

To Believe or Not to Believe, That Is Not the Question: The Complexity of Jewish Beliefs About God

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Belief in a personal God has been central in research and theory in the psychology of religion and spirituality. Beliefs may seem to be less important to Jews. Indeed, recent national surveys suggest that even some observant Jews report disbelief in God. Yet there are historical, philosophical, theological, and cultural reasons to suggest that Jewish beliefs about God are complex and may not be adequately measured as a yes/no survey response. Using both qualitative (in-depth interviews) and quantitative data (2 new measures of God representations), we show that Jews are quite likely to believe that God exists and that they hold diverse representations of God as a benevolent personal being, as a mystical cosmic force, and as ineffable—unknowable and incomprehensible. Jewish God representations appear to be relatively unstable and indefinite compared with the God representations of certain other religious groups. Our findings suggest that more nuanced research methods are needed in assessing religiosity, generally, and beliefs about God among Jews, specifically. Implications for the study of relational spirituality are discussed.

Keywords: Judaism, God representations, mixed-methods, qualitative research

Belief in a personal God actively engaged in human affairs plays a major role in research and theorizing in the psychology of religion and spirituality (e.g., Allport, 1957; Boyer, 2001; Froese & Bader, 2010; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992). In a recent survey of U.S. Jews, however, the Pew Research Center, Religion & Public Life (2013) reported that “[t]he data make clear that . . . being Jewish is as much about ethnicity and culture as it is about religious belief. . . . Some Jews by religion are non-believers, whereas some Jews of no [religious belief] are ritually observant” (p. 71). The researchers found that whereas 69% of the U.S. general public profess belief in God, only 34% of Jews reported being certain that God exists, 43% were uncertain, and 23% reported not believing at all. Moreover, two thirds of the Jews surveyed agreed that a person can certainly be Jewish but not believe in God. Indeed, Jewish religion often seems to be more about practice than about belief (Cohen, Siegel, & Rozin, 2003).

We contend that Jews may not lack belief in God. Instead, current ways of thinking about and assessing beliefs about God do not adequately reflect the complex culture and theology of mainstream American Jews. This inadequacy may have led to an underappreciation of the way many Jews engage with religious

beliefs and practices—that is, through questioning and complexity. Indeed, there is a strong Jewish tradition of argumentation and questioning everything including the existence and nature of God. This custom derives from the traditional method of learning *Talmud*, in which students engage in a process of argumentation and debate with, and about, the traditional texts (Cohen, Gorvine, & Gorvine, 2013). Thus, Judaism often tolerates and encourages wide latitude in what are considered acceptable beliefs and interpretations.

Furthermore, asking Jewish people whether or not they believe in God is a complex issue for a number of historical, philosophical, theological, and cultural reasons. On the one hand, at least until the Middle Ages, the God of rabbinic Judaism was “as anthropomorphic as the God of the Bible . . . a fatherly deity, intimate and personal, loving without compromising his ethical rigor, a God who weeps when he must punish” (Seltzer, 1980, p. 290). The notion of a personified God fits well with current psychological theory positing that theory of mind (i.e., the belief that God has a mind) plays a critical role in beliefs about God (Boyer, 2001; Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012; Guthrie, 1993). Anthropomorphic God representations also comport with recent psychological theories positing that God is thought of as a kind of supernatural monitor observing human affairs (Norenzayan, 2013). It is true that Jewish tradition strongly puts forth the understanding that God is both merciful and just (Cohen, Malka, Rozin, & Cherfas, 2006). There is also empirical evidence that some Jews today think of God in rather personal terms (Rosmarin, Pirutinsky, Pargament, & Krumrei, 2009).

However, the majority of contemporary, mainstream American Jews have been shown to be much less likely than those in other religious groups to endorse an anthropomorphic view of God as a personal being (Froese & Bader, 2010; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). At least as far back as the preeminent rabbinic

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figure of Maimonides (1138–1204), Jews have held the idea that Biblical descriptions of God in human physical and psychological terms were to be interpreted as metaphorical and that believing that God had literal feet or fingers (as it says in the Bible) would be to remake God in man's image, a blasphemy (Cohen, 2002). Such descriptions, for Maimonides, were adapted and simplified for human understanding, as God is limitless and beyond human comprehension. As Richard Feynman is reported to have said, if you think you understand quantum mechanics, then you surely do not. How much more so would this inability to understand apply to thinking about God? Yet, in what may seem paradoxical, Maimonides held that belief in one God is a basic article of Jewish faith and a religious obligation (*mitzvah*). Thus, Jews are commanded to obey God's laws, but they also are taught that they cannot fully understand the God that is commanding. It is unclear, therefore, how a Jew might respond to a yes/no question about whether he or she believes in something (or someone) that cannot possibly be comprehended.

