

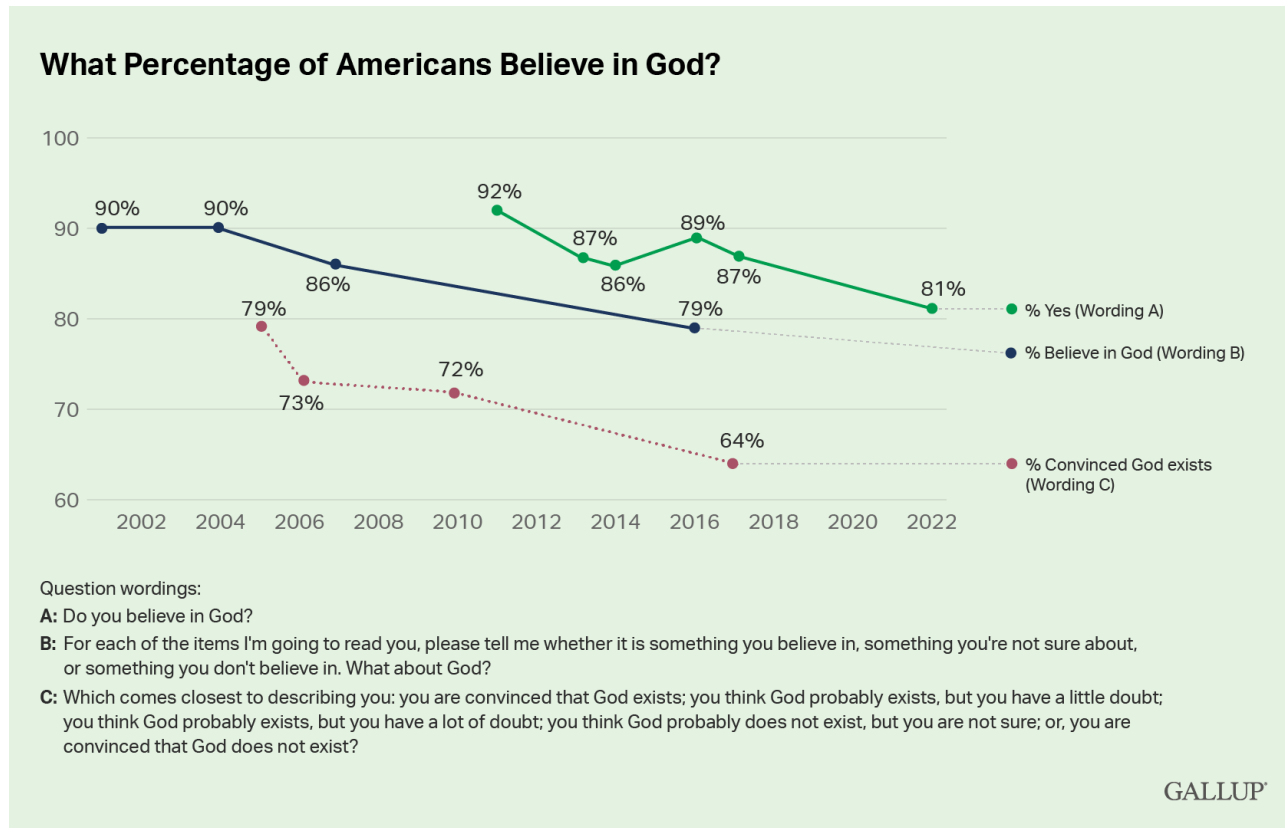
GOD: UNCHANGING?

THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

Dr. Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies

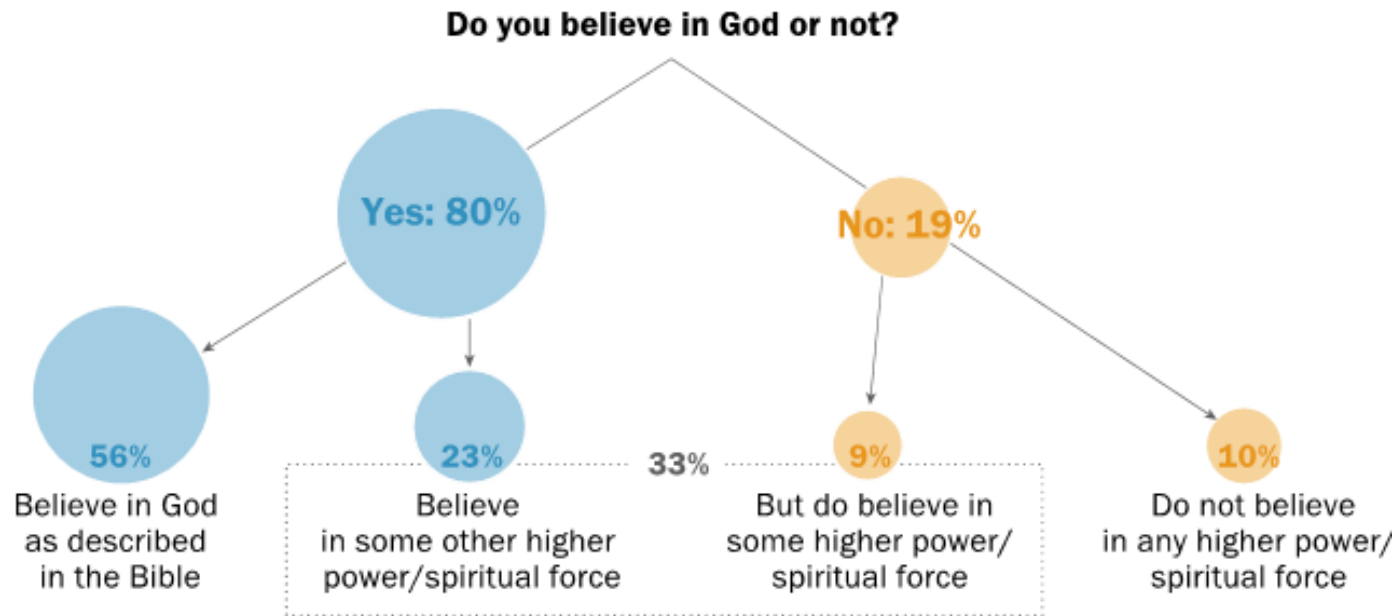
Alan Cooper joined the faculty in 1997 as a professor of Bible, and has served as director of publications, chair of the Bible faculty, and, from 2007 to 2018, provost of JTS. In 1998, he was appointed professor of Bible at the Union Theological Seminary, a nondenominational Christian seminary, becoming the first person to hold concurrent professorships at JTS and Union. Previously, Dr. Cooper was a professor of Bible at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, where for six years he was director of its School of Graduate Studies. He also taught religious studies for ten years at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

Most recently, [Gallup](#) found [81% of Americans expressing belief](#) when asked the simple question, "Do you believe in God?" This was down from 87% in 2017 and a record low for this question first asked in 1944, when 96% believed. It reached a high of 98% in the 1950s and 1960s.



When Americans Say They Believe In God, What Do They Mean?

One-third of U.S. adults believe in a higher power of some kind, but not in God as described in Bible



Note: Don't know or unclear responses not shown. Figures may not add to subtotals indicated due to rounding.
Source: Survey conducted Dec. 4-18, 2017, among U.S. adults.
"When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

God looks like us (or vice versa)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ
כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ.... וַיְבָרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם
בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ

God said, let us make a human in our image, according to our likeness.... Then god created the human in his image; created it in the divine image. (Gen 1:26-27)

[9th-century BCE
Akkadian/Aramaic bilingual from
North Syria]

The statue (צֶלֶם) of Hadad-yis'i, king of Guzan, Sikan, and Azran, for exalting and continuing his throne and for the length of his life, and so that his word might be pleasing to gods and to people, this image (דְּמוּתָא) he made better than before.



The Biblical God (1)

“The Old Testament...believed in a God who was utterly other but who despite this status listened, talked, wept, walked, judged and loved.” Santiago Sia, in *New Blackfriars*, May 1987 (Special Issue: God and Change), p. 220.

אֲל אֲנֹכִי וְלֹא-אִישׁ בְּקִרְבִּי קְדוֹשׁ

I am divine, not human; the Holy amidst you (Hosea 11:9).

