

## SYMMETRY AND TRANSFORMATION WITHIN SONG OF SONGS RABBAH

By  
Christopher P. Benton

The final redaction of Song of Songs Rabbah occurred circa 550 CE according to Encyclopedia Judaica. It is a rabbinical work that explicitly explains Song of Songs as a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel. In this paper, however, we will examine Song of Songs Rabbah more for its implicit messages than for its explicit discourse. As with any great work, Song of Songs Rabbah transmits not only particular ideas that the authors intended, but also the *weltanschauung*, or worldview, of its creators. Throughout, a seminal passage from Song of Songs Rabbah will often be used as a starting point and then passages from both earlier and later writings will be examined to demonstrate a continuity of this *weltenshaung*. Earlier writings such as Tanach and some parts of rabbinic literature represent what would be taken for granted by the authors of Song of Songs Rabbah, and later writings can clarify the evolution of certain lines of thought. We commence with the concept that God reconciles all contradictions.

### God as the Reconciler Between Opposites

*R. Johanan said: It is written that He makes peace in high places (Job. 25:2). The firmament is made of water and the stars are of fire, and yet they do not harm one another.*  
(Song of Songs Rabbah III:24)

This passage expresses a recurring theme in rabbinic literature that God is able to embrace all opposites without one overpowering the other. The ability of God to reconcile fire and water is reiterated in the following two passages that are also found in Song of Songs Rabbah.

*Michael is the Prince of snow and Gabriel is the Prince of fire, and neither quenches or injures the other. R. Ahib said: It is not merely between one angel and another that the Holy One, blessed be He, makes peace, but even between the two parts of an angel, one half of which is snow and the other half fire.*  
(Song of Songs Rabbah III:24)

*"The flashes are flashes of fire, a flame of the Lord." R. Berekiah said: Like the fire of heaven, where the fire does not consume the water nor the water reduce the fire.*  
(Song of Songs Rabbah VIII:7)

The notion of God reconciling fire and water can even be traced back to the beginning of the Torah where the word for heavens, *Shamayim*, can be decomposed into *Eish* and *Mayim*, the Hebrew words

for fire and water. Explanations of *Shamayim* as representing both fire and water can be found in the Talmud, Midrash Rabbah, and the Zohar.

*"And God called the firmament heaven (Shamayim)." Rav said: Shamayim is a compound of Eish (fire) and Mayim (water).  
(Genesis Rabbah 4:7)*

*What does 'heaven' [Shamayim] mean? . . . It is taught in a Baraita that it means 'fire' and 'water'. This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, brought them and mixed them together and made the firmament from them.  
(B. Chagigah 12a)*

*When God created the world, He made the heavens of fire and of water united together.  
(Zohar I:77a)*

Reconciliation of opposites also applies to the words of scholars as is demonstrated by the following passages from the Talmud and Song of Songs Rabbah.

*For three years there was a dispute between Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel. The former said, "The halachah is in agreement with our views," and the latter asserted, "The halachah is in agreement with our views." Then a bat kol (heavenly voice) declared, "The utterances of both are the words of the living God."  
(B. Eiruvim 13b)*

*R. Nehemiah said: If two scholars argue over a law and each one cites a general principle to support his view, the Holy One, blessed be He, says, "Their source comes from Me."  
(Song of Songs Rabbah 1:16)*

### **Mathematics and the Nature of Perception**

At this point we will digress briefly to discuss the nature of perception and contradictions in greater detail. Experience teaches us that we build complex perceptions out of simpler ones. For example, perceptions of color, shape, texture, and other component parts all come together to form our favorite chair. Presumably, when we were very young, before we could see an object as a "chair", we had to first learn to perceive some of its simpler elements. To give another example, we begin at one level with the perception of a "tree", and after a sufficient amount of experience with trees, we can suddenly formulate the perception of the "forest". With objects of perception that are difficult or new to us, such as complicated topics in

mathematics, the transition from "trees" to "forest" can take some time. On such occasions, we often express our frustration by saying that we have all the pieces of the puzzle, but we just can't put them together, or that the concept hasn't quite gelled in our minds.

We also sometimes go in what seems like the opposite direction, from the whole to parts. For example, we may have understanding of "snow" as an object of perception, and yet it may take repeated observations before we can begin to distinguish between a multitude of different types of snow as do the Inuit natives of Alaska. In other words, in addition to objects coming together in our minds to form a new gestalt, we also take gestalts that we have already learned to perceive and make those gestalts richer through elaboration of their component parts. A classic example is the ego, our sense of "I". At an early age we create our perception of "I-ness", and it serves as the focal point for all experience from that point on. The "I" is a gestalt that is created out of a synthesis of perceptions and their relationships with the physical and mental "bodies", and that "I" undergoes extensive development and modification as a consequence of the natural individuation of consciousness that occurs as we mature. Notice that whether we are first formulating a gestalt or taking a given gestalt and adding further details to its components through individuation, what is constant in each process is the presence of the gestalt as a whole that embraces many parts and, in essence, turns the "many" into a "one".

Fortunately, mathematics provides some tools for discussing these processes. The process of the "many" becoming the "one" corresponds to what mathematics refers to as an "equivalence class". An equivalence class may be thought of as a box in which everything contained therein is considered the same. For instance, we can begin with the counting numbers,  $\{1, 2, 3, \dots\}$  and divide them into two groups, even and odd. The collection even counting numbers is  $\{2, 4, 6, \dots\}$ , and the odd are  $\{1, 3, 5, \dots\}$ . There are an infinite number of counting numbers, but when we group them into the two equivalence classes, even and odd, we reduce this infinity to just two. From the perspective of these classes, there now exist just two objects. Additionally, when we give the numbers 1, 2, 3, etc., the label "counting numbers", everything has been further reduced to one.

### **Contradictions and Equivalence Classes**

In symbolic logic a contradiction occurs when a hypothesis implies both the truth and falsity of some proposition. The more general definition of a contradiction, however, is that of having conditions or inherent qualities that are contrary to one another. Using the broadest possible notion of contradiction, we could say that every perception in a sense contradicts every other perception. Thus, a tree is not a rock, and the rock is, likewise, contrary to the tree. From the standpoint of any particular object, everything else is *acher*, the other.