A second way in which Jewish beliefs about God might be complex and not easily assessed relates to the fact that Jewish history is punctuated with an almost unending series of tragedies, which are very salient to Jewish people and are remembered in liturgy and in observances throughout the year, including (but not limited to) the destruction of the temples and exile, the expulsion from Spain, and the Holocaust. Jews are by no means the only people who have suffered tragedy, and surely all religions wrestle with the notion of theodicy. However, Jews might be especially likely to reason that God could not exist and allow such suffering or to reason that, if God does exist, he cannot be a benevolent personal being. This viewpoint is a common post-Holocaust response among Jews (Sherwin, 2005).

A third reason why simple measures of belief in God might not give an accurate picture of Jews' beliefs about God is that, in Judaism, it is a grave sin to spread disbelief in a way that causes other people to sin (see Maimonides, "Laws of Repentance," *Mishneh Torah*; Dorff, 1998). Even if a Jew felt disinclined toward belief in God, he or she may not wish to admit this disinclination in a survey because saying that one does not believe could be seen as normalizing or legitimizing a lack of belief in God.

Finally, Sandage and Shults (2007) have defined *relational spirituality* as "ways of relating to the sacred" (p. 263) and point out that understanding the development of Christians' belief in God and their ways of relating with God have been important topics of research in the psychology of religion and spirituality. However, ways of relating to God and the sacred may be different for Jews than for Christians. Jewish identity and communal life typically focus as much on ethnicity, traditions, practices, and rituals as they do on personal beliefs about God (Cohen, 2002; Cohen, Hall, Koenig, & Meador, 2005; Cohen & Hill, 2007; Cohen et al., 2003). Among Jews, personal beliefs are not often discussed; therefore, asking Jews whether they believe in God or how they relate with God might make for an uncomfortable and awkward conversation.

All this is to say that characterizing Jewish belief in God is a complex undertaking. Feeling unsatisfied with the apparent conclusion in national surveys that many Jews do not believe in God, we sought to understand more fully the complexity of Jewish beliefs about God in the present research, using both qualitative interviews and new quantitative measures. This mixed-methods

approach allowed us to capture more fully the richness and diversity of Jewish beliefs about God. In addition, given the paucity of existing research on this subject, a mixed-methods approach creates opportunities to explore, in free response form, what may be multiple God representations.

Study Overview

Our goal in the present research was to use both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the relational spirituality of Jewish persons. In particular, we focused on describing how Jewish persons represent God and how those views may differ from the views of people from other religious groups (i.e., atheist, agnostic, Christian, Muslim, and spiritual but not religious). As Davis et al. (2016) noted, qualitative and mixed-methods can be especially useful in studying God representations because of their complex and context-sensitive nature (see also Davis, Moriarty, & Mauch, 2013). The use of multiple methods for collecting and analyzing also enables researchers to cross-check findings that may seem contradictory.

In Study 1, we present results from an ethnographic study of Jewish prayer and healing conducted among liberal (non-Orthodox) American Jews in a city in the Southwest. This ethnographic study included 35 in-depth, open-ended interviews that often touched on beliefs about God and 2 years of participant observation in synagogue and Jewish communal life.

In Study 2, we used two quantitative survey measures to assess Jewish beliefs about God, which are (a) items adapted from the General Social Survey (Smith, Marsden, Hout, & Kim, 2015), which assesses belief in a personal God, belief in a cosmic force, having no view of God, and disbelief; and (b) a five-factor God representation scale assessing the nature of God as authoritarian (e.g., punishing, commanding), benevolent (e.g., caring, merciful), mystical (e.g., the universe, nature), ineffable (e.g., inconceivable, unknowable), or nonexistent (e.g., imaginary, not real).

In regard to the five-factor God representation scale, we noted that a distinction is sometimes made between God concepts (explicit, ontological understandings) and God images (implicit, affect-laden, experiential understandings; Davis, Moriarty, & Mauch, 2013; Zahl & Gibson, 2012). Because we do not empirically test this distinction in the present research, and because the relational spirituality approach assumes that people draw on both organized religion and personal experience in relating to God, we refer to the five proposed factors using the broader, overarching term "God representations."

