The Humor of Divine Discourse in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Literature

Hershey H. Friedman
Professor of Business, Finance and Business Management Department, School of Business, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, New York, NY, USA

Linda Weiser Friedman
Professor of Statistics and Computer Information Systems, Department of Statistics and CIS, Baruch College, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA

Abstract. There is something inherently funny about mortals arguing or disagreeing with an omniscient God, but a number of Biblical and Talmudic characters do just that. And God does not always do very well in these disputes which is, in itself, extremely humorous. The fact that God is depicted in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic literature as someone who can be blamed, criticized, argued with, negotiated with, and even taught a thing or two has had a profound effect on the Jewish people. This paper examines the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Rabbinic texts to find examples of God in conversation with mortals; examines these in the context of humorous or playful engagement; and considers what we as mortals who operate under the principle of *imitatio Dei*, may derive from these encounters.

Keywords: Religion; Judaism; Bible; Hebrew Bible; Old Testament; Rabbinic literature; Talmud; Jewish humor; argumentation; Constructive arguing; Discourse with God; *Svara*; Logic.

1. Introduction

A number of scholars have examined the use of humor in the Hebrew Bible (Radday and Brenner 1990; Whedbee 1998; Friedman 2000). Many individuals – and this includes many scholars – believe that the Bible, in particular the Hebrew Bible, is without any humor. For example, the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead was of the opinion that there is no humor in the Old Testament (Price 1954). Others disagree. Knox (1969), for one, believes that there is much humor in the Hebrew Bible, and that it consists mainly of irony. Jemielty (1992) demonstrates that Hebrew prophecy makes use of satire. Jonsson (1985) rejects the opinion that there is no humor in the Hebrew Bible and discusses several examples of Biblical humor, for example, the story of Jacob and Laban. While there has been some scholarly debate about Biblical humor (also see, e.g., Friedman 2002, 2000; Morreall 2001), there is very little doubt about humor in the Rabbinic and Talmudic tradition (Friedman 2004; Friedman 1997; Friedman and Friedman 2014; Friedman and Lipman 1998). Indeed, in a recent work, the authors attempt to trace the origins of Jewish humor of the present day to the ancient Jewish writings (Friedman and Friedman 2014).

Jewish humor – both ancient and present-day – is rather inimitable in the way God is depicted. God is often included in Jewish humor, and is criticized, condemned, blamed, taught, and negotiated with. Perhaps this humor stems from incongruity. For one thing, just the notion of conversing with an omniscient God on equal footing is – simply – funny. Additionally, laughter is considered to be a form of *human* communication; Beard (2014) emphasizes this point and suggests that it may be the drive to debate and theorize laughter rather than laughter itself that defines the human species.

In the following Talmudic tale, which references Psalms to prove that God has a sense of humor, we get to see God laughing at mankind.

> In the future, the Holy One will take a Torah onto his lap and say: Anyone who has occupied himself with it should come and take his reward. Immediately, all the nations will gather together and arrive in disorder, as it says (Isaiah 43:9): 'All the nations will gather together.' The Holy One will say to them: Do not enter in disorder, but allow each nation with its sages to enter separately … Immediately, Rome will enter first. The Holy One will say: With what have you occupied yourself? They will say: Creator of the Universe, many marketplaces have we established, many bathhouses have we constructed, and much silver and gold have we accumulated. All this we have done only for Israel in order that they should be able to occupy themselves with the study of Torah. The Holy One will say: Fools of the World, everything that you have done, you have done for yourselves. You established marketplaces in order to place prostitutes there. You constructed bathhouses for your own enjoyment, and the silver and gold is mine …
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> The Romans will depart with a disheartened spirit and the Persians will enter. The Holy One will say: With what have you occupied yourself? They will say: Creator of the Universe, many bridges have we erected, many cities have we conquered, and many wars have we waged. The Holy One will say: Everything that you have done, you have done for yourselves. You erected bridges in order to collect tolls. You conquered cities in order to use them for forced labor; as for wars, I wage them, as it is written (Exodus 15:3): 'The Lord is a Master of war.' … They too will depart with a disheartened spirit … The same will happen with every nation.
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> The nations will then say: Creator of the Universe, give the Torah to us now and we will observe it. The Holy One will say to them: Fools of the World, one who works hard on the eve of the Sabbath will have something to eat on Sabbath, but one who has not worked hard on the eve of Sabbath, from where will he eat on Sabbath? However, I have one easy commandment by the name of *sukkah* [the booth covered with twigs that Jews dine in during the holiday of Tabernacles], go and perform this precept … Immediately, each one will go and make himself a small *sukkah* on his roof. The Holy One will make the sun blaze and penetrate as it does during the summer solstice. Each one of them will kick contemptuously at his *sukkah* and go away …
>
> The Holy One will sit and laugh at them, as it is written (Psalms 2:4): 'He who sits in Heaven shall laugh'
>
> (Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah, 2b–3b)

In this story, God has the last laugh on all the nations by proving that He made the right choice in giving His Torah to the Jewish people because they are the only ones who follow the commandments regardless of their personal comfort. Later in this paper, we see that God laughs not only to mock but also in appreciation of a good debate. When the sages reject His opinion during the famous dispute over the oven of Akhnai, God laughs and says: "My children have triumphed over me. My children have triumphed over me (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 59b).

The idea that mortals can criticize, negotiate, and argue with God — sometimes even successfully — is a theme that permeates the Hebrew Bible as well as Rabbinic literature. Indeed, it has also influenced Jewish, as well as Christian, humor. The idea of quarrelling and disagreeing with an omniscient God is not only funny but also has much to teach humankind. One might even say that it is a way of demonstrating great love for God. By blaming and criticizing Him, we feel much closer to Him and thereby feel that He cares for His people and is concerned with their suffering. One essential function of humor according to Hyers (1969, p. 220) is to minimize the distance between the sacred and the profane. Jewish humor involving God may serve the function of making the Almighty seem closer to mankind.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Rabbinic texts to find examples of God in conversation with mortals; to examine these in the context of humorous or playful engagements; and to, in the process, pay particular attention to what we as mortals who operate under the principle of *imitatio Dei*, can derive from these examples for our own interactions with each other.

2. The Sources

The material here is mostly taken from the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, and the Midrash. The Hebrew Bible, or *Tanach*, is the written law, consisting of the five books of Moses, as well as the Prophets and the Writings. The *Talmud* is the compilation of Jewish oral law and consists of the *mishna* and the *gemara*. The *mishna* was compiled and redacted by Rabbi Yehuda the *Nasi* (Rebbi), The President of the Sanhedrin, about the year 189 C.E. The *gemara* consists mainly of commentaries on and discussions of the *mishna* and was put into written form about 1500 years ago. The scholars of the *mishna* are called *tannaim* and the scholars of the *gemara* are called *amoraim*. The *amoraim* analyzed, explained, and elaborated on the *mishna*.

The *Midrash* is essentially devoted to the exposition of Biblical verses. There are two types of *Midrash*: *Halachic Midrash* which is mainly concerned with Jewish law and *Aggadic Midrash* which is homiletic and mainly concerned with morality. The sages quoted and discussed in the Midrash are generally the same sages as in the Talmud. Chajes (1960, p. 195) states that the aim of the homiletic portion of the Talmud (the *aggadah*) was to inspire people to serve the Lord. Also, if the lecturer noticed that the audience was not paying attention or was dozing off, he might tell stories which "sounded strange or terrifying or which went beyond the limits of the natural and so won the attention of his audience for his message." Maimonides (1138–1204) describes individuals who take the homiletics of the Talmud literally as simple-minded fools, since there are hidden inner meanings in the stories, riddles, and parables used in *aggadah* (Maimonides, Sanhedrin, Introduction to the Mishna, Chapter 10). Thus, we see that the stories told in the Talmud and Midrash, many of which are cited here, were not necessarily meant to be taken literally. Literal or not, the stories depict God in a certain way that has greatly influenced Judaism and Jewish literature.