Yet—

God moves about in a garden:

וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶת-קוֹל ה' אֱלֹהִים מְתַהַלֵּךְ בַּגֵּן לְרוּחַ הַיּוֹם וַיִּתְחַבֵּא הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ מִפְּנֵי ה' אֱלֹהִים בְּתוֹךְ עֵץ הַגֵּן:

[The human couple] heard the sound of YHWH moving about in the garden and the adam and his woman hid from the face of YHWH amid the trees of the garden (Genesis 3:8).

God visits Abraham, who is recovering from his circumcision:

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאֵלֶינִי מִמְּרָא וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח-הָאֹהֶל כְּחַם הַיּוֹם:

YHWH appeared to [Abraham] while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent by the terebinths of Mamre (Genesis 18:1—YHWH being one of the “men” mentioned in v.2?)

The Biblical God (2)

God wrestles with Jacob:

וַיִּתְרֶם יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ וַיֵּאבֶּק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלֹת הַשָּׁחַר:

Jacob remained alone, and a “man” wrestled with him until dawn (Genesis 32:25).

[“Man”=God, cf. v.29; or an angel, cf. Hosea 12:5]

[On Genesis 18 and 32, see Esther J. Hamori, [*“When Gods Were Men”: The Embodied God in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature*](#) (2008)]

God appears as fire:

וּמִרְאֵה כְבוֹד ה' כְּאֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת בְּרֹאשׁ הַהָר לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

The sight of the Glory of YHWH was like a consuming fire on the mountaintop in the sight of the Israelites (Exodus 24:17).

God refuses to show his face:

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא תוּכַל לִרְאֹת אֶת-פָּנַי כִּי לֹא-יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם וְחָי:

[God] said [to Moses], you cannot see my face because no human sees my face and lives (Exodus 33:20).

The Biblical God (3)

God reveals his face:

וְלֹא-לָקַח נְבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדָעוּ ה' פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים:

Another prophet did not arise in Israel like Moses who knew YHWH face to face (Deuteronomy 34:10).

God settles his gigantic body on a throne:

בְּשָׁנַת-מוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ עֲזַיָּהוּ וְאָרָאָה אֶת-אֲדֹנָי יוֹשֵׁב עַל-כִּסֵּא רָם וְנֹשֵׂא וְשׁוֹלֵיו מְלֵאִים אֶת-הַהֵיכָל:

In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw YHWH sitting on a high and lofty throne, his skirts filling the temple (Isaiah 6:1).

[On the embodied god in general, see Francesca Stavrakopoulou, [God: An Anatomy](#) (2022)]

God enthroned over the cherubim:

ה' מֶלֶךְ יִרְגָזוּ עַמִּים יוֹשֵׁב כְּרוּבִים תִּנּוּט הָאָרֶץ:

YHWH reigns; the nations tremble.

Enthroned on the cherubs; the earth quakes (Psalm 99:1).

In the first instance, God is represented as a king enthroned in heaven, ruling providentially by means of the configuration of the planets that comprise his throne, governing the heavens as appropriate for the exercise of righteousness and justice. Now God is depicted as enthroned on earth abiding over the cherubs, denoting miraculous rulership by means of the angels, his servants who do his will. They are winged like the cherubs. On account of this the earth quakes in terror of the great king abiding in it.

בצד הראשון בא ציור ה' כמלך יושב בשמים, כי מנהיג ע"י המערכת שבזה כסאו בשמים, ומסדר הנהגת השמים כפי הראוי להנהגה השגחיית בצד ובמשפט, אבל עתה יצייר כיושב בארץ ושוכן על הכרובים, שהוא ציור אל ההנהגה הנסיית שבא ע"י המלאכים משרתיו עושי רצונו, שהם בעלי כנפים שזה ציור הכרובים, ומצד זה תנוט הארץ מחרדת המלך הגדול השוכן בה.



Ahirom sarcophagus (Phoenician, c. 1000)

The Biblical God (4)

God is perceived as the merest whisper:

[God passes by the prophet Elijah. There are great wind and a shattering earthquake, but God is in neither of those.]

וְאַחַר הַרְעֵשׁ אֵשׁ לֹא בָּאֵשׁ ה' וְאַחַר הָאֵשׁ קוֹל דְּמָמָה דַּקָּה:

And after the earthquake, fire, but YHWH was not in the fire; and after the fire the merest whisper (1 Kings 19:11-12).