The type of contradiction, however, that we generally experience in life occurs as a result of being faced with points of view which seem irreconcilable. Classic examples are the often contradictory views of Hillel and Shammai. When people are faced with contradictory viewpoints, a variety of techniques are

often employed to deal with the ensuing cognitive dissonance. A few of the more common approaches are described below:

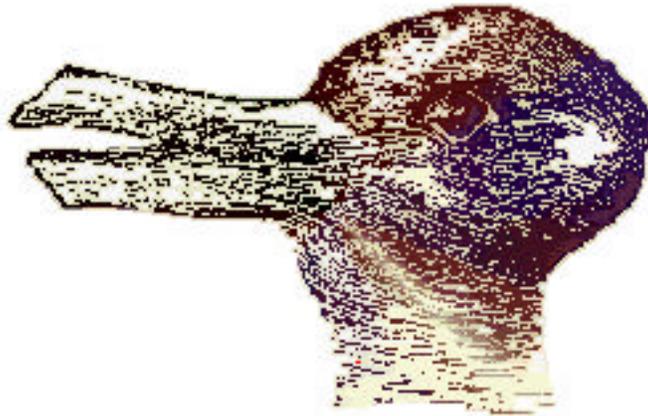
- *War* - This approach is characterized by attempts to eliminate all viewpoints that conflict with the one that is preferred.
- *Denial* - This coping technique involves an avoidance of focusing on the conflict. If we don't think about it, then it doesn't exist! A common application is the avoidance at work of discussion of certain topics, such as religion and politics, that often reveal divergent points of view.
- *Separation* - This method seeks resolution of tension through separation from the source of the contradiction.
- *Assimilation* - This approach refers to one or more of the parties involved changing their perspective in order to ameliorate the discord.
- *Transcendence* - This solution represents resolution of the contradictions through discovery of a higher viewpoint that resolves the tension. An example from rabbinical literature would be the reconciliation of opposing views of Hillel and Shammai by stating that "both are the words of the living God."

It is this last approach that can be described by the notion of equivalence classes. For example, the conflict between Hillel and Shammai is resolved by declaring both to be God's word, thus, establishing an equivalence between the two contradictory points of view. The ability of God to turn a "many" into "one" and vice-versa is clearly articulated in rabbinical literature.

*A human being cannot say two things at once, but the Holy One, blessed be He, uttered the Ten Commandments simultaneously.  
(Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 41b)*

*The School of R. Ishamael taught: "And like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces." Just as a hammer is divided into many sparks, so every single word that went forth from the Holy One, blessed be He, split up into seventy languages.  
(B. Shabbat 88b)*

Implicit in this transition from the "one" to the "many" is the understanding that contradictory viewpoints can both be true. To see an example of how this can be so, one need go no further than a common optical illusion. In the graphic that follows, one can mentally assemble the parts to form either the image of a duck or the semblance of a rabbit. Each image contradicts the other and yet both are valid and accurate perceptions.



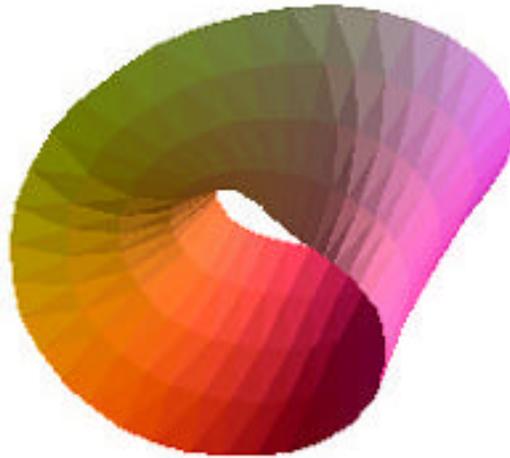
**Figure 1. Duck/Rabbit Optical Illusion**

In theory, any set of perceptions or viewpoints can be considered equivalent in the eye of the beholder. This immediately raises the question as to whether reality is entirely arbitrary. Are we to accept the dictum of Shakespeare's Hamlet that "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so"? The answer of Judaism is a resounding, "No." The Tanach makes it clear that certain things are not to be treated as equivalent. This is subtly expressed in the passage below from Deuteronomy, and it is stated more strongly in Isaiah.

*You will keep my commandments. You won't mate your cattle with a different kind; you won't sow your field with two kinds of seed; you won't wear a garment mixed of linen and woolen.*  
(Leviticus 19:19)

*Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who present darkness as light, and light as darkness; who place bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!*  
(Isaiah 5:20)

It is apparent from the above that there are some absolutes within Judaism and that morality is not entirely arbitrary. In mathematics, when two orientations which are generally meant to be distinct are forced to be combined, the result is an object which is "nonorientable". A classic example is a Mobius strip. Usually, a strip of paper will have two sides, one of which may be arbitrarily designated as "top" and the other as "bottom". However, if we take a strip of paper and twist it before connecting the ends, then we obtain a Mobius strip which, mathematically speaking, has only one side.



**Figure 2. A Möbius Strip**

Because orientations of "top" and "bottom" cannot be defined consistently with respect to a Möbius strip, it is considered to be nonorientable. Likewise, when people "call evil good, and good evil (Isaiah 5:20)", then speech becomes "nonorientable".

While Judaism warns against trying to combine particular things, it is equally clear that Judaism also allows certain other contradictory viewpoints and situations to both be correct. However, which viewpoints are relative and which are absolute is often far from clear even within Judaism, as is evidenced by the many ongoing debates. Nevertheless, rabbinic Judaism does suggest that the guidance of scholars is paramount in coming to, at least a temporary, if not permanent, resolution to these conflicts.

*The scholars said in the name of R. Johanan: The commands of the Scribes are more beloved than those of the Torah, as it says, for thy love (dodeka) is better than wine. If a man says: There is no commandment to put on tefillin, thus transgressing a law of the Torah, he is subject to no penalty. But if he says there are five compartments in the tefillin, thus transgressing an sanction of the Scribes, he is subject to a penalty.*  
(Song of Songs Rabbah I:18)

It is also apparent that even though some contradictions are to be treated by us as absolute, in God all are reconciled. We refer once again to Isaiah:

*I form the light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil; I, the Lord, do all these things.*  
(Isaiah 45:7)

### **God as the Totality of All Things**

Judaism implies that God contains everything. This may be deduced from the following two passages and another reference to basic mathematics. First, in Genesis Rabbah we find the following:

*From the text "Lord, You have been our dwelling place (Psalm 90:1)", it follows that the Lord is the dwelling place of the world, but the world is not His dwelling place.  
(Genesis Rabbah 68:9)*

This passage implies that the world is contained in God. Furthermore, we might say that everything in the world has the property of being embedded within God. In mathematics, we often describe a collection through an expression of the form "the set of all  $x$  such that  $x$  has property  $P$ ". If we let property  $P$  correspond to the condition of being contained within God, then the quote below from Psalms suggests that there is nothing which lacks this property.