3. Divine Discourse and its Manifestations

3.1. General Considerations

Divine discourse, in the sense of conversations between mortals and an omniscient God, is a type of humor that has not received much attention. Discourse is, or should be, equivalent to disagreement. As U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson said, "If two men agree on everything you can be sure that one of them is doing all the thinking." How do we make sense of an omniscient God who allows – no, encourages – mortals to disagree with Him? Of course, disagreement can be productive (Friedman 2014) but, much like religion itself, it can also be a destructive force. Barash and Webel (2009, p. 192) assert that differences in ideology between groups or countries, whether based on politics, economics, or religion, can often lead to war. These wars are frequently quite vicious since ideologues tend to be certain that only their particular beliefs are correct. They act like they are omniscient and do not tolerate dissent. In this generation, as in those past, we have seen the harmful effects of radical religious views. Even humorous cartoons of religious figures can lead to strife and death.

On the other hand we like to believe that religion can be a force for bringing people together, if, say, emphasis is placed on similarities rather than on differences. Virtually all religions have some version of the Golden Rule and posit that humankind was created in the image of God. The latter begs the question – if people are funny does that mean that God is funny? Or, more to the point – a very serious point — if God has a sense of humor, and we are to strive for Godliness, then we too should be able to share a laugh, enjoy a good argument, and engage in productive discourse with those with whom we disagree.

There is definitely something inherently funny or, at least, playful, about mortals arguing or disagreeing with an omniscient God (Waisanen et al. 2014), but a number of Biblical

characters do just that, according to the Talmudic sages and in the words of the Bible itself. And God does not always do very well in these disputes which is, in itself, extremely humorous. How does one even begin to have the temerity to disagree — for, after all, discourse implies disagreement — with an omniscient God? This is the source of the humor contained in these stories. God knows exactly what you are going to say — why would He be swayed by your argument? In many of the examples presented in this paper, the mortal wins, yet — how can a mortal even hope to win an argument with the omniscient One? It is this unspoken tension that makes these stories interesting.

It is interesting to note that this humor is generally not meant to show disrespect or defiance towards God. On the contrary, it demonstrates a great love for God, even when God is blamed for the unhappy plight of humankind. The affection of God for His people and that of the Jewish people for God are manifested in this humor. Just as humor can close the distance between the teller and the listener, so humor involving God closes the distance between God and man, and the same holds true for arguing and conversing with God. When we see Biblical figures engage in Divine discourse is this intentionally humorous? Or are we reading more into the stories than what was really there? From a hermeneutical perspective, of course, what one brings to the text may be as important as the text itself.

In the following sections, we organize Biblical, Midrashic, and Talmudic examples of Divine discourse into a rudimentary framework. What sorts of discourse do we find between God and mortals in the words of the Bible, Talmud and Midrash? At first blush, one might imagine that the mortals in these conversations are very respectful, deferential, even submissive, accepting of God's will, not daring to express an opinion or differ at all from that God has to say, right? No bartering, complaining, blaming, hiding from, or criticizing the omniscient and omnipotent Almighty One? Hardly.

Sometimes, the most interesting and humorous part of the story is the manner in which the mortal tries to *avoid* discourse with the Omniscient One.

3.2. Avoiding Discourse with God

Jonah, the unwilling prophet, refused God's bidding to announce to the residents of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, its imminent destruction. He actually tried to flee from God by taking a ship from Jaffa to Tarshish. Unsurprisingly, God managed to force Jonah to prophesy to the residents of Nineveh. Jonah's entire prophecy was but five Hebrew words and he was wildly successful — more successful than any other prophet ever. Not only did the citizens of Nineveh proclaim a fast in their repentance, but the cattle and sheep were made to fast, and the cattle were even covered with sackcloth. Miles (1990) considers the entire book of *Jonah* as parody. The reluctant Jonah accomplished in a mere five words what numerous prophets, including the eloquent Isaiah, could not achieve with thousands of words, and all without even really trying (Jonah 1-3).

3.3. Rhetorical Questions

In an odd way, the rhetorical questions in the Bible are perhaps among the most respectful of our examples of Divine discourse since they are not really true discourse at all but, rather, instances of God asking a question for which He does not need an answer. For example, God, upset that Adam and Eve have eaten from the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, asked Adam about it (Genesis 3:11): "Did you eat the fruit of the tree that I commanded you not to eat?" Adam's response will be provided shortly but — spoiler alert — it's not exactly an

appropriate response given that God is the One who asked the question and surely knows the answer.

Similarly, God actually does know that Cain has just murdered his brother Abel when he asks him about it (Genesis 4:9).

> God to Cain: Where is Abel, your brother?
> Cain: I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?

Rhetorical questions are essentially sarcastic, and lend themselves very easily to humor, especially when the respondent answers disingenuously.

3.4. Blaming God

So, back to Adam, who should probably have kept quiet. One of the first examples of a mortal blaming God is in the Garden of Eden where, after all, it all began. Eve eats from the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and gives some of the fruit to Adam to eat. They suddenly both become aware of their nakedness and hide in the Garden of Eden. God asks (Genesis 3:11–12): "Who told you that you are naked? Did you eat the fruit of the tree that I commanded you not to eat?" Adam's response: "The woman whom You gave to be *with me* (*imadi*), she gave me from the tree, and I ate." Here Adam is not only blaming the woman but also God since it is God's fault for giving him the woman in the first place; all the commentaries note that Adam was an ingrate. The Hebrew word *li* could have been used instead of *imadi* and it would have meant "the woman you gave to me." The word *imadi* which means "with me" might also hint that Adam is blaming God for making Eve an equal to be with him and that if she had been totally subservient, this would not have happened.

In another example of God getting blamed for the sins of mortals, Moses, in the following Midrash, not only tries to exculpate the Israelites for the sin of the golden calf that they made, he also blames God Himself for it. Apparently, God even gets blamed for the sins of mortals.

> The verse states (Exodus 32:11): 'Moses began to plead before God his Lord, and said, Lord, why unleash your wrath against Your people, that You brought out of Egypt…' Why did Moses decide to mention here the exodus from Egypt? Moses said: Creator of the Universe, from where did You bring them out? From Egypt, where everyone worships lambs.

In other words, do not be upset that the Jewish people then worshipped the golden calf. The Midrash continues:

> Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: This can be compared to a wise person who opened a perfume store for his son in a street of prostitutes. The street did its part, the business did its part, and the young man did his part and fell into bad ways. His father came and caught him with prostitutes. He started yelling, saying: I will kill you! A friend was there who said to the father: You caused the boy's ruination, yet you are screaming at him. You ignored all occupations and taught him perfumery, you ignored all streets and could only open the store in the street of prostitutes. So too did Moses say: Creator of the Universe, You forsook the whole world and caused your children to be enslaved only in Egypt, where lambs are worshipped. That is from whom your children learned and made the golden calf. This is the reason Moses said: '… that you brought out of Egypt'
>
> (Midrash Exodus Rabbah 43:7).