Study 1: Interviews With Jews Regarding God Representations

The data presented in Study 1 were excerpted from a larger ethnographic study of prayer and healing in non-Orthodox Judaism. The study was conducted in Tucson, Arizona between 2012 and 2014. Research methods for this project included open-ended interviews, group discussions, and 2 years of participant observation in synagogue life and Jewish communal and educational events. Participant observation, in which the researcher immerses him- or herself in the life of the studied community, is the foundation of ethnographic research. It allows for emergent observations within the naturally occurring social and cultural contexts in

which meaning is generated (Bernard, 2006; Robben & Sluka, 2007). Materials relating to Judaism, Jewish identity, healing, and prayer were also collected from rabbinic and popular books, newspapers, blogs, and online forums. This article reports primarily on the interviews. The analysis presented here also draws on perspectives gathered through participant observation and on other materials collected throughout the project.

Method

The interviews were semistructured and guided by a list of open-ended questions. Each interview lasted from 1 to 3 hr. All the interviews were conducted by one of the present authors, who is a cultural anthropologist is also a member of the Jewish community. Most interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. For some interviews, recording was not appropriate or possible; in these cases, detailed notes were taken. The transcripts and notes were then coded for common themes, using the Maxqdata qualitative analysis software.

We implemented a grounded theory approach, in which the researcher engages in an iterative process, analyzing the data using both a priori and emergent codes (Bernard, 2006). This type of open coding is particularly useful when the concepts and relationships that characterize the phenomena under study are not known in advance and when diverse materials are analyzed as part of a single study (Strauss, 1987). Because the research sought to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings that individuals find in their Jewish practices (and to situate these meanings within the broader context of participants' lives), the interview questions were designed to catalyze wide-ranging discussion. Interviewees were encouraged to tell their stories in their own ways and to create narratives that were personally meaningful to them. Notably, the interview protocol did not ask specifically about belief in, or representations of, God.

In qualitative interviews such as these, the interview process itself may become part of the person's spiritual journey, catalyzing them to think more fully about subjects they may not previously have tried to express in words. It is important to note that, whereas the data presented here consist primarily of participants' words, nonverbal cues informed the analyses. Because beliefs about and experiences of God are often very difficult to articulate (Davis et al., 2013), in-person interviews play an important role in exploring this issue inasmuch as they allow the researcher to gather data on more than the words spoken and to go beyond a preexisting list of responses to specific questions. Pauses, hesitations, stumbles over words, repetition of words and phrases, body language, facial expressions, and tone and volume of voice all become visible and important in this setting. In recognizing the importance of nonverbal information, we draw on Nichter's (2008) call for anthropologists to pay careful attention to the meanings and experiences of the bodily sensations of both the anthropologist and the interviewee, studying them in context (see also Lock & Nichter, 2002).

Participants. Thirty-five in-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted. The sample consisted of eight Jewish professionals (i.e., rabbis, cantors, chaplains; 23% of the sample) and 27 lay members of the community (77% of the sample). Thirteen of the participants were male (37%), and 22 were female (63%). Participants were recruited through local Reform and Conservative

synagogues, an ad placed in the regional Jewish newspaper, and a support group for Jewish women with cancer, and by asking for referrals from rabbis and other study participants. To allow participants' own interpretations and experiences of Jewish prayers and Jewish life to emerge, we did not screen participants for specific religious affiliations, beliefs, or behaviors. Our goal was to understand the religious practices, beliefs, and experiences of mainstream, non-Orthodox, American Jews, which is a population that makes up close to 80% of American Jewry (Pew Research Center, Religion & Public Life, 2013), and which has been understudied anthropologically. Therefore, the sample did not include Orthodox Jews.

Participants ranged in age from 40 to 85 years old, with the majority being in their 50s and 60s. Most participants were retired or semiretired, primarily from careers in business, health care, or community social services. All participants were U.S. citizens. Many participants were affiliated with Jewish denominations (Reform and Conservative). However, the sample also included Jews whose connections to Judaism and the Jewish community were primarily social and/or cultural, those with limited communal affiliations, and those who defined themselves as "Jewish but not religious." (These categories are not mutually exclusive and often overlapped.) According to the Tucson Jewish Community Study (Sheskin, 2003), Tucson's Jewish population self-identifies as 2% Orthodox, 21% Conservative, 32% Reform, and 44% "Just Jewish" (i.e., indicating no denominational affiliation). Initially, we attempted to mirror these proportions in the sample. However, we found that these categories did not fit the narratives people told about their Jewish identities. Many people reported having multiple affiliations and combining practices that might link them with several of these denominations.