*Where shall I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend up to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, you are there!  
(Psalm 139:7-8)*

Together these passages imply that all things are contained within God. However, the mathematical theory of sets shows that the notion of an ultimate collection, a "set of all sets" leads to a logical contradiction.

### **Paradoxes of Wholeness**

Set theory was developed in the late nineteenth century by the great Jewish mathematician Georg Cantor. Intuitively, a set was originally thought of as a collection, and it was presumed that collections could be defined arbitrarily without any difficulties arising. This also applies to infinite collections, such as the set of counting numbers. Also, set theory even came up with a well-defined procedure for creating a larger set from any given set. This procedure applies to infinite as well as finite sets, and, thus, modern mathematics recognizes not only infinite sets, but also infinities of different sizes. However, herein lies the problem known as Cantor's Paradox. Suppose we naively assume that we can speak of the "set of all sets". Then this set has a definite size which in mathematics is referred to as its "cardinality" or "cardinal number". However, since there does exist a well-defined procedure in mathematics for constructing a set with a larger cardinality from any given set, it in essence becomes possible to construct a set that is larger than the set of all sets. We now have a contradiction, for what could possibly be larger than "everything"? This is the essence of Cantor's Paradox.

A subtler but even more satisfying conundrum is Russell's Paradox which was discovered in 1901 by Bertrand Russell. In this paradox, Russell noted that a set either contains itself as an element or it doesn't. For example, the set of all teacups is not itself a teacup, and hence, this set is not an element of itself. However, the set of all things that are not teacups is also not a teacup, and thus, it does contain itself as a member. Now let S correspond to the "set of all sets that do not contain themselves as an element", and consider the question of whether S is an element of itself. Logic dictates the following conclusions. If S is an element of itself, then since S is the "set of all sets that do not contain themselves as an element", it follows that S is not an element of itself. On the other hand, if S is not an element of itself, then again since S is the "set of all sets that do not contain themselves as an element", S is an element of itself. Either way we have a contradiction.

The response of mathematics to this and other paradoxes that were found in set theory was to limit the size and scope of what could be considered a set. The mathematical theory of sets was reformulated axiomatically into a universe of discourse that was large enough to permit infinite sets of different sizes while not allowing the collection of everything to be referred to as a set. The term "set" was then interpreted not as a synonym for "collection", but as an undefinable primitive term to be used in the definition of more complex objects. In this way, the paradoxes of the infinite, while not necessarily being resolved, were certainly avoided. Interestingly, the intuitive understanding that infinities that are sufficiently large are contradictory is present even outside of mathematics as can be seen in the following poetic excerpt by Walt Whitman.

*Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)*  
 ("Song of Myself [ll 1324-26]", Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman)

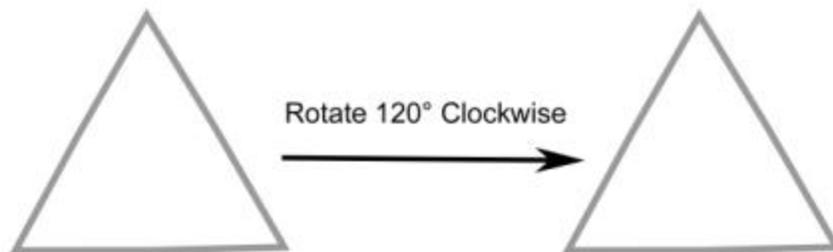
The bottom line is that the totality of all things is necessarily paradoxical and contradictory, and hence, it must be excluded from our universe of discourse in order to obtain logical consistency. Consequently, if we think of God in terms of the totality of all things, then even modern mathematics hints that God is not like other objects and is inherently unknowable and ineffable. This intrinsic unknowableness of God is described in the following passage from the Babylonian Talmud.

*Another time the Emperor said to R. Joshua b. Hananiah, "I wish to see your God." He replied, "You cannot see Him." "Indeed," said the Emperor, "I will see Him." He went and placed the Emperor before the sun during the summer solstice and said to the him, "Gaze upon it." He replied, "I cannot." Said R. Joshua, "If you cannot look at the sun which is but one of the ministers that attend the Holy One, blessed be He, then how can you possibly look upon the divine presence!"*  
 (B. Chullin 59b-60a)

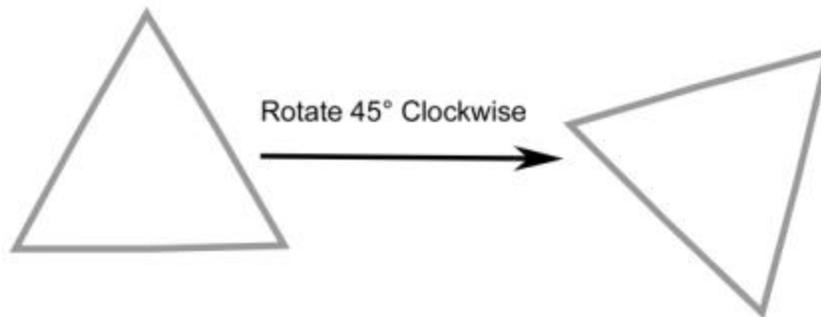
## God as Symmetry

Symmetry means repetition of a pattern. Such repetition can occur in a variety of ways. Theories of modern physics postulate that the universe began in a state of perfect symmetry, and that this symmetry was subsequently broken in the event known as the Big Bang. As we will see, the notion of God as the totality of all things also carries with it an implication of perfect symmetry.

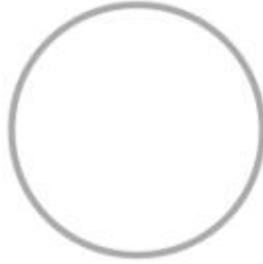
When an object possesses symmetry, transformations can be found that appear to leave the object unchanged. For example, an equilateral triangle such as the one below possesses a certain amount of symmetry. If our transformation is a rotation through an angle of 120 degrees or any whole number multiple thereof, then the resulting triangle appears unchanged.



However, if we rotate the triangle through a lesser angle, then the end result is definitely different from what we started with.



A circle, however, possesses more symmetry than an equilateral triangle. With this object no amount of rotation about its center will produce any discernable change. Greater symmetry implies more stability in the face of transformation.