A clever way of blaming God for the sin of the golden calf. The implication is that the idol worship was all God's fault since it was He who made sure the Israelites would live in Egypt, where they learned to worship idols.[1]

God sometimes blames too, but, according to the Midrash, Moses does not let Him get away with it, as the following shows.

> At first, the Holy One said to Moses (Exodus 3:10): 'Now go, and I will send you to Pharaoh, and take my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt'. After they made the golden calf, what does it say there (Exodus 32:7): 'Go down, because your people whom you have brought out of Egypt have become corrupt'. Moses exclaimed before the Holy One: Creator of the Universe, when they are sinners, they are mine, and when they are righteous, they are Yours? Whether they are sinners or righteous they are Yours, since it is written (Deuteronomy 9:29): 'They are Your people and Your heritage'.
>
> (Pesikta D' Rav Kahana, Pesikta 16).

In this Midrash, God seems like a parent, who, when disappointed in the actions of a child, tells his or her spouse, "Look what *your* child has done."

3.5. Rebuking God

According to the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 44a), in a discussion about leaders who were not pleased with the justness of God's punishments, Joshua angrily hurled the booty taken by Achan from Jericho before God. He was furious that God would cause the Israelites to lose a battle against Ai due to the transgression of one man, Achan. God defended himself to Joshua by saying the tragedy at Ai was his own fault. After all, God did not direct him to consecrate the spoils of Jericho.

The Talmud adds Pinchas to the list of those who were unhappy with God's justice. He hurled the corpses of Zimri and Cosbi before God and exclaimed: "For the sin of these two, 24,000 people should perish?" (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 44a). It is truly amazing how the Talmud portrays great leaders speaking to God. Apparently, mortals have the right to question His methods.

Moses also spoke audaciously to God when he said (Exodus 5:22): "Why have you done evil to this people?" When it comes to justice, even God has to act in a just manner. As Abraham said to God, "Shall the Judge of the whole world not act justly?" (Genesis 18:25). God seems to accept and even welcome criticism from mortals.

The following story of Choni, a Talmudic sage known as HaMeagel, the Circle Maker, demonstrates that Choni's relationship with the Creator was very much like that of a son to a father and so God tolerated his backtalk.

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[1] Attitudes towards Egypt in the early rabbinic midrashic literature are the subject of Ulmer (2009). Greek-language Roman-age Jewish writers also made negative references to Egyptian zoolatry (the worship of animals). Jewish attacks on Egyptian polytheism are discussed by Smelik and Hemelrijk (1984, pp. 1906–1920), whose study is concerned with ancient attitudes towards Egypt's zoolatry. Ancient Egypt's zoolatry loomed large also in Graeco-Roman attitudes towards Egypt, and was a prominent motif, and a motive for scorn: see for example Bohak (2003). For example, he discusses (*ibid.*, p. 32) how in a fragment of Anaxandrides' comedy *Cities* — a fragment presenved by Athenaeus in a context being a culinary discussion of eels — a Greek (either a person, or a city) objects to an alliance with Egypt by pointing out cultural differences: "For neither our ways nor our laws coincide, / and they differ greatly on every side: / You bow to a cow, which I sacrifice now; / You think of the eel as divinely great, / But we only think it great on a plate. / You don't eat pork, I love it a lot; / You worship the dog which I heartily beat, / Whenever I catch it stealing my meat; / We have a law that the priests must be whole, / But your priests, so it seems, are missing a piece; / If you see a cat sick you will certainly weep, But I will just kill it, so its fur's mine to keep; / To you a mouse can mean a great deal; to me, nil." The translation appears in Bohak's study. See s.v. *Anaxandrides* in Kassel and Austin (1991).

> One time the majority of the month of Adar had passed and there was still no rainfall. The people sent a message to Choni HaMeagel to pray that rain should fall. Choni prayed, but rain did not fall. He drew a circle and stood within it in the same manner as Habakuk the prophet, as it is written (Habakuk 2:1): 'I will stand on my watch, and set me on the tower, and will watch to see what he will say to me.' He declared: Master of the Universe, Your children are relying on me because they see me as a member of Your household. I take an oath in Your name not to move from here until you show mercy upon Your children. It rained, but in very small drops. Choni's disciples said to him: We looked to you to save us from death; however, this rain is only enough to release you from your oath. Choni then exclaimed to God: This is not what I asked for! I prayed for enough rain fill up the cisterns, ditches, and caves. It began to pour. Every drop of rain was as big as the opening of a barrel. The sages estimated that no single raindrop was smaller than one lug. Choni's disciples said to him: We looked to you to save us from death; however, we believe that this rain has come down in order to destroy the earth. Choni then exclaimed to God: It is not for this kind of rain that I have prayed, but for a rain of kindness, blessing, and bounty. It rained normally. However, the rain continued for so long that the people began fleeing to the Temple Mount because of it. They told Choni: Rabbi, just as you prayed for the rain to fall, please pray for it to cease.
>
> (Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 23a).

The story continues, and after bringing a sacrifice to God, Choni gets God to make the rain stop. Shimon b. Shetach, the leader of the Jewish people at that time, remarked: "Were you not Choni, I would place you under a ban [for being so disrespectful to God]… But what shall I do to you who misbehaves before God and He fulfills your desire just as a son who misbehaves towards his father and his father fulfills his desire." Telushkin (1992, p. 146) sees this story as proving that God is a "primordial joker." God taunts Choni with a light drizzle and then a deluge before delivering the kind of rain the people needed.

3.6. Rejecting God's Opinion

In another example of Divine discourse in which God is portrayed as an indulgent father, Rabbi Eliezer b. Hyrkanos, who was of the Shammai school, refused to go along with the majority in a dispute regarding an oven of Akhnai, and whether it could become ritually unclean. To prove his point, Rabbi Eliezer performed various miracles, which, although they should have established that God was on his side, were still ignored by the majority in reaching a decision.

> On that day, Rabbi Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but the Sages did not accept them. He said to them: If the *halacha* is in accordance with me, let this carob tree prove it! Immediately, the carob tree was uprooted and moved one hundred cubits from its place — some say 400 cubits. The sages responded: No proof can be brought from a carob tree.
>
> He further said to them: If the *halacha* agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it! Thereupon, the stream of water flowed backwards. The sages responded: No proof can be brought from a stream of water.
>
> Again he said to them: If the *halacha* agrees with me, let the walls of the house of study prove it! Whereupon, the walls started leaning as if to fall. Rabbi Yehoshua, reprimanded the walls: When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, why are you interfering? Out of respect for Rabbi Yehoshua they did not fall, and out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer, they did not straighten out; they are still standing tilted.
>
> Rabbi Eliezer further said: If the *halacha* is as I say, let it be proven from Heaven. A Heavenly voice then rang out and exclaimed: What do you want with Rabbi Eliezer, since the law is in agreement with him in all areas. Rabbi Yehoshua then stood up and declared: 'The Torah is not in Heaven' (Deuteronomy 30:12). What does 'not in Heaven' mean? Rabbi Yirmiyah said: Since the Torah was already given at Sinai, we therefore pay no attention to Heavenly voices. After all, it is written in the Torah itself (Exodus 23:2): 'After the majority one must follow'.

(Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 59b).

The Talmud continues with Rabbi Nathan asking Elijah the Prophet what God was doing when His Heavenly voice was disregarded. Elijah answered: "He laughed and said, My children have triumphed over Me! My children have triumphed over Me!" In addition to demonstrating that God Himself finds Divine discourse funny, this story makes it quite clear that you cannot win a legal debate by using miracles or even having God agree with your position.

