

# In Search of God: A Desperate View of the Conflicts of the Present

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**Against the backdrop of ongoing social violence and war, the author presents and develops his argument for controlling human violent tendencies and channeling human vital energies into constructive and morally grounded action. The essay provides a theological perspective on these issues based on midrashic exegesis.**

Without doubt, one of the greatest problems facing humanity today is the level of violence in our societies and the danger of all-out war among nations and peoples. Indeed, war is currently killing thousands of people each day.

The question that immediately arises is: what must we do to control our violent tendencies? How do we channel our energies into constructive action and to the building of mutual respect and affection?

The question become more complex if we ask: given all of the advances in the scientific-technological sphere – which reveal the structures of subatomic particles, the sequence and quaternary structure of deoxyribonucleic acid, and the possibilities of artificial intelligence – how is it that humanity fails to find ways to live together in dignity?

One approach realizes that scientific progress is essentially the product of people who can generate leaps in their thinking. Although we speak of the scientific community that develops according to what Thomas Khun has called a “scientific paradigm” (Khun 1996), it seems that brilliant minds emerge that achieve flashes of insight that lead to new paradigms. Such “paradigm shifts” answer questions that the previous models could not, thereby enabling advancement. The deepening of scientific and technological knowledge is the work of a relatively small percentage of individuals, while the great majority of people simply use the products that science and technology develop.

Spiritual advancement is also a process in which particular individuals experience flashes of insight. Unlike the sciences and technology, however, such insights cannot simply be taken up by everyone else. Communal spiritual uplift, and the peace that accompanies it, becomes possible only when masses of people embrace profound spiritual values and interact together in redirecting their passions toward respect for others. There are no “software programs” or apps for people simply to download and follow. Ultimately, each and every person must decide in the privacy of his or her being to be creative and constructive instead of being pernicious and destructive.



**Rabbi Abraham Skorka, Ph.D.** is a religious scholar, professor of Jewish studies, and longtime friend of Pope Francis. He is an avid promoter of interfaith dialogue and the author of numerous articles and books on religious and interfaith topics. Abraham Skorka served as rector of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano and rabbi of Congregation Benei Tikva in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He is currently Senior Research Fellow for Jewish Studies and Jewish-Catholic Relations at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. His email contact is [aviskorka50@gmail.com](mailto:aviskorka50@gmail.com).

Patterns of human behavior are initially shaped by each individual's experiences within the family and their larger society. These experiences interact with their natural drives, those that Sigmund Freud named *Eros* and *Thanatos*, especially in his 1930 book *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Eng. *Civilization and Its Discontents*). Each generation, unlike the accumulation over time of scientific and technological knowledge, cannot merely build upon the life-decisions of previous generations. The standards and decisions of our ancestors, of course, serve as a guide in our lives, but since human life is very dynamic and changing, each generation must develop its own responses to life and adopt for themselves the values upon which to build their existence.

The Bible teaches us about this human characteristic. God made a covenant with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. God revealed to them the principles according to which they should live their lives. In this way God was made known to them. The Children of Israel committed themselves to observing these maxims (Exodus 19–20). Forty years later, a new generation that was preparing to enter Canaan renewed the covenant (Deuteronomy 29:9–28). This, in turn, was renewed by the next generation at the end of Joshua's days (Joshua 24:1–28). The process that each person experiences of building an individual identity with a distinct personality and set of values also occurs collectively at the level of the people and nation. Just as individuals resist being mere imitations of their parents, the Bible speaks about the renewal of the covenant as each generation appears. This means that the degree of spirituality attained by one generation does not automatically become integral for the next generation. This dynamic is vividly expressed in the biblical story of the cult of the golden calf before which the Children of Israel prostrated themselves barely forty days after having experienced the presence of God on Mount Sinai.

What, then, is the path that individuals and societies must follow to be spiritually and ethically mature?