Results

Twenty-nine of the 35 interviewees (83%) spontaneously brought up God and wanted to discuss their experiences and representations of God. In analyzing the interview transcripts, we sought to identify common themes. In the sections that follow, the perceptions of God—among only the subsample of 29 participants who mentioned God—are discussed more fully. The interview excerpts that are included here are representative of similar ideas expressed in multiple interviews.

Uncertainty of beliefs about God. During the interviews, when discussing God, many revealed hesitation in their eyes, and their speech was sometimes interrupted by long pauses. At other times, their voices were lowered. It is impossible to know for certain what these pauses mean, but they seemed to reflect uncertainty. This uncertainty may be in regard to what they believe or what they think they should believe; alternatively, it may reflect the interview context and participants' uncertainty about whether it would be acceptable either to talk about religious belief or to admit disbelief. Often participants' beliefs were not entirely consistent or coherent. The interview process, which forced people to put their thoughts and experiences about God into words, drew attention to these inconsistencies and sometimes made people feel uncomfortable or caused them to realize that they have never tried to reconcile their varied thoughts into a coherent God representation.

For example, midway through explaining that God was more present at synagogue, Sarah paused, her expression confused, as

she realized that she was not sure that she herself completely agreed with what she was saying.¹ Her words came more slowly as she tried to make her divergent thoughts come together:

I suppose the sort of general statement of putting it out there, a little more present to God in the place of worship, where, you know, where God's supposed to be listening . . . But . . . I cannot get too far along that path, but—well, you know, whether or not God is, God listens, God acts . . . I do not think God acts. I think God is, period. and I think however sentient God might be, I do not, and never have, viewed God as a, as an . . . active actor in the fate of the universe.

For other people in this sample, their uncertainty about God reflected theological concerns as they tried to reconcile what they think they should believe with the realities of the world around them. Often this “should” is a benevolent, loving, personal God. Eva, a member of a Conservative synagogue, who had grown up in an Orthodox environment, explained that she had spent much of her life trying to figure out what she believed about God. Now in her early 80s, she has come to a comfortable understanding of God, yet she also continues to struggle with other perceptions of God that permeate her thinking:

I have a hard time thinking about God. I look around, and I see all the awfulness in the world—illnesses, earthquakes, wars, tsunamis . . . and I think, if there are standards of morality, then God isn't keeping them. God is doing awful things. If there are standards of morality, then I cannot accept that we would hold God to a lower standard than we hold other humans. I've thought about this a lot, and what I've finally come to is that the universe is God. I used to think, God is the universe, but then I realized, no, the universe is God. It's different. I think there's a universal essence in each of us, and the things we do can elevate it or bring it down.

Other interviewees expressed similar concerns, but the awfulness that they saw around them was more focused on their immediate social circles. Rachel is in her mid-60s and is a member of a small Reform congregation. She says her friends describe her as religious, because she is active in Jewish communal organizations, goes to synagogue, and celebrates all of the holidays at home. To her, however, these activities alone do not make her religious, although they do define her Judaism; rather, for her, it is her belief that differentiates the religious from the cultural aspects of her Judaism. She explained that “it's more than just latkes and Seders . . . I do think that there's a God, there's God within us. And through Judaism, we get closer to God and make a better world.”² Yet she, too, struggled to reconcile her Jewish identity and her belief in God as well as in the connection of God to Judaism, in light of the difficult situations she sees around her. She commented, as follows:

I feel very often so helpless in the face of sickness like my friend whose son has cancer . . . he's a really good guy with a lovely wife and a great family and I . . . give me a break God, this is crap, you know, or my friend who's just so ill, it's like, just . . . the world doesn't make sense and so it feels like in the face of . . . it's like, why do bad things happen to good people . . .

Representations of God. People in the study had a variety of representations of God. Here we describe the most commonly expressed: God as a source of strength, God as the universe or

energy, and God as unknowable. These perspectives were not mutually exclusive; many people integrated elements of more than one of these, as well as others not described in the present article.