In another classic example of mortals disagreeing with the Almighty, the Talmud describes the events surrounding the death of Rabbah b. Nachmeni. The government did not like the fact that Rabbah's lectures resulted in thousands of Jewish people not being in their homes during the two months preceding the holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Passover, and thereby making it difficult for the tax collectors to collect the monthly tax. The authorities sent agents to capture him. He had a difficult time eluding the King's men and finally was captured. He managed to escape and was hiding in a swamp, totally exhausted and sitting on the stump of a tree and studying Torah. Meanwhile:

> There was a dispute in the Heavenly Academy regarding laws of leprosy: If the bright spot on the skin precedes the white hair, the person is impure [i.e., it is leprosy]; if the white hair precedes the bright spot, the person is ritually pure. If there is a doubt as to which one came first: God said 'pure' and the entire Heavenly Academy said 'impure.' They decided to ask Rabbah b. Nachmeni to resolve this dispute, since he once said, I am unique in my knowledge of leprosy and tents [both tractates deal with ritual impurity and are quite difficult]. They sent a messenger to get him, but the Angel of Death could not approach him, since Rabbah did not cease his Torah studies [one cannot die while studying Torah]. Meanwhile, a wind began to blow which made the reeds rustle. Rabbah thought it was a company of soldiers that were coming to get him. He said: It is better that I die than be delivered into the hands of the government. While he was dying he exclaimed, [in response to the Heavenly question]: Pure! Pure! A Heavenly voice declared: Happy are you Rabbah b. Nachmeni, your body is pure and your soul departed in purity.
>
> (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 86a).

Did Rabbah know more than God? Apparently, this story illustrates that when it comes to a legal dispute, even one between God and the angels in Heaven, a well-trained expert must be brought in to resolve the dispute. Interestingly, Maimonides, who wrote the encyclopedic compilation of Talmudic law, concluded that when there is uncertainty as to which came first, the white hair or the bright spot, the law is that the person is impure (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Leprosy 2:9). Thus, Maimonides also disagreed with God. (Don't worry, God's used to it.)

In the next selection from the Talmud we again see that the sages did not necessarily go along with Heavenly declarations. What mattered more to them was logic — human logic.

> Rabbi Yehuda stated in the name of Rav that they wished to add one more king — Solomon — to the list of kings that have no share in the world to come [Paradise]. A vision resembling Solomon's father, King David, appeared before the sages and prostrated itself in supplication, but they ignored it. A fire from Heaven came and singed their benches, but they ignored it. A Heavenly voice proclaimed to them: 'Do you see a man diligent in His work? He will stand before kings, but he shall not stand before the lowly' (Proverbs 22:29). King Solomon built My home [the Temple] before his own… he should stand before kings [in Paradise], and should not stand before the lowly [in Hell]. They ignored this Heavenly voice. The Heavenly voice then proclaimed (Job 34:33): 'Shall his compensation be as you wish it?... Should you choose and not I?'.
>
> (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 104b).

Apparently, God won and Solomon was not added to the list. God, it seems, sometimes has to tell the sages on earth to mind their own business. He decides who will go to Paradise and no one else. The story is even more humorous when one considers that the Heavenly voice quoted Proverbs which was written by — that's right — King Solomon.

3.7. Rejecting The Torah

The following Midrash portrays God trying to sell his "wares" to the nations of the world. Here God seems like a door-to-door salesman trying to peddle His Torah to each nation successively. In the end, God only finds one customer for His *Torah*, every other nation having found something objectionable in it.

> When God revealed Himself to give the Torah to Israel, He did not only reveal Himself to Israel but also to all the nations.
>
> First, He went to the descendants of Esau and asked them: Do you wish to receive the Torah? They said to Him: What is written in it? He said to them: Thou shalt not murder. They said to Him: Creator of the Universe, The very essence of our forefathers was murder, as it says (Genesis 27:22): 'The hands are the hands of Esau.' And regarding this, his father Isaac assured him (Genesis 27: 40): 'And by the sword shalt thou live.'
>
> God then went to the children of Ammon and Moab, and said to them: Do you wish to receive the Torah? They said to Him: What is written in it? He said to them: Thou shalt not commit adultery. They said to Him: Creator of the Universe, The very essence of our forefathers was incest, as it says (Genesis 19:36): 'And both daughters of Lot were made pregnant by their father.'
>
> God went and found the children of Ishmael, and said to them: Do you wish to receive the Torah? They said to Him: What is written in it? He said to them: Thou shalt not steal. They said to Him: Creator of the Universe, The very essence of our forefathers is robbery, as it says (Genesis 16:12): 'And he shall be a wild ass of a man.'
>
> There was no nation among the nations that God did not go to, speak to, and knock at their door.
>
> (Sifre, Deuteronomy 33:2)

We note that this story is very similar to the one presented earlier in this paper by which the Talmud appears to prove that God has a sense of humor, referencing Psalms (2:4), "He who sits in Heaven shall laugh."

The following Talmudic story is quite strange and is taken as a metaphor by most commentaries.

> The verse states (I Kings 13:33): 'After this thing, Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way.' What does 'After this thing' mean? Rabbi Abuhu said: After God grabbed Jeroboam's garment and said to him, repent! Then I, you, and [David] the son of Jesse will stroll together in the Garden of Eden. Jeroboam said to God: Who will be at the head? God replied: The son of Jesse will be at the head. Jeroboam replied: If so, I do not want it.
>
> (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 102a)

Clearly, no one accepts that God Himself grabbed Jeroboam's garment. Some take this story as a dream: Jeroboam dreamed that God urged him to give up his idolatrous ways. King David, son of Jesse, repented for his sin of having Uriah killed in order to take his wife, Bathsheba, for himself. In any case, this story shows God's offer of eternity in Paradise being rejected by a mortal. Note that God initially named Jeroboam before David, son of Jesse. Despite this, Jeroboam wanted an explicit assurance that he would be at the head.

3.8. Betting Against God? Not a Very Good Idea

According to the Talmud, King David made a bet with God that he could withstand any spiritual test; he lost the bet. David, however, was a bit of a sore loser:

> Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rav: A person should never bring himself to be tested [spiritually] because David, King of Israel, asked to be tested and failed. David asked God: Creator of the Universe, why do we say in the [*amidah*] prayer, 'The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' and do not say the God of David? God replied: They were tested and you were not. David said: Examine and test me, as it is written (Psalms 26:2), 'Examine me, God, and test me.' God answered: I will test you and do something special for you. For they were not informed beforehand as to the nature of the test, but I will tell you beforehand that the test will involve sexual immorality …

David thought he would free himself from sexual desire by having intercourse with his wives during the daytime. However, David still failed the test and ended up cohabiting with Bathsheba, a married woman. He lost his wager with God, but not gracefully:

> David said to God: You know very well that had I wished to overcome my desire I could have done so, but I did not want people to say the slave defeated his Master (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 107a).

David knew that had he not sinned with Bathsheba, he would have been correct in his assertion that he deserved to be included in the aforementioned prayer. And that is why he "let" God win the bet. King David may have had many good attributes, but being a good loser was clearly not among them.