Consequently, perfect symmetry implies extreme resistance to change as a result of any transformation. In Malachi, the following statement carries with it the implication that God represents ultimate symmetry.

*I am the Lord, I do not change.*  
(Malachi 3:6)

Admittedly, the Torah also contains instances where God does appear to change His mind in a very human manner. For example, in Exodus 32 God appears ready to destroy the Hebrews for having made and worshipped a golden calf, but Moses persuades God to relent. Nevertheless, we presume that it is also true that God is unchangeable. The constancy of God over time is also expressed in Song of Songs Rabbah through reference to a symmetry found in the aleph-bet. By noting that the Hebrew word for truth is spelled using the letters from the beginning, middle, and end of the aleph-bet, a type of symmetry is being highlighted. In this case, the discernable pattern is that of aleph and tav being equidistant from mem, and Song of Songs Rabbah uses this symmetry to express the temporal unchangeableness of God.

*Resh Lakish said, "Why is God's signature emet (truth)? Because this word consists of alef, the beginning of the alphabet, mem the middle letter, and tav the last letter, as if to say, I am the first and I am the last, and beside Me there is no God.*  
( Song of Songs Rabbah I:46)

Perfect symmetry is also implied by the notion of God as the totality of all things. As we saw above, this totality is inherently unknowable. Consequently, any transformation that starts with this totality and ends with this totality will produce no discernable change in the whole. The whole will still be unknowable. In this sense, God is ultimate symmetry.

### **Broken Symmetry and the Creation of the Universe**

Physics postulates that various symmetries were broken during the Big Bang. Interestingly, a strikingly beautiful description of a Big Bang type event and a resulting expanding universe occurs in the Zohar.

*There was indeed a "brightness" (Zohar). The Most Mysterious struck its void, and caused this point to shine. This "beginning" then extended, and made for itself a place for its honor and glory. There it sowed a sacred seed which was to generate for the benefit of the universe, and to which may be applied the scriptural words "the holy seed is the stock thereof" (Isaiah 6:13). Again there was Zohar, in that it sowed a seed for its glory, just as the silkworm encloses itself, as it were, in a palace of its own production which is both useful and beautiful. Thus, by means of this "beginning" the Mysterious Unknown made this palace. This palace is called Elohim, and this doctrine is contained in the words, "By means of a beginning it created Elohim." (Zohar I:15a)*

In later Lurianic kabbalah this evolved into the notion of the *tzimtzum*, God withdrawing his essence from about a central point in order to create a space for the universe to exist. In Hasidic thought, this contraction of God's essence has generally been treated as an illusion on the basis of textual declarations that God's glory fills the earth (Isaiah 6:3). However, from our perspective the illusion is real and we find ourselves in a universe that is characterized by both broken symmetry and remnants of the original symmetry. It is the presence of these concepts of symmetry and broken symmetry within rabbinical Judaism that we'll now explore.

### **Symmetry and Enantiomorphism Within Judaism**

Enantiomorphism is a term coined by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus to denote the changing of a thing into its opposite. The concept of enantiomorphism as opposites which are the same later became a cornerstone of Jungian psychology. According to Jung, the transcendent function within us seeks to unite these opposites in order to bring us into a state of wholeness. In Judaism, we find many examples of opposites which are the same, and these examples likewise reflect simultaneously the concepts of symmetry and broken symmetry. Illustrations of this principle are encountered as early as the following passage from Genesis.

*And God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." (Genesis 1:26)*

Probably no passage reflects symmetry and broken symmetry, sameness and opposition, as much as this passage from Genesis. On the one hand, we are the mirror image of God, and on the other hand, what could be more opposite from God than a human being? God is infinite while humans are finite. God is formless while a human has form. God is permanent while a human being is impermanent. And yet, we are told that we should be holy because God is holy (Leviticus 11:44). Both symmetry and opposition are present in the relationship between persons and God.

In Song of Songs Rabbah, we find many instances of enantiodromia. For example, consider the following passages.

*"A man should concentrate his mind on the Holy of Holies." R. Hiyya the Great and R. Simeon b. Halaftha interpret this differently. R. Hiyya the Great says, "It means, the celestial Holy of Holies." R.. Simeon b. Halaftha says, "It means, the Holy of Holies here below."  
(Song of Songs Rabbah IV:12)*

*"Your name [which has a numerical value of 613] is an ointment poured forth," - two hundred and forty-eight positive commandments and three hundred and sixty-five negative commandments.  
(Song of Songs Rabbah I:20)*

*MY UNDEFILED (TAMATHI): My wholly devoted (tamuthi) who become whole-hearted with Me at Sinai and said, "All that the Lord has said will we do, and obey (Exodus 24:7)." R. Jannai said, "It means, as it were, my twin (teumathi). I am not greater than she nor is she greater than I am." R. Joshua of Siknin said in the name of R. Levi, "It means, my twin. Just as, if one twin has a pain in his head, the other feels it also, so, as it were the Holy One, blessed be He, said, I will be with him in trouble (Psalm 91:15)."  
(Song of Songs Rabbah V:3)*

In the first passage we encounter symmetry between the opposites of heaven and earth. The earthly Holy of Holies is a reflection of the heavenly Holy of Holies. In the next passage we encounter the paradox that the God who is without form and structure imparted to us the ultimate structure of the commandments. Furthermore, by following the structure of these commandments, we become more like God who is without structure. Finally, the third passage above strongly reiterates the symmetrical relationship between human beings and God that is found at the beginning of Genesis. Again, nothing is more opposite God than an individual person, and yet this passage from Song of Songs Rabbah describes God as our twin, once more highlighting the symmetrical relationship between people and God.

This next passage from Song of Song of Songs Rabbah, which compares a woman's breasts to Moses and Aaron, is extremely telling and rife with symbolism.

