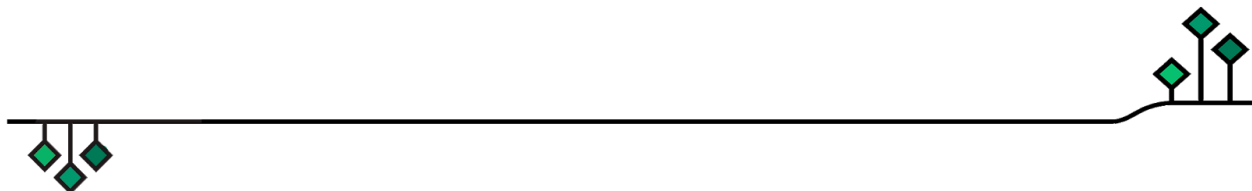


This period ends in a catastrophe—the Destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian Exile—because the Israelites betrayed the covenant. They pursued foreign religious worship, they cheated and oppressed their fellow Jews, and—to make matters worse—thought that they could buy off God by bringing sacrifices to the Temple. The prophets warned them that God cannot be bribed, but the Israelites were blinded by greed and selfishness. They were led astray by the neighboring religious regimes which assured them that the divine favor could be bought. In Babylonia, many of the Israelites repented and returned to the prophetic faith. In return, God sent Cyrus, the head of the ascendant Persian Empire, to free the Israelites, allowing them to return to the Land of Israel and to rebuild their Temple and community.⁵

In the Rabbinic view, the covenant in this period was not a carbon copy of the arrangement during the First Temple period. Yes, covenant was renewed, but the Divine self-limited in the act of reentering the pact. God chose to be less controlling, and invited humans to take on new responsibility in the partnership. This was the beginning of the **Rabbinic** era. There were no further revelations from the heavenly realm. The age of prophecy ended as the people—led by the emerging Rabbis' cadre—took charge of developing Torah (in Oral and Written form) further in the new era.

How would people know what God wants of them in the new circumstances? By studying the past record of revelation in the Bible and the oral tradition, and using their intellect to appropriately apply those values and guidelines to the present realities. The greater human role meant that, in many cases, more than one view or judgment of what God wanted from us emerged. Since God was more hidden and not speaking out as obviously as in the past, the Rabbis intensified Torah study for all people, to train them to pick up more subtle divine signs

⁵ See the books of Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel in particular.



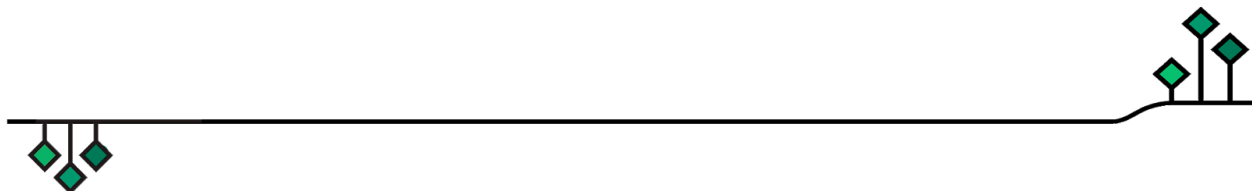
and messages. The rabbis went on to create schools where they learned to analyze and debate, and to follow majority judgment in coming to conclusions.

In political life also, the Divine self-limited to call humans to take up more responsibility to build their own society. The Israelites had to learn how to negotiate with neighbors and to navigate between the world powers. In the new era, human political decisions and behaviors became decisive in deciding the outcome. “Being right with God” was no longer the dominant cause of the Judean political landscape.

When the Talmud describes the final period of Roman domination of Judea, it describes the judgments and failures in policy that led to the exile and destruction. The rebels against Rome had good intentions: for example, they wanted to remove Roman standards and impurities from the Temple. But they were guilty of mistreatment of fellow Jews (who turned to the Romans with their grievances). They acted recklessly in clashing with the Roman Empire and in rebelling. They aggravated the situation by following sectarian policies and by terror tactics against their compatriots who disagreed with them.⁶

These zealots refused to accept Rabbinic advice to negotiate, to submit—at least temporarily—to the Roman Empire’s military superiority, and to come to some understanding so that the Romans would let the Jews pursue their culture peacefully, as they allowed many of the other (non-rebellious) nations in their Empire. Given the greater autonomy and authority extended to humans by God, these policies ran their course—and brought disaster. The Lord did not intervene with visible miracles to offset Roman power. The destruction of

⁶ See the account of this period and the destruction process in Gittin 55-56.



the Temple and the great exile followed, despite the fanatic dedication of the rebels to the Jewish tradition.

This brings me back to the Rabbis' understanding of God's new self-limitation in the covenant. The Talmud (Yoma 69b) suggests that one cannot go on speaking of God as all powerful—as great, mighty, and awesome—in a world where humans (including the enemies of Jewry) are operating freely. As Rabbi Joshua ben Levi relates, Moses could rightly call God great, mighty, and awesome. But, when the prophet Jeremiah saw non-Jews trampling God's sanctuary—that is, the First Temple in ruins—he concluded: where is God's awesomeness? Jeremiah therefore spoke of God as **not** awesome.⁷ Then came the prophet Daniel, who saw non-Jews enslaving God's children. He similarly concluded: where is God's might? Daniel therefore spoke of God as **not** mighty.⁸