3.9. Arguing with God

As we have seen, God appears to enjoy negotiating with mortals. Waisanen et al. (2014) urges us to take seriously and playfully God's desire for dialogue and reciprocity and suggests that these examples demonstrate that interactivity is as important as hierarchy. The most famous example of arguing with God is probably that of Abraham haggling with God to save Sodom and Gomorra from destruction (Genesis 18:23–33):

> Abraham: What if there are 50 innocent people in the city? Will you still destroy it?
> God: If I find 50 innocent people in Sodom, I will spare the entire area.
> Abraham: Suppose there are 45…?
> God: I will not destroy it if I find 45 …
> Abraham: What if there are 40?
> God: I will not act if there are forty …

As this conversation continues, Abraham proposes and God agrees to allow for 30, 20, and 10 in succession, until Abraham finally gives up presumably because 10 innocents could not be found in those evil towns. A less humorous telling of this tale would have had God stopping Abraham at 50, saying something like: "Don't even bother. I'm omniscient and so I know you're going to stop at 10. There aren't even 10 righteous people in Sodom. End of discussion."

God appeared to Moses at the burning bush and told him to return to Egypt and free his people. Moses refused his mission five times using five different arguments (Exodus 3-4). Moses' fifth objection (Exodus 4:13-14), "Oh Lord, send, I pray Thee, by the hand of whom

Thou will send," made it clear that Moses was not interested in going, possibly because of his great humility. That is when God got angry at him.

According to the Midrash, Moses tried several good arguments on God to convince Him not to punish the Jewish people after the episode of the golden calf. For example,

> Moses said to God: Why are you angry with the Israelites? Is it not because they made an idol? You never told them not to do this. God replied to Moses: Did I not say in the second commandment (Exodus 20:3), 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me'? Moses replied: 'You did not command them, you commanded me, since You did not say, "You [plural] shalt not have …" It was thus only me that You commanded. Hence, if I have made an idol (Exodus 32:32), "Blot me, please, out of Your book"'
>
> (Midrash Exodus Rabbah 47:9).

Also,

> When the Israelites made the golden calf, Moses tried to convince God to forgive them. God said (Exodus 22:19): Moses, I have already sworn that, 'he that sacrifices unto the deities other than God alone shall be utterly destroyed,' and I cannot take back an oath which emanates from My mouth. Moses replied: Creator of the Universe, did you not grant me the power of annulling oaths? Any elder that passes judgment, who desires that his pronouncement should be accepted, should be the first to accept the pronouncement …

Moses is referring to God, here, and is telling God to practice what He preaches. A scholar may absolve one's oath under certain situations. And Moses continues:

> You, who commanded me regarding annulling oaths, it is only right that I should be able to annul your oath the way you commanded me to annul the oaths of others. Immediately, Moses wrapped himself in his prayer shawl and sat as an elder [of the court], and God stood as one asking about his oath …
>
> (Midrash Exodus Rabbah 43:4).

This story is even more humorous when one realizes that the way an oath is usually annulled by a court is by ascertaining that the individual making the oath did not have perfect knowledge and made the oath without considering every ramification. How do you annul the oath of God, who is omniscient? For that matter, how does one have the temerity to tell God to practice what He preaches?

Moses used a very unique argument against God to convince Him to forgive the Israelites for the sin of the spies. The Israelites made a serious blunder by believing the false report of the spies (Numbers 13-14). Moses was offered the chance to become the leader of a new nation consisting of his own descendants (Numbers 14:12): "I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them, and will make of you a greater nation and mightier than they." Moses, a true servant-leader, was willing to give up his own life for his followers. His argument for not eradicating the Israelites was (Numbers 14:15-16): "Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations which have heard of Your fame will say. Because God lacked the ability to bring His people into the land that He had sworn to give them, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness." This argument is an interesting one to use with God who is omnipotent. The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 32a) notes that the feminine form of the word "ability" (*yacholet*) is used in the verse. The verse should have used the masculine form, *yachol*. Moses was hinting to God that the nations will say that "your power has grown as weak as that of a female" or, in modern vernacular, that He would be considered a sissy. According to the Talmud, God responds with: "But did they not see the miracles and mighty feats that I performed for them at the Sea?" Moses has an answer to that: "They can still say that against one king [Pharaoh of Egypt] You can be victorious, but not against 31

kings." There were 31 kings in the Promised Land. One would think that this is not the way to argue with someone who is omnipotent but, apparently, God enjoys any good argument.

God did forgive the people, according to the Talmud because of Moses' argument. Indeed the Talmud concludes: "Happy is the disciple whose master agrees with him." The Talmud even goes so far as saying that God told Moses "you … kept Me alive" among the nations. This is based homiletically on the use of the phrase (Numbers 14:21): "as surely as I live." God admitted to Moses that his point was correct. The nations would not believe that God was omnipotent had He destroyed all the Israelites in the wilderness.

In the following Midrash, Moses gets to outsmart the Omniscient One.

> Moses said to God: This calf that the Israelites made can now be of assistance to You. It will send down the rain and You will produce the dew. The Holy One said to him: Is there any substance to it? Moses then retorted: If there is no substance to it, then why are you angry with the Israelites?
>
> (Midrash Numbers Rabbah 2:15).

Moses to God: Gotcha.

The next Midrash shows how the Jewish people used a clever argument to justify praying to God after the Temple's destruction. This Midrash is based on the Midrash cited earlier in which the Torah was offered to numerous nations first and they all rejected it. Only the Jewish people accepted it.

> The Holy One said to Israel: You are acting impudently [by praying to me after I have driven you out of Israel]. They replied: Creator of the Universe, it is appropriate and proper that we do so, for no other nation accepted your Torah except for us. God replied: I was the One who disqualified all the nations for your sake. The Jewish people said to God: If so, why did You take Your Torah around to every nation and they did not accept it?
>
> (Midrash Lamentations Rabbah 3:1).

This sounds almost like an old married couple having an argument as to who had been pursuing whom in the marriage. In fact, the *Midrash* even used the parable of the king who throws out his queen and, then, seeing her later clinging to the pillar of the palace, says to her:

> You are acting impudently. She tells the king: I am acting appropriately since no other woman would accept you except for me. The king says to her: I was the one who disqualified all women for you. She replies to the king: If so, why did you enter that street, that yard, and that place? Were you not rejected by all the women there?
>
> (Midrash Lamentations Rabbah 3:1).

Sometimes God wins the argument as the following Talmudic passage indicates. One of God's attributes (Exodus 34:6) is "*erech apayim*" which is translated as "long suffering" or "slow to anger".

> When Moses ascended on high [to Heaven in order to receive the Torah], he found God sitting and writing 'slow to anger' in the Torah. Moses asked God: Are you slow to anger only to the righteous? God replied: Even for the wicked. Moses said to God: Let the wicked perish. God said to Moses: See now that which you desire …

In other words, you will change your mind in the future about this request. Later when Israel sinned regarding the incident involving the spies and Moses prayed to God that He spare them,

> God said to Moses: Is this not what you said to me to be, be slow to anger but only to the righteous? Moses replied to God: And did You not say to me that you are slow to anger even

> to the wicked. Hence it is written (Numbers 14:17): 'And now, I beseech You, may the power of My Lord be great according as You have spoken, saying'.
>
> (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 111a–111b).

God to Moses: Gotcha. This time God wins as Moses wants God's power to be great when it comes to showing tolerance for the wicked. By being slow to anger, God gives the wrongdoer plenty of time to repent.

Job demanded to confront God and know the reason for all his suffering. Job angrily railed against the injustice that he perceived when he said (Job 9:22), "He destroys the innocent and the wicked." His wish was granted and God answered him with magnificent sarcasm: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? (Job 38:4) … Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, or told the dawn its place?" (Job 38:12). Note that God doesn't even give Job the real answer – that He made a bet with the satan to prove Job's righteousness. Geeraerts (2003), in a paper about irony in the *Book of Job*, suggests that God was embarrassed to tell Job that all his suffering was simply to prove a point.