A famous Talmudic passage (*Makkot* 23b–24a) describes a discussion among the rabbis about the essence of all the precepts, the *mitzvot*, that Jews must observe. Rabbi Simlai concludes that all the teachings of the Torah are epitomized

in Amos (5:4): “Thus said the Lord to the house of Israel, seek me and you will live.” The Hebrew verb *DRSh*, which I have translated in Amos's words as “seek”, is used in the Bible in various ways. In many verses it refers to the search for the presence of God in human existence (e.g., Genesis 25:22; Exodus 18:15; 1 Samuel 9:9; 1 Kings 22:8; Hosea 10:12; 1 Chronicles 22:19; 2 Chronicles 12:14; 2 Kings 1:3). This sincere and authentic search inspires individuals with values that move them away from the evil and the madness to which rampant low passions can drag them. According to the Bible, to seek God without being willing to embrace what is fair and merciful, what is just and good, is the same as walking after an idol. Those who seek the presence of God in their lives through the enhancement of their feelings and deeds are able to participate in God's creation of peace on the face of the earth.

In 1931, the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation was established by the League of Nations' Permanent Committee for Literature and the Arts. Its purpose was to facilitate the exchange of letters between representative public thinkers “on subjects calculated to serve the common interest of the League of Nations and of intellectual life” (Freud 1964, 197), and to publish these letters periodically.

At that time, Albert Einstein was very well known around the world for his contributions to physics. He was considered one of the planet's most outstanding intellectuals. Therefore, he was invited to correspond with whomever he wanted on the subject of his choice. In the early 1930s, many had already predicted that a new world conflict would soon break out. Social tensions in Europe were of such a magnitude that the shadows of a new world war darkened the horizon. Therefore, Albert Einstein chose Sigmund Freud as his dialogue partner on the topic “Why war?” as the topic for them to correspond about.

In his letter to Freud, Einstein gave an extensive analysis of the different conflicts of interest among peoples. These included the insatiable appetite for power, the desire for domination on the part of leaders, and the destructive drives that are part of human life. It is on this last point especially that

the great physicist wanted to learn the opinions of the father of psychoanalysis.

Freud (1964, 197–215) in his reply examined the characteristics of the innate drives within the human species. He concluded by saying:

*[But] it may not be Utopian to hope that these two factors, the cultural attitude and the justified dread of the consequences of a future war, may result within a measurable time in putting an end to the waging of war. By what paths or by what side-tracks this will come about we cannot guess. But one thing we can say: whatever fosters the growth of civilization works at the same time against war.*

The second of Freud's insights was verified by the political events that occurred after nuclear weapons were first deployed in war with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Afterward there were emergencies, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, which threatened the destruction of large portions of the planet. These perils encouraged people to resolve their differences by non-violent means.

The guarantor of universal peace, according to Freud, is culture, the foundation upon which civilizations develop. But what does Freud understand by culture?

Karen Armstrong (1993, 391), in her book *A History of God*, summarizes Freud's thinking about God in this way:

*Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) certainly regarded belief in God as an illusion that mature men and women should lay aside. The idea of God was not a lie but a device of the unconscious which needed to be decoded by psychology. A personal god was nothing more than an exalted father-figure: desire for such a deity sprang from infantile yearnings for a powerful, protective father, for justice and fairness and for life to go on forever. God is simply a projection of these desires, feared and worshipped by human beings out of an abiding sense of helplessness. Religion belonged to the infancy of the human race; it had been a necessary stage in the transition from childhood to maturity. It had promoted ethical values which were essential*

*to society. Now that humanity had come of age, however, it should be left behind. Science, the new logos, could take God's place. It could provide a new basis for morality and help us to face our fears. Freud was emphatic about his faith in science, which seemed almost religious in its intensity: 'No, our science is not an illusion! An illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give we can get elsewhere.'*

Certainly not all psychoanalysts agree with Freud's understanding of God, but his belief in science and its power is shared by many. Undoubtedly science revealed and continues to reveal many features of existence. However, its goal is not to answer the question why but rather how? Everything that is proposed in the scientific field must be verified through measurements, experiments, etc. It is in the arena of faith where the question of why is faced: the "why" of existence, the "why" of the suffering of the just, and the "why" of the existence of evil. There is no laboratory in which such questions of faith can be empirically measured or weighed. In the end, these questions reside in the most intimate dimension of each individual.

It seems to me that the expulsion of God from our lives, or more generally the denial of higher powers, frequently transforms life into a meaningless chaotic state in which dictators try to take substitute for the Creator. They bewitch people with charismatic appeals to their worst instincts.