*YOUR TWO BREASTS: these are Moses and Aaron. Just as the breasts are the beauty and the adornment of a woman, so Moses and Aaron were the beauty and adornment of Israel. Just as the breasts are the appeal of a woman, so Moses and Aaron were the appeal of Israel. Just as the breasts are full of milk, so Moses and Aaron filled Israel with Torah. Just as whatever a woman eats helps to feed the child at the breast, so all the Torah that Moses our teacher learned he taught to Aaron, as it is written, "And Moses told Aaron all the words of the Lord (Exodus 4:28)." The*

*Rabbis say, "He revealed to him the ineffable Name." Just as one breast is not greater than the other, so it was with Moses and Aaron, for it is written, "These are that Moses and Aaron (Exodus 4:27)," and it is also written, "These are that Aaron and Moses (ib. 26)," showing that Moses was not greater than Aaron nor was Aaron greater than Moses in knowledge of Torah. R. Abba said, "They were like two fine pearls belonging to a king which he put in a balance, finding that neither weighed down the other. So were Moses and Aaron just equal."*  
*(Song of Songs Rabbah IV:13)*

Through the symbolic use of "breasts" to represent Moses and Aaron, we have yet another encounter with both symmetry and opposition. The symmetry of the breasts illustrates the equivalence between Moses and Aaron. Yet, on the other hand, Moses and Aaron also represent opposites. Aaron was an eloquent spokesperson while Moses stuttered and was "slow of tongue" (Exodus 4:10). We can also say that Moses is to Aaron as God is to Moses. This is demonstrated by the following two passages.

*And he (Aaron) shall speak to the people for you; and he shall be to you (Moses) as a mouth, and it will be as if you were God to him.*  
*(Exodus 4:16)*

*"And you shall be to him in God's stead." In fact, what God said to Moses was this, "Moses, as My fear is upon you, so shall the fear of you be upon thy brother."*  
*(Song of Songs Rabbah I:52)*

The Hebrew word for breasts can be further related to greater spiritual realms in two ways. First, the spelling for breasts, *Shadayim*, differs by only one letter from the spelling for heavens, *Shamayim*, and second, the word for breast, *Shad*, appears to be etymologically related to the appellation "God Almighty", *El Shaddai*. Additionally, the transition of the milk of the breasts from the unseen inside to the visible outside is also representative of more general transitions from the unknown to the known, and hence from God to humans. We now begin a more thorough examination of what rabbinic literature has to say about such transitions.

### **God as the Moving Energy Between Opposites**

One view of God already discussed is God as the unknowable, unchangeable totality that contains all things. However, there is another aspect of God in Judaism as the invisible animating energy that directs all movement. The notion of God as a moving, dynamic force occurs in Psalms and Isaiah in the guise of the "cloud rider".

*Sing to God, intone hymns to His name; praise Him who rides on the clouds; His name is the Lord, exult in his presence.*

*(Psalm 68:5)*

*Behold, the Lord rides upon a swift cloud.*

*(Isaiah 19:1)*

Cloud imagery is also associated with God's presence and communication as we see in the following collection of passages below.

*And the presence of the Lord abode upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; and on the seventh day he called to Moses from the midst of the cloud.*

*(Exodus 24:16)*

*And the Lord came down in the pillar of the cloud, and stood in the door of the Tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forward.*

*(Numbers 12:5)*

*They have heard that you Lord are among this people, that you Lord are seen face to face, and that your cloud stands over them, and that you go before them, by day time in a pillar of a cloud, and in the pillar of fire by night.*

*(Numbers 14:14)*

It should also be noted that clouds represent a boundary between heaven and hearth. As such, they are a barrier between realms. Hence, it is not surprising that the presence of a cloud is often attendant with communication from God.

Earlier, the symbolism of breasts was discussed in reference to Moses and Aaron, God and Moses, and communication between the seen and unseen worlds. Similar associations may be made with clouds. For example, just as a breast can sustain life through its milk, so do clouds perform the same function through rain. Furthermore, the voice of God that goes forth from the cloud also functions to sustain life as is evidenced by the following passage from Deuteronomy.

*Man does not live by bread only, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.*

*(Deuteronomy 8:3)*

In addition to riding on clouds, one also finds many references to God riding on cherubs.

*Then I looked, and behold, in the firmament that was above the head of the cherubim appeared over them something like a sapphire stone, in appearance like the shape of a throne. . . . Then the glory of the Lord went up from the cherub, and stood over the threshold of the Temple; and the Temple was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the Lord's glory.*  
(Ezekiel 10:1, 4)

*And he rode on a cherub, and flew; he flew on the wings of the wind. He made darkness his secret place; his pavilion around him was dark with waters and thick clouds of the skies.*  
(Psalm 18:11-12)

*Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock; appear, you who are enthroned upon the cherubim.*  
(Psalm 80:2)

Interestingly, the root letters for "ride" and "rider" (resh-kaf-bet) are just a permutation of the root letters for cherub. This reiterates the understanding of a cherub as something that is ridden upon. It is also thought that the word cherub is derived from the Akkadian "karabu" meaning to pray or bless, and this is in keeping with the thesis that clouds and cherubs are associated with communication with God. Both these symbols are present in the following passage.

*Who makes the clouds his chariot; who walks upon the wings of the wind; who makes the winds his messengers (angels).*  
(Psalm 104:3-4)

The imagery of cherubs, clouds, and communication with God is also present in the ark of the covenant, and this association may, in fact, be the source for later correlations of these elements with God.

*And you shall make two cherubim of gold, of hammered workmanship shall you make them, in the two ends of a the cover. ... And you shall put the cover upon the ark; and in the ark you put the testimony that I shall give you. And there I will meet with you, and I will talk with you from above the cover, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give you in commandment to the people of Israel.*  
(Exodus 25:18, 22)

*And the Lord said to Moses, "Speak to Aaron your brother, that he not come always into the holy place inside the veil before the covering which is upon the ark; that he die not; for I will appear in the cloud upon the covering.*

*(Leviticus 16:2)*

Apparently, incense was used to create an artificial cloud to facilitate communication with God as is indicated by passages such as the following.

*And he shall put incense upon the fire before the Lord, so that the cloud of the incense may blanket the covering that is upon the testimony, so that he shall not die.*

*(Leviticus 16:13)*

*For what purpose then is it stated, "For I appear in the cloud upon the ark cover? (Leviticus 16:2)" It comes to teach us that he puts into it [the incense] a smoke-raiser. From where do we know that he must put a smoke-raiser into it? Because it is said, "So that the cloud of the incense may cover the ark cover. (Leviticus 16:13)"*

*(B. Yoma 53a)*

The word "ketoret", one of two words generally used in the Torah for incense, essentially means "that which goes up in smoke". Hence, it can refer either to incense or to the smoke of an animal sacrifice. One finds "ketoret" used in the latter manner in the Psalm 66:15. However, the following two textual references show that in either context this cloud of smoke is associated with communication with God.

*And Noah built an altar to the Lord; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the Lord smelled the pleasing odor.*

*(Genesis 8:21)*

*Let my prayer be set forth before you like incense; and the lifting up of my hands like the evening sacrifice.*

*(Psalm 141:2)*

The passages above depict God as a moving power that rides upon clouds and cherubim and actively communicates with humans. Confirmation of God as an animating force is also found in the following Talmudic passage.