3.10. Even God Has Feelings

In this story from the Talmud, we see that God expects to be greeted just as any mortal would and can even be sarcastic. God was said to be insulted when Moses, who went up to heaven for forty days, ignored Him and did not wish Him well on His handiwork.

> Rabbi Yehoshua b. Levi said: At the time that Moses ascended to Heaven, he found the Holy One tying crowns on the letters of the Torah. God said to him: Moses, in your town people do not give greetings? Moses replied: Is it then proper for a servant to extend greetings to his master? God said to him: You should have wished me success. Moses then said to Him (Numbers 14: 17): 'And now let the power of the Lord be great, as You once declared'.
>
> (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 89a).

Moses' response was close to the traditional Jewish way of congratulating someone on a job well done by blessing him with strength to continue.

Clearly, God has feelings. When the Jewish people, under the leadership of Joshua, suffered a defeat at Ai, Joshua was told by God it was because someone had violated the ban against taking anything from the spoils of Jericho for themselves (Joshua 7: 11). After the miraculous victory at Jericho, the wealth of the city had been consecrated to the Lord (Joshua 6: 19). Joshua, according to the Talmud, asked God to reveal the name of the perpetrator. God's response: "Am I an informer? Go and cast lots [to identify the sinner]" (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 43b). Joshua did cast lots and eventually found out that Achan, son of Carmi, was the guilty party. Achan confessed to the crime and admitted to stealing valuables from the booty of Jericho (Joshua 7:21). It appears that God did not want to be a tattle-tale. Of course, casting lots would require divine intervention to work. In fact, according to the Talmud, Achan made the point that one cannot rely on a lottery. He told Joshua that if a lottery were cast between Joshua and the High Priest Elazar, one would be declared guilty. Joshua had to beg Achan not to cast aspersions on the lottery method since it would later be used to parcel out the land of Israel to the 12 tribes (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 43b).

God can get sarcastic when mortals hurt His feelings, but He also wants to be blessed by them. The Talmud relates the following story. Amazingly, God asked for a blessing of Rabbi Yishmael b. Elisha, a High Priest, who came up with an appropriate response:

> Rabbi Yishmael b. Elisha said: I once entered the innermost part of the Temple to offer incense and I saw that God, the Lord of Hosts, was seated on a high and lofty throne. He said to me: Yishmael, My son, bless me. I said to Him: May it be Your will that Your compassion

> should suppress Your anger and that Your compassion prevail over all Your other attributes so that You should treat Your children with the attribute of mercy and You should stop short of the strict letter of the law for them. And God nodded to me with His head.
>
> (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 7a).

This poignant story not only depicts God as asking a mere mortal for a blessing, but this mortal then turns the tables on God because the blessing he gives is one that will benefit the people, and God is happy with this.

Not only does God want to be blessed, He wants the righteous people to do a circle dance (*machol*) around Him.

> In the future, God will make a circle for the righteous and He will sit in their midst in the Garden of Eden. Every single one of them will point with his finger towards Him and say (Isaiah 25:9), 'And it shall be said on that day: Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited, that he may save us; this is the Lord for whom we have waited, we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation'.
>
> (Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 31a).

Student (2014) discusses the symbolism of the circle dance. He notes that some scholars see this as an allegory describing the afterlife. In any case, this is a rather unique type of imagery with which to portray God. Well, the *hora* is still a popular Jewish folk dance.[2] If we can argue, criticize, rebuke God, it's nice to know we — or at least the righteous among us — can also praise God and dance around Him.

3.11. Teaching God a Thing or Three

God may be omniscient but he is willing to learn, and he even admits to making mistakes. This is surprising and, of course, humorous, given that He is omniscient. The Midrash relates that Moses taught God three things. God is not shy about learning new things; He even said to Moses: "You have taught Me something".

> 'Then sang Israel' (Numbers 21:17). This is one of the three things said by Moses to God to which God replied: You have taught Me something. Moses said to God [after the Israelites made the golden calf]: Creator of the Universe! How can Israel realize what they have done? Were they not raised in Egypt and all Egyptians are idolaters? Also, when You gave the Torah, You did not give it to them. And they were not even standing nearby; as Scripture (Exodus 20:18) states: 'And the people stood at a distance.' And You only gave the Torah to me; as Scripture states (Exodus 24:1): 'Then He said to Moses: Come up to the Lord.' When You gave the commandments, You did not give it to them. You did not say 'I am the Lord your [plural] God, ' but said (Exodus 20:1): 'I am the Lord thy [singular] God." Did I sin? God said to Moses: By your life, you have spoken well and have taught Me. From now on, I will use the expression 'I am the Lord your [plural] God.'
>
> The second occasion was when God said to Moses (Exodus 20:5): 'punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.' Moses said to God: Creator of the Universe, Many wicked people begot righteous children. Shall the children be punished for the sins of their fathers? Terach worshipped idols, yet Abraham his son was a righteous person. Similarly, Hezekiah was a righteous person, though Ahaz his father was wicked. So also Josiah was righteous, yet Amon his father was wicked. Is it proper that the righteous should be punished for the sins of their fathers? God said to Moses: You have taught Me something. By your life, I shall nullify My words and uphold yours; as it says (Deuteronomy 24:16): 'Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin.' And by your life, I shall record these words in your name; as it says (II Kings 14:6): 'in accordance with what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses where the

[2] Originally a Rumanian dance, it came to be considered the Jewish national dance in pre-state Israel.

> Lord commanded: 'Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents…'
>
> The third occasion was when God said to Moses: Make war with Sichon. Even if he does not seek to interfere with you, you must start a war against him, as it says (Deuteronomy 2:24): 'Set out now and cross the Arnon Gorge. See, I have given into your hand Sichon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his country. Begin to take possession of it and engage him in battle.' Moses, however, did not do so but, in accordance with what is written lower down, sent messengers [of peace]. God said to Moses: By your life, I shall nullify My own words and uphold yours; as it says (Deuteronomy 20:10): 'When you approach a city to wage war against it, make its people an offer of peace.' Seeing that Sichon did not accept their peace overtures, God cast him down before them; as it says (Deuteronomy 2:33): 'the Lord our God delivered him over to us and we struck him down'.
>
> (Midrash Rabbah Numbers 19:33).

Note that in the second occasion, Moses mentions people who were not yet born — Hezekiah and Josiah.

Here again, we see that God is willing to learn from others:

> Rabbah b. Shila once encountered Elijah the Prophet. He asked him: What is the Holy One doing? Elijah answered: He is quoting legal decisions in the names of all the Rabbis, but not in the name of Rabbi Meir. Rabbah asked: Why? Elijah answered: Because Rabbi Meir studied laws from the mouth of *acher* …

Acher, literally, *the other*, was a name given to Rabbi Elisha b. Avuyah, who became a heretic.

> Rabbah explained: Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate, he ate the fruit on the inside and discarded the peel. Elijah answered: Now God is saying, 'Meir, my son, says …'.
>
> (Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah 15b).

Who ought to know best what is in the heart of man, God or Rabbah? Yet, when Rabbah explains that Rabbi Meir only culled the good in learning from Acher and discarded the bad, God accepts this and starts quoting Rabbi Meir along with everyone else.