God is perceived in the racket of a thunderstorm:

קוֹל ה' עַל-הַמַּיִם אֶל-הַכְּבוֹד הַרְעִים ה' עַל-מַיִם רַבִּים:

The voice of YHWH is over the waters. The Divine Glory thunders; YHWH over the mighty waters (Psalm 29:3).

God is with me:

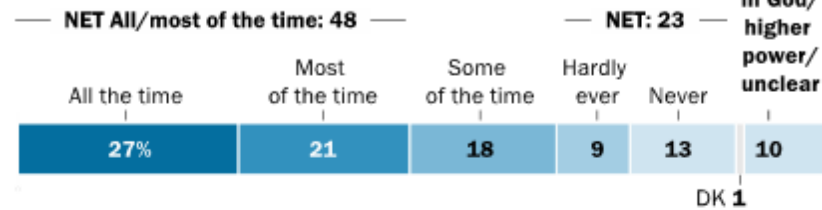
גַּם כִּי-אֵלֶךְ בְּגִיא צְלֻמּוֹת לֹא-אֶירָא זֶע כִּי-אַתָּה עִמָּדִי

Even when I walk through deepest darkness, I do not fear evil for you are with me.

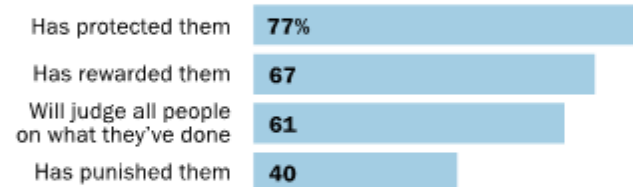
[See Tanya Luhrmann, [*How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*](#) (2020)]

In U.S., half of adults believe God determines what happens to them most or all of the time

% who believe God determines what happens to them ...



% who believe God/higher power ...



% who say ...



Note: Figures may not add to 100% or to subtotals indicated due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted Dec. 4-18, 2017, among U.S. adults.

"When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?"

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Maimonides and the Via Negativa (adapted from Kenneth Seeskin, “[Maimonides](#)”)

Maimonides offers several proofs for the existence of God, all of which are versions of the cosmological argument (*Guide* 2.1). Rather than begin with a definition of God and try to show that God’s essence implies existence, he begins with a description of the world as we know it and tries to show that it implies the existence of God.

Because the heavenly bodies are always moving, the only thing that can explain that motion is an infinite power. It cannot be corporeal, because then it would be subject to division or change. Seeing that its power is infinite, it cannot derive that power from something else. Thus, the only way to explain the motion of the heavenly bodies is to posit the existence of a being that is neither a body nor a force in a body. **Although Maimonides thinks this argument gives us sufficient grounds for saying *that* God is, he does not think it provides any grounds for saying *what* God is.**

If Maimonides is right, there can be no plurality of faculties, moral dispositions, or essential attributes in God. Even to say that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good is to introduce plurality, if one means thereby that these qualities are separate attributes.

So How Can We “Know” God? (Bahya b. Asher [c. 1300])

God's rulership is conveyed to us by spreading word of God's activities, specifically the act of creation *ex nihilo*. God wanted the written Torah—not just the oral tradition—to attest to this great matter, because belief in creation *ex nihilo* is the grounding for the attainment of knowledge of God on the basis on God's actions, and that is the greatest possible personal attainment. Attainment of knowledge of God on the basis of God's essence and being is impossible, hidden and concealed even from the angels.

התפרסם מלכותו מצד דרכיו ופעולותיו ממש
שחדש והמציא מאין הנמצאים כלם, לא רצה
הקב"ה שיהיה הענין הגדול הזה מסור ביד
הקבלה רק שתעיד עליו התורה, כי מתוך
אמונת חדוש העולם ישיג האדם ידיעת הש"י
מצד דרכיו ופעולותיו, וזאת היא השגה
הפרטית האפשרית כי ההשגה מצד עצמו
ומהותו נמנעת היא לפי שענינו נסתר ונעלם
אף מן המלאכים.

Bahya (Cont.)