*Our Rabbis taught, "There are three partners in man, the Holy One, blessed be He, his father and his mother. His father supplies the semen of the white substance out of which are formed the*

*child's bones, sinews, nails, the brain in his head and the white in his eye; his mother supplies the semen of the red substance out of which is formed his skin, flesh, hair, blood and the black of his eye; and the Holy One, blessed be He, gives him the spirit and the breath, beauty of features, eyesight, the power of hearing and the ability to speak and to walk, understanding and discernment. When his time to depart from the world approaches the Holy One, blessed be He, takes away his share and leaves the shares of his father and his mother with them"*  
(B. Niddah 31a)

Furthermore, in Song of Songs Rabbah we encounter both the idea of God as the cloud rider and images of intangibility with respect to God's chariot. This latter is apropos if clouds do indeed represent a boundary between two realms, between heaven and earth. As such, clouds have only a quasi sort of existence in comparison to other physical objects. A mist can be seen, but it cannot be grasped and manipulated in the same manner that other objects can. Likewise, a cloud of incense can be seen and smelt, but is otherwise intangible. Consequently, it is understandable that clouds represent a bridge between worlds.

*R. Hanina b. Papa said, "When a human being rides, he rides on something that carries him, something tangible; but not so the Holy One, blessed be He; He carries His chariot and rides on something which is not tangible, as it is written, 'And He rode upon a cherub and it did fly; yea, He did swoop down upon the wings of the wind' (Psalm 18:11)."*  
( Song of Songs Rabbah I:49)

In Exodus Rabbah XV:22, one of the later midrashic works, we read that three things preceded the creation of the world - water, wind, and fire. Notice that of these three, water and fire are visible while wind is invisible. The association of water and fire with the earth is found in the following passage from Genesis Rabbah.

*AND THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH WERE FINISHED, etc. How did the Holy One, blessed be He, create the world? Said R. Johanan, "The Lord took two balls, one of fire and the other snow, and worked them into each other, and from these the world was created."*  
(Genesis Rabbah 10:3)

Finally, *Sefer Yetzirah*, an early kabbalistic work, shows us the evolution of this line of thought.

*Three Mothers, Aleph-Mem-Shin, in the universe are air, water, and fire. Heaven was created from fire, earth was created from water, and the air decides between the fire and the water.*  
(Sefer Yetzirah 3:3)

Taking all of the above passages together, we get a striking picture of how God appears in the physical world. As stated at the beginning of this article, water and fire represent tangible opposites. Air, on the other hand, represents an intangible substance that makes interaction of these opposites possible. As such, this latter substance symbolizes God not in His static, unchangeable character, but as dynamic force that underlies all movement, interaction, and change between opposites. Hence, in these symbols of air, fire, and water, we once more encounter images of enantiodromia and God as the reconciling principle between opposites.

It could be said, though, that an apparent contradiction occurs in the images of God that Judaism presents to us. On the one hand, we have the immutable, unchanging God of Malachi.

*I am the Lord, I do not change.*  
(Malachi 3:6)

But on the other hand, we have the dynamic image of the cloud rider presented above. How can these images of movement and immutability be reconciled? The answer seems to lie within the text itself. Notice the following references to *Kisei Ha-Kavod*, the throne of glory.

*And he said, "Listen to the word of the Lord; I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right hand and on His left."*  
(1 Kings 22:19)

*In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and its legs filled the Temple.*  
(Isaiah 6:1)

*Behold, in the firmament that was above the head of the cherubim appeared over them something like a sapphire stone, in appearance like the shape of a throne*  
(Ezekiel 10:1)

This last passage suggests, in particular, that God's throne is carried by the cherubim. Consequently, we can see how God can be moving and unmoving at the same time. By remaining seated on the throne of glory, God does not change. It is not unlike a person remaining immobile while traveling in a car. Nevertheless, the effect is the same as if God were actually moving, and accordingly, enantiodromia is also encountered in the two opposing descriptions of God. Additionally, the following passage from the *Sefer Yetzirah* suggests that we should strive to learn how to move from the perception of God as the dynamic rider of the clouds to an awareness of God as the unchangeable essence that lies behind all phenomena.

*Make each thing stand on its essence and make the Creator sit on His base.*

*(Sefer Yetzirah 4:5)*

### **The Transition From God to Persons**

One of the mysteries of Judaism is the issue of how it is possible for any communication to occur between entities that are so opposite as God and humankind. The answer seems to lie in the notion of enantiodromia, the idea that while God and people are opposites, they are also in some sense the same. Thus, we now examine what Song of Songs Rabbah and rabbinic literature have to say about interaction and reconciliation between these two poles and the conditions that can make such interaction possible.

On the one hand, when there is communication between God and persons, it is often described in terms of the *ruach ha-kodesh*, the Holy Spirit.

*Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him, "You (Solomon) sought out words of Torah; I swear that I will not withhold your reward. Behold I cause the Holy Spirit to rest on you."*

*, the Holy Spirit rested on him and he composed these three books, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.*

*(Song of Songs Rabbah I:7)*

Interaction between God and human beings is also often described metaphorically in terms of a kiss. This occurs both during life and at the moment of death. Below we find both the giving of the Torah and the departure of the righteous described in terms of being kissed by God.

*The whole Torah contains six hundred and thirteen precepts. The numerical value of "Torah" is six hundred and eleven, and these Moses communicated to us. But "I am" and "Thou shalt not have" (Exodus 20:2,3) were not heard from the mouth of Moses but from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He. In this way HE KISSED ME WITH THE KISSES OF HIS MOUTH.*

*( Song of Songs Rabbah I:13)*

*The Rabbis say, "The souls of these (the righteous) will be taken away with a kiss." Said R. Azariah, "The soul of Aaron was taken away only with a kiss, as it says, And Aaron the priest went up into Mount Hor at the commandment (lit. mouth) of the Lord and died there (Numbers 33:38). How do we know that it was the same with the soul of Moses? Because it says, So Moses the servant of the Lord died there ... according to the word (lit. mouth) of the Lord (Deuteronomy 34:5). How do we know it of Miriam? Because it is written, And Miriam died there (Numbers 20:1). Just as "there" in the other text implies 'by the mouth of the Lord', so here, too, only it is not stated expressly as this would be disrespectful. How do we know the same of all other*

*righteous persons? Because it says, LET HIM KISS ME WITH THE KISSES OF HIS MOUTH. If you have occupied yourself with words of Torah so that your lips are well armed (menushakoth) with them, in the end all will kiss (menashskin) you on your mouth."*

*(Song of Songs Rabbah I:16)*

At the end of this last passage we come upon specific examples of enantiodromia and opposition once more. In Hebrew, the word for "kiss" and the word for "weapon" have an identical spelling (nun-shin-koof). Presumably, the original purpose of a handshake was to show the other person that one carried no weapon. A kiss puts one in a vulnerable position, and hence, serves a similar purpose. Additionally, if we replace the final letter, *koof*, by the letter *chaf*, we obtain a cognate that means "to bite". Both of these opposites to kissing appear in Song of Songs Rabbah.