The Talmud describes a situation in which God admitted that He made a "mistake." The Talmud explains the meaning of God's reply as to His name to Moses in Exodus (3:14), "I Will Be What I Will Be".

> God instructed Moses to tell the Israelites that, I shall be with them in this servitude just as I will be with them in other servitudes. Moses told God: They have enough troubles now; You do not have to tell them about future troubles. God agreed with Moses and instructed Moses to tell the Israelites (Exodus 3:14): 'I Will Be has sent me'.
>
> (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 9b).

4. Divine Discourse in Jewish Literature of the Present Day

In Jewish literature too, God is quite frequently portrayed in a familiar, playful, and almost disrespectful, manner. For example, Sholom Aleichem's unforgettable character, Tevye the dairyman, had Job-like conversations with God: "O God, All-powerful and All-Merciful, great and good, kind and just, how does it happen that to some people you give everything and to others nothing?" (Aleichem 1956, p. 57). Even in the middle of prayer, Tevye would interject his own personal comments: "*Thou sustainest the living with loving kindness* — and, sometimes, with a little food" (Aleichem 1956, p. 50).

Treating God in such an informal and familiar manner is also common in Chassidic tales, which have also certainly been influenced by those in the Talmud and Midrash. In Chassidic

stories, God is often chided, albeit in a warm manner, for the harshness of the Diaspora and for not helping his people. For example, in one classic story, three Chassidic rabbis (Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, Rabbi Israel of Koznitz, and the seer of Lublin) act as the Jewish court in a suit brought by an individual against God. Their verdict is that the plaintiff was right and God was wrong for allowing the emperor to issue an edict against the Jews. God, of course, has no choice and had to obey the final verdict of the court: The decree is annulled (Buber 1975, p. 258). In another story, the famous Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev once declared to God that if He did not forgive the Jewish people their sins then he would tell the whole world that God's phylacteries were invalid. According to the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 6a), God's phylacteries contain the verse (I Chronicles 17:21): "And Who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth." The idea that God has a head on which he can wear phylacteries is itself quite amusing. Rabbi Levi exclaimed that if God did not forgive Israel their sins then they were not a "unique nation on earth," thus making His phylacteries invalid! On another occasion he scolded God and said: "The Jewish people are your phylacteries. When one of the phylacteries of a simple Jew falls on the ground he picks it up carefully and kisses it. Dear Lord! Your phylacteries have fallen to the ground" (Buber, 1975, p. 222).

It may be appropriate to include an example of how the tradition of Divine discourse has affected Jewish humor. There are many Jewish jokes in this vein; we present only two here, the first from Novak and Waldoks (2006, p. 288):

> Moses asks God to explain the kosher laws.
> "THOU SHALT NOT SEETHE A KID IN ITS MOTHER'S MILK."
> "Does that mean that we should wait six hours between eating meat and drinking milk?"
> "THOU SHALT NOT SEETHE A KID IN ITS MOTHER'S MILK."
> "Does that mean we should have two sets of dishes?"
> "THOU SHALT NOT SEETHE A KID IN ITS MOTHER'S MILK."
> "Does that mean we should check the label of everything we buy and use only those items made with pure vegetable shortening?"
> "THOU SHALT NOT SEETHE A KID IN ITS MOTHER'S MILK."
> "Does that mean —"
> "OKAY, HAVE IT YOUR WAY!"

And here's another:

> A very pious rabbi dies at a ripe old age and goes straight to Heaven. There, he finds a large table, surrounded by several learned men, all studying the Talmud. Many are his former teachers and students. The table is laden with all kinds of wonderful food— kishke, kugel, knaidlach and much more. The men noshed as they studied. One of his former students exclaims, "Rebbe, we're so happy you've finally joined us! Come, have something to eat!" The Rabbi surveys the scene, looks over the food and asks, "Who's the *mashgiach* here?" The man looks at the rabbi incredulously and replies, chuckling, "This is Heaven! God is the *mashgiach*!" The old man ponders this for a long, long time, stroking his beard, eyes closed, deep in thought. The others regard him with great anticipation, awaiting his learned words. At last, the rabbi speaks. "OK," he finally says, "I'll have some fruit. On a paper plate".
>
> (Friedman and Friedman, 2014, p. 52).

By the way, according to the Talmud, God may indeed be trusted as a kosher supervisor (*mashgiach*). If meat falls from Heaven, even if it resembles something non-kosher such as donkey meat, it may be eaten. Anything miraculously falling from Heaven can be assumed to be kosher (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 59b). The Talmud is silent on the matter of Heavenly dishware.

5. Discussion

Even back in Talmudic times, Jews saw God in a very different way than did other peoples. The Greeks, for example, depicted their many gods as having the very worst failings of mortals. Zeus was portrayed as a serial adulterer and his wife, Hera, was extremely jealous of all his affairs, most of which were with mortals. The gods were jealous of each other and behaved in despicable ways. This is not surprising in a polytheistic world view. Hertz (1959, p. 265) states: "The belief in the unity of the human race is the natural corollary of the unity of God, since One God must be the God of the whole of humanity…Through Hebrew monotheism alone was it possible to teach the Brotherhood of Man." By depicting God as someone who has feelings and even wants to be blessed by mortals, we learn the importance of compassion for each other. It is the ultimate *imitatio Dei*. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, one of the great rabbinical leaders of the twentieth century, makes the point that human dignity and social justice "are implicit in the biblical concept that man was created in God's image" (Besdin 1979, p. 190).

The fact that God is depicted in Rabbinic literature as someone who can be blamed, argued with, negotiated with, and even taught a thing or two has had a profound effect on the Jewish people. It has influenced Jewish humor and Jewish literature but has also made the Jewish people appreciate the importance of logical arguments. The power of *s'vara* (logic and reason) is so strong that sometimes even God has to yield to it. God may be omniscient but laughs when bested by His children. Berkovits (1983, pp. 3–8) provides numerous examples from the Talmud demonstrating how Jewish religious law (*halacha*) was influenced by *s'vara* (logic). The Talmud often asks why the Torah requires a verse when it can be deduced using *s'vara*. Berkovits demonstrates that logical reasoning was just as valid to the Talmudic sages as a biblical statement. In fact, according to Berkovits, (1983, p. 6), a *s'vara* "may be so convincing that it may compel one's conscience to suppress the plain meaning of a biblical injunction and force upon a verse in the Bible a meaning that it can hardly bear textually." One example of many given by Berkovits deals with the rule that even though a person is normally permitted to violate Jewish law if a life is at stake, there are three exceptions. When it comes to idolatry, *arayot* (incest and adultery), or murder, one is obligated to die rather than violate Jewish law. The Talmud derives the principle that one must die rather than commit murder from *s'vara*: "What makes you think your blood is redder than the blood of a fellow human being?" (Berkovits 1983, p. 4). If *s'vara* is so important in law, it is not surprising that it is also significant in homiletics.

That we find logic in the pages of the Talmud — the source for interpretation, exposition, and discussion of *halacha* — is not a surprise. It is far more interesting to consider why we find humor in the Talmud, and in the Bible as well. There are several very good reasons. The Talmud records the teachings and discussions of a great number of very smart, witty people. According to humor scholar Peter McGraw (Bliwise 2014), "humor demands intelligence" and so if you get some really smart people together you will necessarily produce humor. In addition, whether we are believers – as the Talmudic sages certainly were – or not, the Bible itself is an intellectual piece of work; hence, the wit we find within. In particular, the Bible is studied as a work of literature (Jasper and Prickett 2007; Robinson 2011) and as such, uses a variety of literary devices including those considered humorous, such as, for example, irony, satire, and sarcasm.