The two kinds of knowledge are exemplified by the dialogue between God and Moses in Exodus 33: “Pray let me know Your ways” in v. 13 refers to the knowable, to which God responds, “I will make all My goodness pass before you” (v. 19). “Oh, let me behold Your Presence!” (v. 18) refers to the unknowable, to which God responds, “you cannot see My face” (v. 20). Just as a person is obliged and commanded to refrain from delving into the unattainable [that is, God's essence], so is it a commandment and an obligation to seek out and delve into that which is knowable, for by this does a servant find favor with the master [cf. 1 Samuel 20:4]. We know God on the basis of God's actions.

... והנה משה רבינו ע"ה שאל שתים אלה הודיעני נא את דרכך הוא החלק האפשר, והושב בזה אני אעביר כל טובי על פניך, הראני נא את כבודך הוא החלק הנמנע, והושב בזה לא תוכל לראות את פני.

כשם שחייב אדם ומצוה עליו להמנע מחקור החלק הנמנע, כן מצוה וחובה עליו לדרוש ולחקור על החלק האפשר, כי בזה יתרצה עבד אל אדוניו ונדענו מתוך פעולותיו.

[Prime example is Psalm 19:2:

הַשָּׁמַיִם מְסַפְּרִים כְּבוֹד־אֱלֹהִים וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו מְגִיד הַרְקִיעַ:

The heavens declare God's glory; the sky proclaims his handiwork.]

Where Do We Find God Now?

Berakhot 8a (with Steinsaltz, apud Sefaria): **Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Ami said in the name of Ulla: Since the day the Temple, where the Divine Presence rested in this world, was destroyed, the Holy One, Blessed be He, has only one place in His world where he reveals His presence exclusively; only the four cubits where the study of *halakha* is undertaken.**

Numbers 24:5: How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!

וְהֵייוֹנוּ דְאָמַר רַבִּי חִיָּיא בַר אַמִּי מִשְׁמִיָּה
דְּעוּלָא: מִיּוֹם שְׁחָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ אֵין לוֹ
לְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּעוֹלָמוֹ אֶלָּא אַרְבַּע
אַמּוֹת שֶׁל הֶלְכָה בְּלַבַּד.

[N.B. *halakhah* might mean “walking” in its plain sense.]

מָה טָבוּ אֱהָלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Rashi and Maharal (Judah Loew, d. 1609) on Numbers 24:6

Rashi: Our sages said, from the blessings of the wicked [Balaam] we learn how he had thought to curse [Israel] ... When God reversed his mouth, he blessed them in accordance with the curses he sought to say, as it says in *Sanhedrin* 105b.

Maharal (beg.): This means that he sought to say that there should be no synagogues (“your tents”). And that the *shekhina* should not abide over them (“your dwellings”). He sought to curse them such that there would be no synagogues or study houses in order to separate the *shekhinah* from Israel, God forbid.

אָמְרוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ מִבְּרָכוֹתָיו שֶׁל אוֹתוֹ רָשָׁע
אָנוּ לְמַדִּים מֶה הָיָה בְּלִבּוֹ לְקַלֵּלם ...
וּכְשֶׁהֲפֹךְ הַמָּקוֹם אֶת פִּיּוֹ, בִּרְכָם מֵעֵין
אוֹתָם קָלְלוֹת שֶׁבִקֵּשׁ לוֹמַר כּוֹ, כְּדֹאִיתָא
בְּחֻלְקָא.

[On *Sanhedrin* 105b, see Rabbi Vered L. Harris, “[Distracted by Blessing](#).”]

פִּירוּשׁ, בִּקֵּשׁ לוֹמַר לֹא יִהְיֶה לָהֶם בֵּית
כְּנִסְיֹת, אִמַּר מֶה טוֹבוֹ אֶהְלִיךְ יַעֲקֹב. לֹא
תִשְׂרָה שְׂכִינְתְךָ עֲלֵיהֶם - אִמַּר מִשְׁכְּנוֹתֶיךָ
יִשְׂרָאֵל. וּמֶה שֶׁרָצָה לְקַלֵּל אוֹתָם בְּקַלְלוֹת
אֵלוֹ, שֶׁלֹּא יִהְיֶה לָהֶם בֵּית כְּנִסְיֹת וּבֵית
מִדְּרָשׁוֹת, כְּדִי לְהַפְרִיד חֵס וְשָׁלוֹם
הַשְׂכִּינָה מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל.

Maharal on Numbers 24:6 (Cont.)