*LET HIM KISS ME (YISHAKENI) WITH THE KISSES: Let Him arm me; let Him purify me; let Him make me cleave (to Him). "Let Him arm me" on the analogy of, They were armed (nosheke) with bows, and could use both the right hand and the left (I Chronicles 12:2). Said R. Simeon b. R. Nahman: The words of the Torah have been likened to a weapon; just as a weapon serves its owner in time of battle, so the words of Torah serve well all who labor in them with the devotion they require.*

*(Song of Songs Rabbah I:16)*

*THY NECK IS AS A TOWER OF IVORY. It is written, And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him (Genesis 33:4). All the letters of the word "wayyishakehu" (and he kissed him) are dotted. R. Simeon b. Eleazar said: Wherever you find that there are more letters (in a word) dotted than undotted, you concentrate on the undotted and neglect the dots; where the dotted letters are more than the undotted, you concentrate on the dotted and neglect the undotted. Here, however, you cannot say that the undotted are more than the dotted or the dotted than the undotted, since the whole of the word "wayyishakehu" is dotted. It teaches us that he came not to kiss him but to bite him, and the neck of our father Jacob became marble and the teeth of that wicked man were set on edge and melted like wax. Why then does it say, And they wept? One wept for his neck and the other for his teeth.*

*(Song of Songs Rabbah VII:9)*

Communication between God and people can also be described as a transition from the unseen to the seen. This was mentioned earlier with regard to the use of "breasts" as a metaphor for both Moses and Aaron and for God and Moses. The passage of the milk from the inside of the breast to the outside represents a transition from the unseen world to the visible realm. Also, just as the "air" which mediates between "fire" and "water" lacks visibility, so too in practice is breast milk almost never seen. Another

passage in Song of Songs Rabbah uses a pomegranate in a similar way as a metaphor for the boundary between these two worlds. Appropriately, the metal finials that often top the wooden rollers of Torah scrolls are referred to as pomegranates.

*YOUR TEMPLES (RAKATHEK) ARE LIKE A POMEGRANATE SPLIT OPEN: the emptiest (rekan) among you is as packed with knowledge of the Torah as a pomegranate with seeds; how more so those who are BEHIND THE VEIL, the modest among you, the self controlled among you. (Song of Songs Rabbah IV:7)*

Consider also the following passage which expounds how all of God's gifts to Israel came from the wilderness. If we interpret "wilderness" as a metaphor for the unseen world, the world that is not filled with objects, then we can understand this section as another description of the communication that can take place between the invisible God and visible human beings.

*WHO IS THIS THAT COMES UP OUT OF THE WILDERNESS. Israel's elevation is from the wilderness; her decline is from the wilderness; her death is from the wilderness, as it says, In this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die (Numbers 14:35). The Torah came from the wilderness, the tabernacle from the wilderness, the Sanhedrin from the wilderness, the priesthood from the wilderness, the service of the Levites from the wilderness, royalty from the wilderness, as it says, And you shall be into Me a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6); all the excellent gifts that God bestowed on Israel came from the wilderness. R. Simeon b. Yohai said: In the wilderness they were endowed [with their ornaments] and in the wilderness they were stripped of them. Prophecy was from the wilderness; thus Israel's elevation was from the wilderness. (Song of Songs Rabbah III:7)*

Having established something of the nature of the relationship between humankind and God and the use of "kissing" as a metaphor for communication between the two, the question now arises as to what conditions favor this kind of communication. The answer to this query is found in the opening sections of Song of Songs Rabbah where the sages establish the qualifications of Solomon to merit such a relationship, and it is also found in additional passages sprinkled throughout this midrashic work. In the opening sentence of Song of Songs Rabbah we read the following:

*Do you see a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings, he shall not stand before mean men (Proverbs 22:29). (Song of Songs Rabbah I:1)*

The "diligent man" in Song of Songs Rabbah is explained as referring to Joseph, Moses, and R. Hanina b. Dosa, and by implication, to Solomon. While Joseph and Moses are well known to readers, R. Hanina b. Dosa is maybe less well known. This latter sage was a disciple of R. Johanan b. Zakkai, and he was known primarily for his great piety. In his time, when people were ill, he was often asked to pray for their recovery. Hence, a connecting thread between Joseph, Moses, R. Hanina b. Dosa, and Solomon is their ability to closely communicate with God. Joseph communicated in dreams, Moses communicated on Sinai, and R. Hanina b. Dosa through prayer. As for Solomon's communication with God, in Song of Songs Rabbah we read:

*Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him, "You sought out words of Torah. I swear that I will not withhold your reward. Behold I cause the Holy Spirit to rest on you." Immediately the Holy Spirit rested on him and he composed these three books, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and The Song of Songs. (Song of Songs Rabbah I:8)*

While all of the above sages are identified as diligent, the question still arises of diligent with respect to what? The answer of Song of Songs Rabbah seems to be diligent with respect to righteousness and good deeds. The righteousness of Solomon is compared, in particular, to that of his father.

*Solomon, however, was a king son of a king, a wise man son of a wise man, a righteous man son of a righteous man, a nobleman son of a nobleman. (Song of Songs Rabbah I:6)*

A specific action performed by Solomon that resulted in merit that accrued to him was that he taught Torah to others. This activity is described in the passages below.