The God of the Bible is described in the words of the prophet Jeremiah (10:10) as the "Lord God of Truth, is the living God." Perhaps this should be translated as "The Lord God is the God of life." It must be understood that human beings can only dialogue with God in the immaterial dimensions of their lives. The book of Genesis (2:7) relates that God gave life to the first human being by puffing the "breath of life" into an inanimate human form made from the dust of the earth. From this it can be understood, as the rabbis saw it (*Bereshit Rabba* 12:8), that something of the heavenly is found in every human being. The challenge of our lives, as we each learn who we are, is to discover the brilliance of that spark of God with which we have been created.

Perhaps Freud was right that often the idea of God that many people have is nothing more than a psychological projection of their inner need to pay homage to an idol. That is why Amos said, as I mentioned before, that God must be sought, or as the psalmist says (Psalms 145:18): “God is close to all who cry out for God’s presence, to all who cry out with the truth.” In life itself, day by day, God must be sought.

The action of seeking God is the consequence of another search that man must undertake. The famous Argentine writer Ernesto Sábato (2003, 7) reflected:

*One embarks towards distant lands, or seeks the knowledge of men, or inquires into nature, or seeks God; later he noticed that the phantasm he was chasing was he himself.*

When one finds themselves, when he or she sees their being without grandiloquence or melodrama, then they can open a space in their spiritual core for an encounter with God.

The Freudian notion that through mental exercise one can master destructive impulses and create something sublime that he calls culture leads to the question: why should an individual do this if in the end, as Freud himself says, such a process of self-limitations only brings pain? I might answer this question by saying that a society’s culture enhances the human condition. But if human existence does not have a transcendent dimension, as Ecclesiastes (1:9, 14) would say, then everything is irrelevant, what was is what will be since everything is vanity, everything is futile.

The lack of deep religiosity leads to an existential void that can lead people to horrible behaviors. The pursuit of meaningless grandiosity – such as the lust to conquer other countries, to possess immense wealth, or to achieve fame – becomes fanatical. It makes those so obsessed temporarily feel like idols. This self-deception fills our world with fire and destruction.

One of the questions that arises when reading the biblical story of Abraham is how it came to pass that the first of the patriarchs received the command from God: “Go from your land, from the place of your birth to the land that I will show you.” (Gn 12:1). How is it that Abraham conceived of a single God, the Creator of all that exists? In the *Midrash Rabba* (*Bereshit Rabba* 39:1), Rabbi Itzhak explains:

*Abraham’s situation can be compared to that of a person who wandered from place to place and suddenly sees a great fortress on fire. He said to himself: can it be said that this fortress is without any leadership? In the same way Abraham our patriarch did, he said: can it be said that this world does not have a leader? Then God was revealed to him and told him, ‘I am the owner of the world.’*

What does the great burning fortress represent? According to the version of this tale in *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* (1934), the burning fortress represents Nature and its perfection, which could not have come about by chance but is rather the work of a great Creator. To this can be added another *midrashic* speculation that surely Abraham was delighted by the technological developments in Babylon, where he was born. The ability to construct tall buildings, according to the biblical story, led the inhabitants of that land to erect a tower that would reach to heaven. Observers like Abraham would have been amazed by humanity’s creative capacities. They will deduce that in the same way that human constructions have a maker, so too must the great Universal Creation.

According to the *Midrash Lekach Tov* (1880, 55), the burning fortress represents a world that defies God and distances the divine presence from human reality. From the first human generation, in which Adam and Eve transgressed God’s directions, followed by the corrupt generation of Noah, which was followed by the builders of the tower of Babel, there was a refusal on the part of humanity to share their existence with God. Abraham discovered God’s reality in the midst of that pagan reality. That, the *midrash* says, is why God began to speak to and befriend him.

Our world has the same characteristics as those described by these two *midrashim*. On the one hand we can see a great development in science and technology. On the other hand, we perceive generations that have been banishing God, and with God the virtues of justice, mercy, and goodness, which are what the Creator most desires from humanity.

It is up to each one of us to search for the master of the fortress that is on fire, to try to perceive his intentions, and turn to him just as Abraham did four millennia ago. Abraham’s legacy continues to challenge all of us in the present and will do so forevermore.

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