As long as there are synagogues and houses of study, the *shekhinah* is in Israel, as it is said, as long as Israel prays, the *shekhinah* is among them. So also houses of study: Since the day the Temple, was destroyed, the Holy One, Blessed be He, has only four cubits of *halakhah*. And it says (*Avot* 3:2), two who sit and exchange words of Torah, the Divine Presence rests amongst them, [as is said, "Then the God-fearing conversed with one another, and God listened and heard..." (*Malachi* 3:16).... How do I know that God rewards even an individual who sits and is occupied with the Torah? As it says, "He sits alone in meditative stillness; indeed, he receives [reward] for it" (*Lam* 3:28).] Balaam's entire intention, God forbid, was to separate the *shekhinah* from Israel, but God reversed him so that he blessed them: "How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!"

כי כל זמן שיש להם בתי כנסיות ובתי מדרשות - השכינה בישראל, כדאמרינן כל זמן שישראל מתפללין השכינה ביניהם. וכן בתי מדרשות גם כן, מיום שחרב בית המקדש אין להקדוש ברוך הוא אלא ארבע אמות של הלכה, ואמרינן שְׁנַיִם שְׂוֹשְׁבֵינֵינוּ בְּיַנְיָהֶם דְּבָרֵי תוֹרָה, שְׂכִינָה שְׂרוּיָה בְּיַנְיָהֶם, [שְׁנֵאָמַר, אֲז נְדַבְּרוּ יְרָאִי יְיָ אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ וַיִּקְשֹׁב יְיָ וַיִּשְׁמַע וַיִּכְתַּב סֵפֶר זְכוֹרֹן לְפָנָיו לְיְרָאִי יְיָ וַיִּלְחַשְׁבֵי שְׁמוֹ. אִין לִי אֶלָּא שְׁנַיִם. מִנִּין שְׁאֶפְלוּ אֶחָד שְׂוֹשֵׁב וְעוֹסֵק בְּתוֹרָה, שְׂהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא קוֹבֵעַ לוֹ שְׂכָר, שְׁנֵאָמַר, יֵשֵׁב בְּדָד וַיִּדָּם כִּי נָטַל עָלָיו:] וכל כוונת בלעם חס ושלום להפריד שכינה מישראל, והפך הקדוש ברוך הוא וברכם מה טובו אוהליך יעקב ומשכנותיך ישראל:

4 Cubits Of Halakhah (1): Solomon Ben Simon Duran (Algiers, c. 1400 – 1467), *Sefer Milhemet Mitzvah* (Leipzig, 1856, p. 23; Piotrków, 1910, p. 28) [beg.]

When they said in Berakhot 8a, "Since the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One has only four cubits of *halakhah*," the meaning was not that God could be confined within a space of four cubits. Even in the Temple, if God were restricted to entering within four cubits, it would have been impossible to enter the Temple! We reject the erring Christians who say that God entered a woman's belly, which is much narrower than four cubits, and filthy. And also in their opinion, every day God descends on the altar and enters a cup of wine and a cracker. The Most High is far above their notion.

ומה שאמרו גם כן בפרק ראשון של ברכות, מיום שחרב בית המקדש אין לו להקב"ה בעולמו אלא ארבע אמות של הלכה. אין הכונה שהקב"ה יגדרנו מקום ושיכנס בתוך ארבע אמות, ואפילו בבית המקדש שכמו שהוא נמנע שיכנס בארבע אמות, כך הוא נמנע שיכנס במקדש. ולא נקבל הנוצרים בטעותם שאומרים שהאל נכנס בבטן האשה, שהוא צר יותר מארבע אמות ובמקום מטונף. וגם כפי דעתם, בכל יום הוא יורד בבמה ונכנס בגביע היין ורקיק לחם, יתעלה עלוי רב ממאמרם זה.

4 Cubits Of Halakhah (1a): Solomon Ben Simon Duran (Algiers, c. 1400 – 1467),

Sefer Milhemet Mitzvah (Leipzig, 1856, p. 23; Piotrków, 1910, p. 28) [cont.]