*The heart of the wise teaches his mouth (Proverbs 16:23). If the heart of the wise man is full of wisdom, who draws attention to him and who shows his wisdom? 'His mouth.' His mouth makes him wise. His mouth shows what he is. 'And addeth learning to his lips' (ib.). Through the act of bringing forth words of Torah from his heart, he adds to his learning of Torah. (Song of Songs Rabbah I:7)*

*He (Solomon) pondered the words of Torah and investigated the words of the Torah. He made handles to the Torah. ... So till Solomon arose no one was able to understand properly the words of the Torah, but as soon as Solomon arose all began to comprehend the Torah. (Song of Songs Rabbah I:8)*

*For he discoursed on the Torah in public, he earned the favor that the Holy Spirit rested on him and he composed three books, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.*

*(Song of Songs Rabbah I:8)*

In these passages there are three things which are noteworthy. Namely, Solomon studied Torah, he pondered Torah, and he taught Torah. An issue that the sages of the Talmud debated was whether study or good deeds were more important. The opinion of Rabbi Akiba was that study was more important because it leads to good deeds. In this manner, both study and deeds were elevated in importance. Relevant passages appear below.

*STUDY IS NOT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING, BUT DEED; WHOEVER INDULGES IN TOO MANY WORDS BRINGS ABOUT SIN.*

*(Pirkei Avot I:17)*

*Your deeds bring you close [to Heaven] and your deeds keep you far. And of him it is said, THE KING HAS BROUGHT ME INTO HIS CHAMBERS.*

*(Song of Songs Rabbah I:27)*

*THE INSIDE THEREOF BEING INLAID WITH LOVE: R. Judan said: This refers to the merit of the Torah and the merit of the righteous who study and practice it.*

*(Song of Songs Rabbah III:20)*

*LET ME SEE YOUR COUNTENANCE: this signifies study. LET ME HEAR YOUR VOICE: this signifies good actions. Once they had a discussion in the house of Aliyath Arim at Lydda on the question: Which is more important, study or action? R. Tarfon maintained that action was more important: R. Akiba maintained that study was more important. They took a vote and decided that study was more important, because it leads to action. FOR SWEET IS YOUR VOICE: this signifies study; AND YOUR COUNTENANCE IS COMELY: this signifies action.*

*(Song of Songs Rabbah II:38)*

*MINGLED WITH OIL (Numbers 7:19) alludes to the Torah, the study of which must be mingled with good deeds.*

*(Numbers Rabbah XIII:15-16)*

A fundamental tenet of Jewish mysticism is that our deeds and insights change the world. Furthermore, it is we who must initiate this change through appropriate action as described in the passages below.

*And a mist went up from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground.*

*(Genesis 2:6)*

*Truth shall spring from the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heavens.*

*(Psalm 85:12)*

*A MIST WENT UP FROM THE EARTH, to mend the deficiency below, by "watering the whole face of the ground." The rising of the mist signifies the yearning of the female for the male. According to another explanation, we supply the word "not" from the previous clause after "mist", the meaning being that God did not send rain because a mist had not gone up, etc., it being necessary for the impulse from below to set in motion the power above. So vapor first ascends from the earth to form the cloud. Similarly, the smoke of the sacrifice rises and creates harmony above, so that all unite, and in this way there is completion in the supernal realm. The impulse commences from below, and from this all is perfected.*

*(Zohar I:35a)*

*Our teachers have told us that at the moment when a man expounds something new in the Torah, his utterance ascends before the Holy One, blessed be He, ... , then they descend and become absorbed into one earth, whereby a new earth emerges through that new discovery in the torah. This is implied in the verse, "For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I am making, rise up before me, etc." (Isaiah 66:22). It is not written "I have made", but "I am making", signifying continual creation out of the new ideas discovered in the Torah.*

*(Zohar I:5a)*

That the impulse must come from "below" is also evident in the process of lactation in that the milk generally doesn't begin to flow until the child begins to nurse. Nevertheless, the following Talmudic passage indicates that God wants to give to us even more than we want to receive.

*More than the calf wishes to suck does the cow desire to suckle.*

*(B. Pesachim 112a)*

The notion that the impulse must come from below also has implications regarding the symmetrical relationship between heaven and earth and between God and humankind. For example, think of human beings and God as mirror images, as is suggested in Genesis, and consider what happens when we view our image in a mirror. If we want that image to reach out to us, then we must first reach to it. Likewise, truth must first spring from the earth, and then righteousness will look down from heaven (Psalm 85:12).

From the above discussions we can obtain a very coherent picture of the nature of the relationship between people and God and those things which foster communication. We summarize in outline form below.

- There is a symmetrical relationship between God and people. Humans are made in God's image.
- At the same time, God and human beings are opposites. One is unmanifest and the other is manifest.
- Our actions can bring us either closer to, or take us further from, God.
- The impulse must start with us.
- Study is important, but it must result in proper actions.
- In particular, teaching others, as did Solomon, creates a state that allows God to teach us. This suggests, once again, a symmetrical relationship between God and humans. God will give us what we give to others and help us in the way that we would go (Isaiah 48:17). Therefore, we should be holy since God is holy (Leviticus 11:45).

### **Conclusions**

The central theme of this paper has been God's ability to reconcile opposites and the role that the concept of an equivalence class plays in describing that process. Deliberation on this concept in relation to various passages from Song of Songs Rabbah has led to other notions such as God as the totality of all things, God as symmetry, broken symmetry, God as immutability, God as movement, and the transition from God to human beings. Also of chief importance here are the various ways in which people might deal with contradictions on either a personal or societal level - war, denial, separation, assimilation, or transcendence. In the time of the exodus from Egypt, war and separation were considered practical solutions. However, in our day they are not viable resolutions to difficulties that exist between social groups. Similarly, neither denial nor assimilation are feasible answers. Consequently, only through transcendence can contradictions between societies be adequately resolved today. However, there are some preliminaries that must be met before a transcendent solution can be achieved. In particular, twisted arguments and other "nonorientable" lines of thought have to be made straight. An additional perspective on the prerequisites for peace can be derived through wordplay with "shalom". The word *Shalom* means not only peace, but also wholeness (*Shalem*). In Hebrew, this word is spelled "shin-lamed-vav-mem". Notice that the middle two Hebrew letters of *Shalom*, *lamed* and *vav*, have a numerical value of thirty-six. This harkens to the Talmudic tradition that the world endures because of the continual presence of at least thirty-six wholly righteous individuals.

*Abaye said: The world must contain at least thirty-six righteous men in each generation who are vouchsafed in the sight of the Shechinah's countenance, for it is written, Blessed are all they that wait lo [for him]; the numerical value of 'lo' (lamed-vav) is thirty-six.*

*(B. Sanhedrin 97b)*

Consequently, the presence of *lamed-vav* as the middle two letters of *Shalom* serves as a reminder to us that without righteousness there can be neither peace nor wholeness, and without the proper foundation, no lasting resolution to the contradictions of society is possible.