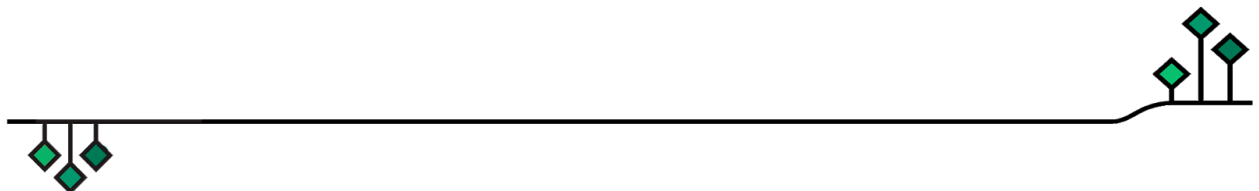
It is not possible, says the Talmud, to simply quote or make biblical references without taking into account our actual experiences in history. For a time, then, it was inappropriate to speak of God as great, mighty, and awesome. People know of God in the world through the Divine presence and through the teachings of Jewry. When Jewry is devastated and the Land of Israel is in ruins, one must speak more modestly (and non-biblically) of God.

This is not the end of the story: The Men of the Great Assembly⁹ restored God's crowning name to its original luster. In the Book of Nehemiah and the Amidah—both of which are traditionally ascribed to these leaders—they used Moses' turn of phrase in full, saying: "Great,

⁷ "The great God, the mighty Lord of Hosts is His name" (Jeremiah 32:18).

⁸ "The great and awesome God" (Daniel 9:4).

⁹ The exact identity of this body is not clear, but they seem to be the chain of covenant transmission leaders between the end of prophecy and the clear emergence of Rabbinic leadership.

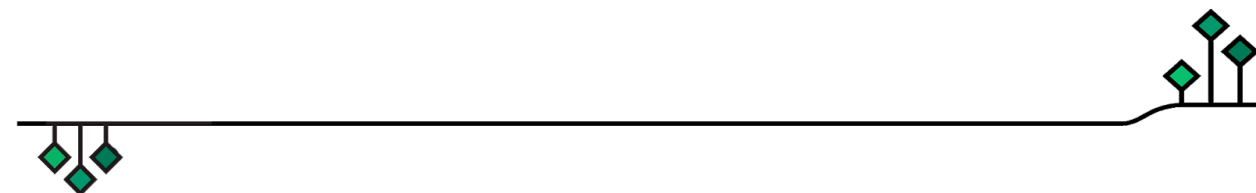


mighty, and awesome.” But although they used the ancient words, they understood them **completely differently.**

After all, in the new age, God’s might is demonstrated by divine self-control and self-limitation, and not direct and thunderous interventions. The biblical God would have wiped out the Romans. In the Rabbinic era—in accordance with the principle “Who is mighty? One who controls his urges/temper” (Mishnah Avot 4:1)¹⁰—God allows human freedom to operate. The Roman triumph reflects this reality of divine self-limitation and human misuse of freedom and power, as does the Nazis’ successful genocide in the Holocaust. We should understand that in praying to a mighty God in our time, we are not asking for a miraculous intervention to overturn the natural order. We are instead asking for God to stand by us and inspire us, in order that we can exercise best human judgment and organize the power of the Jews and all humans to assure the victory of the good. This includes an obligation to responsible self-defense. For Zionists, this means that if our prayers are serious and sincere, we will serve in the IDF, organize American support for Israel, or support Jewish security in other ways we see and understand, to assure that Iran or any other malign force does not destroy the State of Israel.

This creates a new problem for the Talmud. If God does not demonstratively intervene to defeat evil, and since evil reigns from time to time in many countries, how do we know that there is a God? The Talmud answers: the proof is in the survival of the Jewish people. Were it not for God’s awesome power—hidden completely, but reflected in the survival of Jewry—how would this one people persevere, surrounded by hostile nations and dangerous, armed enemies? Jewry’s ongoing existence validates calling God awesome in the Amidah.

¹⁰ Based on Proverbs 16:32.



The lessons of the Rabbinic insight of God's further self-limitation have vital implications. For one, it means that our prayers are not credible unless they are matched by our actions as a people to fight evil, and to take effective political and military action to secure the good and protect evil's potential victims, including the Jews. For two, one of the chief validations of the presence of God in the world is the security and flourishing of Jewry. In this Rabbinic view, **all** Jews who support Israel, who build its economy and fight for its political and military security, are fighting in the front line of religion, and giving testimony to a world about God and covenant.

The people who fail this test of credible belief in an ethical and limited God include the enemies of Israel and the resurgent anti-Semites around the world—and also, I believe, those religious Jews who claim that they are exempt from army and national service, or from building a vibrant society in Israel and the Diaspora. Some haredim justify themselves by appealing to the biblical God, that if they study Torah and do *mitzvot*, then the Lord will protect and save Israel. This is as it was in biblical times—but it clearly does not reflect the shift the Rabbis saw in God's role and humanity's role in the covenant.

As to those who speak of God as the Warrior who fights for us, as if the biblical world were unchanged, the Rabbis said that such descriptions of old style great, mighty, and awesome were quite simply lies.¹¹ Furthermore, the Rabbis added: God is the God of truth. God does not want empty, old style pious praises. In our circumstances, these pious words are lies because we are called to act instead: to protect the vulnerable, to protect Jewry and Israel as the covenantal people, and to defeat evil forces. Our deeds tell the truth about the presence of God and the nature of the world we live in.

¹¹ See the discussion in Babylonian Talmud Yoma 69b.