Many will not believe that God is confined in place, God forbid, for as Solomon said, “But will God really dwell on earth? Even the heavens to their uttermost reaches cannot contain You, how much less this House that have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). Their meaning in this midrash was that God’s providence cleaves to those who serve him and call his name in truth and integrity, as it says, “YHWH is near to all who call him; to all who call him faithfully” (Psalm 145:18). And it says, “Wherever I cause mention of my name I shall come to you and bless you” (Exodus 20:21). The place established for this was the Temple. When it was destroyed, there was no remaining [Temple] service and no means of serving God other than Torah study. The *shekhinah*, viz., individual providence, cleaves to anyone occupied with her.

ורבים לא יאמינו שהב"ה נגדר במקום, חלילה
וחס, שהרי שלמה אמר, כִּי הָאֱמֻנָם יֵשֵׁב אֱלֹהִים
עַל־הָאָרֶץ הַזֶּה הַשָּׁמַיִם וְשָׁמַיִם הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא
יִכְלְלוּךְ אֵלֶּיךָ כִּי־הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בָּנִיתִי:
אבל הכונה להם ז"ל בזה המדרש הוא, כי
השגחתו יתברך דבקה בעובדיו ובקוראים
בשמו באמת ובתמים, כאומרו קְרוֹב ה'
לְכָל־קֹרְאָיו לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאֵהוּ בְּאֵמֶת. ואומר
בְּכָל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אֲזַכִּיר אֶת־שְׁמִי אָבוֹא אֵלֶיךָ
וּבְרַכְתִּיךָ. והמקום המוכן לזה הוא בית
המקדש, ומיום שחרב ולא נשארה עבודה
ולא נשאר לנו במה לעבוד את ה' אלא
בתלמוד תורה, וכל העוסק בה שכינה דבקה
בו, כלומר ההשגחה הפרטית.

Even if only a single person occupies four cubits alone, providence cleaves to that person. That is the ultimate purpose of humanity, according to “the righteous one is the foundation of the world” (Proverbs 10:25). Also, according to what they said, “How do I know that God rewards even an individual who sits and is occupied with the Torah? As it says, ‘He sits alone in meditative stillness; indeed, he receives [reward] for it’” (*Avot* 3:2 quoting Lamentations 3:28). All the *aggadot* are to be interpreted in this manner. How can they believe in Incarnations when they have been admonished against them? God forbid that they should fall into what they have been admonished against.

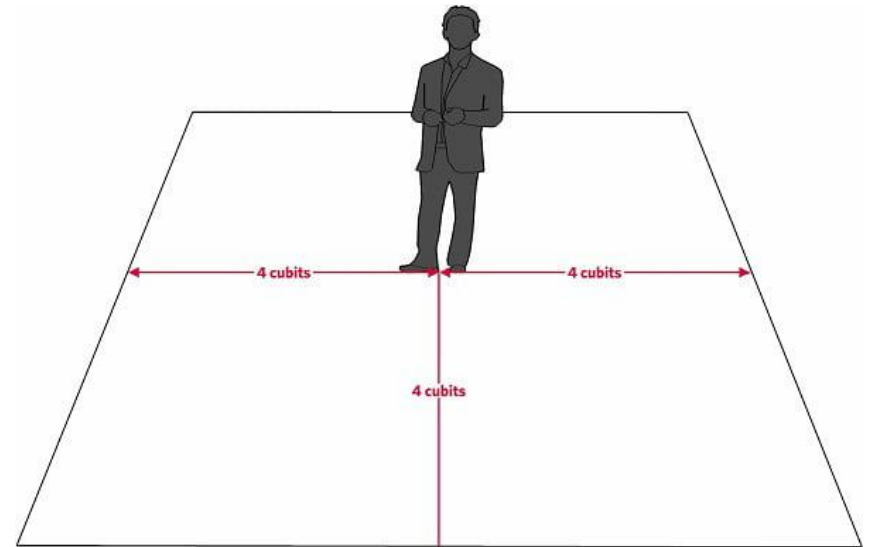
ואפילו לא יהיה אלא אדם אחד לבדו שתופס
ארבע אמות, ההשגחה דבקה בו. והוא
תכלית הבריאה באדם, על דרך יצדיק
יטוד עולם, ועל דרכם שאמרו מנין שאפלו
אחד שישב ועוסק בתורה, שהקדוש ברוך
הוא קובע לו שכר, שנאמר, ישב בדד וידם כי
נטל עליו. ועל זה הדרך יתפרשו כל
אגדותיהם. ואיך יאמינו הגשמות
והם מוזהרים בהם, חלילה שיפלו במה
שהזהירו ממנו:

More on 4 cubits of *halakhah* (2)

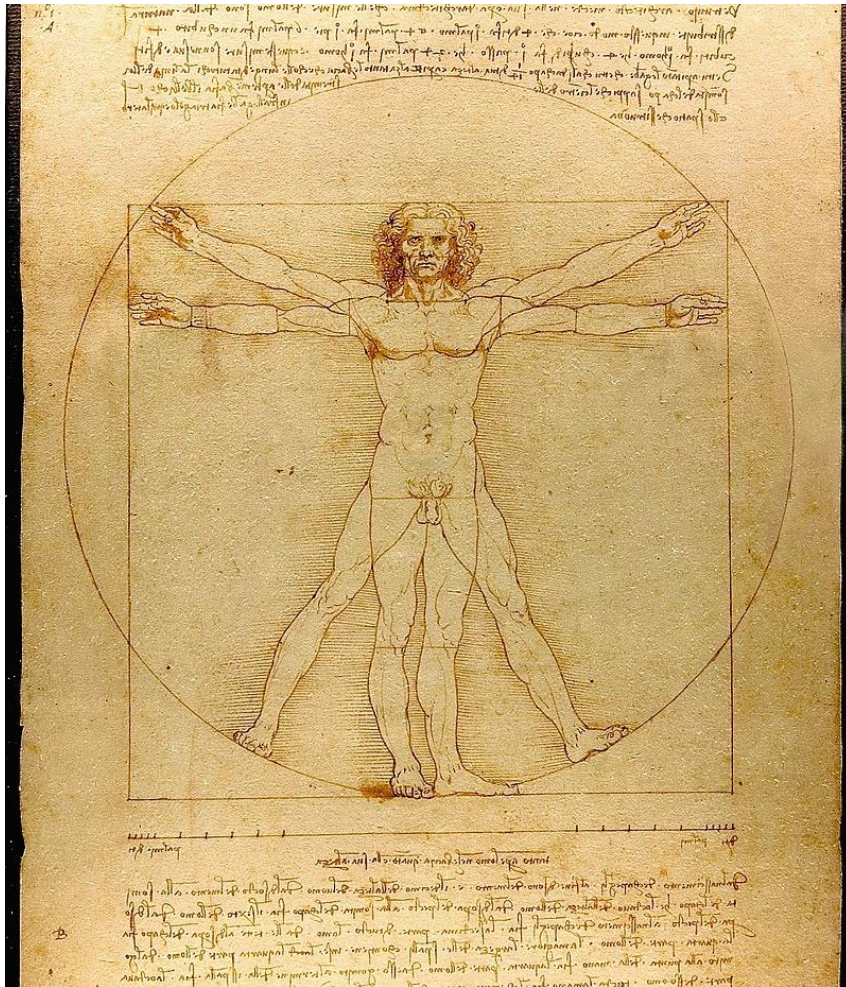
Shulhan arukh OH 396:1 (on Sabbath boundaries)

שָׁבוּ אִישׁ תַּחְתּוֹ – כְּשֶׁעוֹר תַּחְתּוֹ. מִכָּאן
סָמְכוּ חֲכָמִים שְׁכַל אָדָם יֵשׁ לוֹ ד' אַמּוֹת
בְּכֹל מְקוֹם שֶׁהוּא.

“Let each one stay in place” (Exod 16:29) is taken (*Eruvin* 48a) to refer to the measure of the space a person occupies. Hence, the Sages used it to support the idea that every person occupies four cubits anywhere.



More on 4 cubits of *halakhah* (3): [Vitruvian Man](#)



Vitruvius, the architect, says in his architectural work that the measurements of man are in nature distributed in this manner, that is 4 fingers make a palm, 4 palms make a foot, 6 palms make a cubit, **4 cubits make a man**, 4 cubits make a footstep, 24 palms make a man and these measures are in his buildings. (Leonardo's inscription above the image)

Vitruvius was a 1st-century BCE Roman architect and engineer, known for his multi-volume work titled *De architectura*. His discussion of perfect proportion in the human body (*De arch.* III.1) inspired Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man" (c.1485).