God as a source of strength. Some interviewees saw God as a source of strength and comfort during difficult times. Because the interviews focused on illness and loss, this perspective was common. For instance, at the time of the interview, Ruth's husband had been sick for several years. Ruth recognized that other people might feel angry about what was happening or ask God to remedy the situation. The experience had led her to a different conclusion:

Some people would wonder: Where has God been while my husband's been sick? Like where was God when [my husband] got cancer? And so a logical question would be, this is an unfair thing, God abandoned him. I mean that would be logical, you know the Holocaust happened, where was God, he abandoned us. It's a logical conclusion to a certain degree but that's not where I went. Certainly I felt like God is still with us. I felt like life is life and God will help us through this somehow, God will give us strength to get through this and I was not really necessarily thinking that God is going to heal him.

Ruth's comments could be interpreted as implying that God is an actor involved in human affairs, sometimes helping in concrete ways and sometimes providing emotional support such as strength. However, many Jews may not go so far as to say that God is a personal being engaged in human affairs. Several people struggled with what it meant to seek help from God given this contradiction, as we discuss further ahead.

God as mystical, energy, or the universe. Many study participants experienced God as an “energy” that is present in the world. These people were more likely to describe an experience that seemed beyond the ordinary, which they identified as God. Ella, who was not affiliated with any synagogue or Jewish communal organization and who identified herself as “Just Jewish,” said that she prays to God every day. “I'm very close to God. But God is me, God is you. It's not a belief in God. I talk to a vibrating energy.”

Some people experienced this in nature; others in relationships with other people. For some, it was triggered by a ritual or prayer:

For me, God is an energy in the world, a force, creativity, love. Sometimes, services and prayers feel contrived to me, but at some places I've experienced a powerful feeling that is not contrived, but that connects me to this energy, to God.

For many, experiencing God involved a feeling of connecting to something beyond themselves. Words that were commonly used to describe this understanding of God were “universal,” “energy,” “love,” “essence,” and “force.” For example, Noah, a member of a Reform congregation, described how surprised he was when a rabbi's prayer for him in the hospital led to a transcendent moment:

I felt . . . I felt like God was with us, I felt the presence of something larger than myself and maybe that's how I describe God. I see God in

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² Latkes are the potato pancakes eaten by Ashkenazi Jews at Hanukkah. Seder is the ritualized meal that marks Passover. Both eating latkes and participating in a Seder are home-based traditions that are often practiced even by cultural Jews who undertake little else in terms of Jewish rituals during the year.

nature and in the power of connections between people and the power of—as hokey as this sounds—the power of love and what that can do for . . . how we can help each other that way and I felt that way during that moment and it was bigger than the sum of all its parts. I think that’s why I’m having trouble describing it and to me that is God, it’s something that’s bigger than the sum of all the parts. That’s a force in . . . not necessarily a force in my life but an opportunity in my life to notice and draw from.

In an increasingly global and pluralistic world, people are exposed to a myriad of social influences, a number of which are not Jewish. Many people’s spiritual beliefs and practices synthesize teachings from a variety of traditions (Beyer, 2007; Halman & Pettersson, 2003; Johnson & Cohen, 2013; Johnson, Hill, & Cohen, 2011). Ella—quoted in preceding text in which she discussed prayer as vibrating energy—explained that her understanding of God incorporates a lifetime of experiences, including memories of her Orthodox Jewish grandmother, learning Reiki, astrology, energy healing, and volunteering at a hospice.

Stories such as this were especially common among members of the baby boomer generation (the generation of seekers described by Roof, 1999). Jeffrey is in his early 60s, sometimes attends services at a Reform synagogue, and has a daily yoga and meditation practice at home. He described the connection between his beliefs and practices as follows: “My own theology is more what I call ‘Eastern Jewish.’ I believe that there is a universal power source that we can access. Prayer, meditation, yoga, all of these can open us up to this power.”

Similarly, Sarah (quoted previously), who is an active member and often leads services at the same synagogue, weaved together her experience with mindfulness meditation and her experience reading from the Torah scroll. It is only by combining these two distinct cultural references that she could explain her perception of God:

I think that’s what connecting to God means for me, mind-body-spirit . . . in some indefinable way . . . When you practice mindfulness, you’re cultivating an emptiness and a nonemptiness. You are cultivating a space to just be. And that space, in a way, is also God. For me, that happens in the act of chanting Torah, I have this enormous instantaneous connection to God. I get up there in front of the Torah and all of a sudden nobody is there but me and the Torah and God. It’s like I’m in a bubble.

