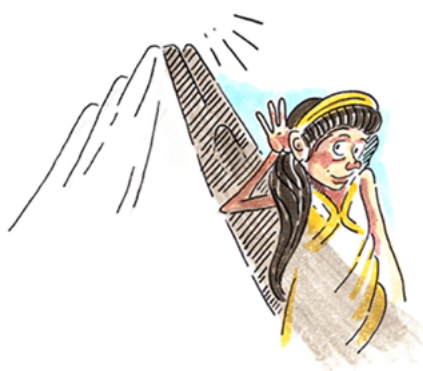


# Lesson Guide: Class Eight

## God Wrestling

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Miller Introduction to  
Judaism Program

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY



# Miller Introduction to Judaism Program

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## **Lesson Guide for Class #8: God Wrestling**

### **Class Summary:**

Jewish approaches to theology, emphasizing the concept of "wrestling with God" and a variety of ways of understanding God. Exploration of selected Jewish texts about God from the Bible, rabbinic literature, and the prayer book. Opportunity for developing and articulating a personal theology.

### **Objectives:**

#### *Students will:*

- Understand that “wrestling with God” is an essential part of Jewish theology.
- Explore diverse ways that the Jewish Tradition has described God.
- Clarify their personal beliefs about God and make connections between those beliefs and Jewish “God-language.”

### **In-Person Teaching Materials:**

- Room and door signs
- Name tags and pens
- Chalkboard, white-board, or large flip chart
- Colored markers or chalk
- On One Foot course books or printed PDFs
- Projector, computer & screen if using Class Slide Decks, On One Foot videos

### **Online Teaching Materials:**

- Zoom Pro Account
- PDF of On One Foot chapter
- PowerPoint Class Slide Deck
- Appropriate background, lighting, and sound setup.

**Set Induction: Jews and God**

For newcomers to contemporary Jewish life in North America, it is often striking how little God is part of the discourse of most non-Orthodox Jews. While God is the subject of most of the Hebrew prayers said in synagogue, God is rarely the topic of either sermons or everyday conversation. Many are particularly surprised to discover that for many Jews, God plays little or no role in their Jewish identity, and a significant portion considers themselves non-believers.

If you are using the PowerPoints, you can show the slide “Belief in God in the American Population,” which indicates that American Jews have a much more similar profile of levels of spiritual belief to those who define as non-religious, than to Christians:

	<b>STRONGLY BELIEVE IN GOD</b>	<b>BELIEVE, BUT LESS CERTAIN</b>	<b>DO NOT BELIEVE IN GOD</b>
<b>AMERICAN JEWS</b>	34%	38%	28%
<b>AMERICAN CHRISTIANS</b>	79%	19%	2%
<b>AMERICAN NON-RELIGIOUS</b>	30%	38%	32%

*Source: Pew Center, 2013*

This suggests something important to understand about Judaism – that we are not primarily a creedal religion. There is no single set of universally held beliefs among Jews. That can be unsettling – how can a religion not provide a clear, agreed-upon system of belief? But, on the other hand, it can also be liberating – it is distinctly possible to be a Jew with big questions about God. In fact, that may be one of the most essential things to know about being Jewish!

**Text and Discussion: “God Wrestling”**

Read and discuss the story of "Jacob Wrestling the Angel" (Genesis 32) found either in the coursebook or on the PowerPoint. This can be done as a whole class or in small groups/breakout rooms.

In addition to understanding the story presented in the text, students may discuss the following questions:

- What does the fact that the Jewish People comes to be identified as "Yisraelites" (God-Wrestlers) tell you about Judaism as a religion?
- How do you personally relate to the idea of "wrestling with God?"
- What makes you comfortable and uncomfortable about the idea of wrestling with God?

Given that students come to an Introduction to Judaism class from many backgrounds, it may be useful to note that the names of each of the three, Western monotheistic traditions come from a verb in relationship with God:

- *Islam* means "one who **submits** to God"
- *Christ-ian* means "one who **follows** Christ/God"
- *Yisrael* means "one who **wrestles** with God."

