

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. In the introduction, the author claims that virtually all religious language and all religious thought is metaphorical in nature. But in the last chapter, there is a discussion about the importance of distinguishing between a metaphor and the “thing itself”—the reality the metaphor seeks to evoke or describe. Bearing both of these claims in mind, is there a point at which, as old Jewish metaphors are deemed obsolete and new Jewish metaphors are created, the metaphor system ceases to be something that can be justifiably called “Judaism”? If you think there is such a point, does it appear in this book? Where? If, on the other hand, you do not think there comes a point where the metaphor system ceases to have a solid claim to be called “Judaism,” then what do you see as the essential elements of Judaism that persist despite the discarding of old metaphors and the creation of new ones? In other words, if the metaphors are not at the core of Judaism, what is?

2. As you think about the relationship between the metaphors of religion and the essence of religion (the “thing itself”), what effect does this book have on more typical recent controversies about traditional God metaphors? Specifically, it has become commonplace in liberal Jewish circles in the past couple of decades to delete all gender-specific God metaphors, such as “father,” “king,” and “Lord.” Some have even proposed the addition of female God metaphors to augment, or correct, the traditional male language. What, if any, relationship do you see between those arguments over gender-specific metaphors and the proposals made in this book about new metaphors?
  
3. Many authors have addressed the question about God and scientific views of creation. A typical example of this may be seen in Timothy Ferris’s *The Whole Shebang: A State-of-the-Universe(s) Report*.

So it seems reasonable to ask what cosmology, now that it is a science, can tell us about God. Sadly, but in all earnestness, I must report that the answer as I see it is: Nothing. Cosmology presents us neither the face of God, nor the handwriting of God, nor such thoughts as may occupy the mind of God.

Does Ferris’s view constitute an attack on the claims made in chapter 1 of this book?

4. In chapter 1, God is likened to the Big Bang—a tiny point of vast energy. Although it was initially the source of everything that would exist in the subsequent history of the universe, the Big Bang itself was utterly simple; it had no particular structure or complexity. The discussion of fractals in chapter 4 suggests that we human beings, in our astounding complexity, are similar to God (that is, we are images of God). If both of these claims are correct, then God must have *developed* or

*evolved* starting from the first instant of the universe's existence, continuing through our own era, and extending into the future. Does the possibility of the evolution or development of God raise questions or problems? How does it affect the way we understand ancient and modern interpretations of the relationship between God and human beings?

5. At the end of chapter 2, physicist Paul Davies is quoted as saying that “the spontaneous appearance of a universe is not such a surprise, because physical objects are spontaneously appearing all the time—without well-defined causes—in the quantum microworld.”

Does the possibility of such spontaneous appearances of physical objects, including the universe as a whole, seem to constitute an assault on a fundamental tenet of traditional religion? If so, can you imagine how people with different views than your own might respond? A religiously conservative person? A liberal?

6. In chapters 3 and 6, the author describes metaphors for the shape of God. This notion may be rather foreign to most readers, and many may be put off by it. A negative reaction probably originally stems from Maimonides's assertion that God has neither physical body nor any semblance of physicality. Do you find these notions of the shape of God useful? If so, how? If not, why? How are they antagonistic to the very core of Jewish belief? What ways can you find to incorporate them into your way(s) of thinking about God?
7. A recurring theme throughout the book is the limitation on knowledge, both human and divine. To what extent do you require, or crave, certainty in your spiritual life? Is there room in your belief system for uncertainty? How does uncertainty weaken or undermine religion?

8. Most of the new God metaphors suggested by the author do not personify God; they do not give God human characteristics and descriptions. Big Bang, light, fractals, gravity—all these are phenomena of nature. Although they are impressive—perhaps even awe-inspiring—they do not inspire love or adoration from us. Yet, we live in a world in which religious individuals focus more and more on having personal relationships with God. Do you think that religion in general, or Judaism in particular, can flourish if our sense of God is not personified?
9. We often imagine scientific people and religious people at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of how they live their lives. For example, some people would imagine that religious ritual behavior, a fundamental element of religious life, would have little, if any, relevance to, or place in, scientific life. Yet the author makes a case for the importance and meaning of at least three specific pieces of Jewish ritual, namely, reciting *berakhot* (blessings), baking challah (twisted egg bread eaten on Shabbat and holidays), and wearing *tzitzit* (tassels on the prayer shawl). How has this book affected your view of, and attitude toward, personal religious ritual observance?
10. One way of looking at this book is to see it as an attempt to facilitate a conversation between religion and science. Yet, Michael Shermer points out in his book *How We Believe: Science, Skepticism and the Search for God*, “If science is the art of the soluble, religion is the art of the insoluble.” This statement might be taken to suggest that religion and science function in such different realms, and with such different goals, that there can be no useful conversation between them. Before you read this book, what possibilities did you see for such a conversation? Has this book changed your view? If so, in what ways?