Perhaps we need to address some questions that naturally arise when reviewing the examples herein. Firstly, is it possible that the passages from the Bible were not intentionally humorous but only appear so to our modern sensibilities? Clearly the humor in the Bible is intentional. There are so many examples of puns, verbal wit, sarcasm, irony, and humorous imagery that it is simply too coincidental to imagine that these humorous bits were *un*-intentionally included in the Bible. Alter (2004), for example, in his translation of and

commentary on the *Five Books of Moses*, finds many instances of deliberate wordplay – passages that employ humor to make a serious point. Gardner (2005) also refers to the presence of "humorous punning, verbal wit, and irony" throughout the Hebrew Bible.[3]

Once we accept that the Hebrew Bible is replete with all kinds of humor, then there is no reason for us to be reluctant to accept that there is humor in the discourses between humans and God. Does seeing humor in these conversations with God detract from the seriousness of the issues raised in these passages? Surely not. The key message as we point out in this paper is that even an omniscient God appreciates good logical arguments. We somehow have the sense that a God Who is willing to argue with humans, and accept these arguments with His own good humor, is more likely to be a just God. A God who is willing to listen, rather than

[3] In the *Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition* (so entitled to distinguish it from the 1987 first edition, whose editor was Mircea Eliade), the entry "Humor and Religion" consists of the following articles: "Humor and Religion: An Overview" by Richard Gardner (pp. 4194–4205), "Humor and Religion: Humor and Religion in East Asian Contexts" by Richard Gardner and Scott Davis (pp. 4205–4210); "Humor and Religion: Humor and Islam" by Sabra J. Webber (pp. 4210–4218); and finally "Humor and Religion: Humor, Irony, and the Comic in Western Theology and Philosophy" by John Lippitt (pp. 4218–4223).

A referee asked for some comparison across religions, of the aspect of religious humor we are discussing in our present study. Encouraged by the editor, who directed us to the relevant entries from the *Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition,* we comply with the referee's request, though briefly, in this note. Consider for example that in "Humor and Religion: An Overview", Gardner remarks on p. 4202 about an attitude in Islamic mysticism:

> The Sūfī Rūmī (c. 1207–1273) is reported to have observed: "If you want special illumination, look upon the human face: See clearly within laughter the Essence of Ultimate Truth".

In stark contrast to such subtlety on the part of a monotheistic mystic, when it comes to ancient Greek religion Gardner remarks on p. 4195 that it was precisely such aspects of the Greek gods which Christians deemed immoral, which are in relation to humor:

> While not infrequently laughing at and mocking humans, the gods also acted much like humans: they played tricks on one another, made foolish mistakes, committed adultery, and laughed at and made fun of one another. Being sexual beings themselves, at least some of the Greek gods also had an appreciation for the humorous dimensions of sexuality. As seen in the myth of Demeter, getting the gods to laugh was one way of restoring the world to order and fertility. Dionysos was a god of laughter linked with sexual excess and inebriation. In short it is difficult to conceive of the Greek gods and their relations to humans without taking into account humor.

In fact, because of the vastly different conceptions of monotheism and polytheism, one can see that in the latter, humour as practised by the divine is radically different from the humour from the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature about human/divine dialogue. For one thing, in polytheism the humorous interaction may be of gods among themselves. This can be seen in the following quote from Gardner (2005, p. 4026):

> In early Japan, a charter myth relating to the role of humor in religion is found in *Kojiki*. The myth narrates how the Sun goddess, Amaterasu, faced with the outrageous behaviour of her brother Susano-o (who has sometimes been identified as a trickster), secludes herself in a cave and thus throws the heavenly realm into chaos and darkness. The other gods, however, devise a plan to lure Amaterasu from the cave by pretending another goddess is present. As part of the ruse, Ame no Uzume performs a dance on an overturned tub and exposes herself. Ame no Uzume's performance produces uproarious laughter on the part of the other gods. Not able to understand why the gods are laughing when she has hidden herself away, Amaterasu is told another goddess is present, and thus is lured out of the cave. The myth testifies to the efficacious power of laughter, as well as the gods' appreciation of humor. In the medieval Nō play *Ema* (The votive tablet), Amaterasu is even portrayed as wanting to reenact the myth so that she can enjoy the joke again. Ame no Uzume's performance is also often cited as the origin of *kagura* (ritual song and dance offered to the gods), rites of possession, and many traditional forms of theatre and performance.

Gods who are tricksters abound in, for example, Native American myths.

just be right all the time, is a God Who cares that His decision is just. Such a God is more likely to temper justice with compassion. It is not surprising that the Talmud notes that the Torah begins and ends with acts of compassion (*chessed*) on the part of God. (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14a).

How is it that we have the audacity to consider arguing with God humorous rather than, say, impertinent or offensive? To answer a question with a question, was Abrahan's haggling with God considered impertinence? When Abraham questioned "Shall the Judge of the whole world not act justly?" (Genesis 18:25) was this offensive? From the point of view of an omniscient God, that entire discussion was not necessary. God went out of his way to include Abraham in his plans even though He knew how the conversation would turn out. It was the very argument itself — with its humanity, its humor, its compassion, and its sense of justice — that God Himself encouraged.

6. Conclusion

We have seen that the Jewish literature, both ancient and current, treats God like almost any other member of the family. He demands justice and compassion but may also be criticized, argued with, and negotiated with. Sometimes, God argues back. Sometimes, God even wins. It may be difficult to accept this sort of playful interactivity with someone who is omniscient and so should not be able to ever lose an argument but, indeed, the homiletic approach allows for this to happen. The Talmudists employed humor for many reasons, not the least of which was to teach their students — including those of us who study it today — important lessons (Friedman and Friedman 2014, Ch. 6). These lessons are universal and certainly not limited to the Jewish people. Indeed, scholars have also studied the role of humor in the Christian Bible and in the Qur'ān (see, e.g., Gardner 2005).

Of all the lessons we may derive from these examples of Divine discourse, the most critical one, especially in today's political and international arenas, may be this: If God Himself allows mortals to argue with Him, to disagree with Him, to reject his opinion on His Own Torah laws, to blame Him, to chastise Him to be just, to teach Him, to, in essence, engage in Divine discourse as equal parties, without resorting to Heavenly destructive acts (presumably justified), how can we possibly do less in our dealings with each other?

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[4] In Bohak's (2003) "The Ibis and the Jewish Question", which begins on p. 27, other than in the title of that article the ibis only appears on p. 36, and this within a discussion of ancient perceptions of Egyptian zoolatry, the worship of animals, and other ancient prejudices against Egyptians. Arguably, the title of the paper was patterned after The elephant and the Jewish question, which in Israeli Hebrew idiomatically refers to unrelatedness; ibis replaced elephant because the ibis is famously associated with Egypt.

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Hershey H. Friedman is Professor of Business at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. His scholarly interests are varied and include Jewish humor, leadership, business ethics, research methods, and pedagogy.

Linda Weiser Friedman is Professor of Statistics and Computer Information Systems at Baruch College of the City University of New York where she is on the doctoral faculties of the CUNY programs in computer science and business. Her scholarly interests are varied and include computer programming languages, simulation, humor studies, Jewish studies, leadership, and pedagogy.

Address correspondence to Hershey H. Friedman at x.friedman@att.net, and to Linda Weiser Friedman at Linda.Friedman@baruch.cuny.edu