Submission, following, and wrestling are three fundamentally different orientations toward faith. Ask students to reflect on the strengths and drawbacks of each. It is crucial in making this comparison that we are not claiming that our (or any!) orientation is right or superior, but rather to ask what it says about Judaism that we place wrestling at the core of how we describe our relationship with God.

### **Lecture: "Ground Rules for God Wrestling"**

While Judaism does not have a formal dogma, and many elements of Jewish belief are up to individual interpretation and questioning, certain generally accepted parameters distinguish a Jewish conversation about God:

1. Judaism is **monotheistic**. While there are Jews who are atheists or agnostics, when we talk about God, we always speak in terms of unity (some people joke that a Jew is a person who believes there is, at very most, one God!) The classic assertion of monotheism is the Sh'ma. Read it together and discuss: Why is monotheism so essential to Judaism? What do we mean by One?
2. Jewish theologies generally contain some balance between God's **transcendence** (God is greater than us) and **immanence** (God is involved with us). Rarely do Jewish theologies entirely embrace one to the exclusion of the other. For example, either the belief that: God is a totally impersonal force in the Universe that is indifferent to

the world that He created (deism) OR God is identical to the visible world around us (pantheism) — while not entirely unknown among Jewish theologians, is relatively rare. Instead, most theologies try to balance these two elements.

*Adon Olam* is a classic example of the balance between transcendence and immanence. Read the poem as a group and identify the point in which the tone changes between depictions of God as entirely transcendent and depictions of God as much more imminent. Then, discuss: Why do you think the poet changed tones so radically? What point do you think he was trying to communicate about his (and our) relationship with God?

## **Break**

### **Activity: “49 Names of God”**

With the understanding that Jews wrestle with God, and within some very broad basic parameters, there is a vast range of theologies. We will use the second half of the class to explore students’ personal understandings of God.

Give students time to do the “49 Names of God” exercise in the coursebook, following the instructions to mark up the list, noting the names that resonate with them, the names that alienate them, and the names that spark questions in them.

Follow a “Think/Pair/Share” model. First, students complete the worksheet on their own, then they get into pairs or small groups (if teaching online, use the breakout feature) to compare their lists, and then have a group discussion.

Group discussion should help students identify patterns in responses. Does a student, for example, seem drawn to names that include very personal, human-like imagery for God (Parent, Sovereign, Beloved), or are they drawn to more abstract imagery (Source, Oneness, Infinite)? Some students may reflect on a difference between names that they resonate with emotionally vs. intellectually. Others may reflect on challenges with gendered or hierarchical god language. This is very fertile ground for the teacher to lead a discussion that validates various types of beliefs and raises the questions that help lead people to articulate a personal theology.

It may be helpful to conclude with the text from *Pesikta d’Rav Kahana*, which concludes that each person hears God’s voice *lefi kocho*, according to their uniqueness. Different people experience God differently according to their own lives and experiences. There are times in life when we affirm a more personal God or a

more transcendent God, when we connect more with a parental figure or a warrior figure. Different times and different personalities are going to call upon us to reach for God in different ways.

### **Text Study/Reflection: 100 Word Theologies**

Divide students into small groups/breakouts and have them study the six, 100-word theologies presented by diverse rabbis in the coursebook. Ask students to read them closely and slowly and discuss them as they go. Students should underline phrases or sentences that they resonate with from these reflections.

Bring the group together and ask each student to share (either aloud or in the chat) one phrase or sentence from one of the theologies that resonates most strongly with them. Note any that seem to be repeated multiple times or any patterns that emerge.

Then, give students individual time to the end of class to write a 100-word theology for themselves. These should be kept private and not shared as a group. Some instructors may choose to play music to help create a sacred, reflective atmosphere.

### **At Home Work**

Students should be told to watch the "God Wrestling" video and answer the review questions and journal prompt. They can also continue working on refining their 100-word theology.