God as unknowable or ineffable. Many interviewees expressed that God is unknowable. For some, this meant that the transcendence of God can never be fully understood, and for others it indicated that God’s ways cannot be comprehended by humans. These similar, yet different, perspectives are each embedded in Jewish texts and traditions (e.g., in Exodus 33, when Moses asks to see God, he is told that no one can see God’s face and live). However, few people in this sample knew, or referenced, Biblical texts. Jerry, a member of both Reform and Conservative synagogues, expressed this perspective well when he stated the following:

I know I believe in God, and I know I believe in prayer. But beyond that, I have no idea. I do not know whether God is an old man with a beard, whether it’s the spirit that’s everywhere, whether it’s something else. I cannot tell you. The best word I’ve ever found to describe it is “ineffable.” God is unknowable, it’s a mystery. But I know I believe in God.

Jonathan, a convert to Judaism, attempted to explain the differences he had seen between Jewish and Christian perceptions of God. Despite his years of study of Jewish texts, he struggled to find the right words for what he wanted to say:

In Jewish prayer, there’s the fact that there is mystery. The fact that there is some connection to the transcendent. It’s brief and . . . what’s the word I’m looking for? . . . amorphous. . . . What I learned from Heschel, is being in awe, and being in that place of mystery and not understanding, gives you an idea of the transcending, it gives you an idea of the vastness of God and the finiteness of humans . . . having that mystery gives a kind of insight into the transcendent and insight into the bigness and the mystery and the ambiguity. And I think . . . having the ambiguity is important for faith because faith is not about concrete things.

Others experienced the unknown as less philosophical and more practical. They felt that God directs the world, but they could never understand why things happened as they did. This perspective was often expressed in the face of an illness or tragedy of which the person could make no sense. It frequently accompanied the recognition that we have little control over much of what happens in the world. Joshua, a member of a conservative synagogue, cited the High Holiday liturgy and stated simply,

[i]t’s in God’s hands, you know “who will die by fire, who will die by water”. . . you know. It’s in God’s hands. I do not know what’s going to come; I can just do my best to live day by day.³

Relation between belief and practice. As discussed in preceding text, the relation between belief and practice in Judaism is a complex one (see, e.g., Buckser, 1999; Cohen & Katz, 2012), and belief is not a precondition for either participation in Jewish ritual practice or for Jewish identity (Cohen et al., 2005; Silverman, 2014a). Jonathan provided an excellent commentary on the lay understanding of this relationship:

I have a friend who’s very secular and he says that as long as it’s the Jewish God that you do not believe in, you’re still Jewish. And I like that attitude, that you’re a Jew as long as you’re a Jew. If you believe in God or if you do not. But it has to be the Jewish God that you do not believe in. In Judaism, it’s the deed before the creed. I know Jewish atheists who have been to synagogue every day, for every week of the last 50 years.

Although it is unclear what he means by the “Jewish God,” Jonathan accurately points out that some Jews practice Judaism despite their lack of religious belief. Many people in this study commented that they participated in certain rituals and traditions because “it’s what Jews do,” or because their participation provided them with a sense of community.

Several people struggled with what it meant to ask something of God and therefore to acknowledge that they saw God as acting in the world but also beyond human action, as a partner in conversation but also as transcending human interaction, and as personal but also unknowable. For example, Eli, an active member of a

³ This quote comes from the “*Unetaneh tokef*” prayer, recited in the synagogue on the Jewish High Holidays. The prayer begins, “On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who will live and who will die? Who in their time and who not in their time? Who by fire and who by water?” It goes on to list an extensive list of possibilities of ways one might die by divine decree in the coming year.

Conservative synagogue, stumbled as he tried to explain the relationship between prayer and his understanding of God:

I think the way that we use prayer, in the Jewish way is a very . . . there's a lot of ingenuity . . . because we try . . . it's almost like we make an argument with God, or we set God up, so but God forbid that we set up God . . . But you know, we set it up in a certain way where we . . . we're trying to . . . as if you could force God into having to do what we want God to do . . . you're the one here reminding God . . . as if God could be reminded about anything . . . It's not reminding, it's bringing it to the front burner that God blessed our ancestors. God had this incredible relationship with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, and you know Moses, David, and Solomon. Now we're asking that you—you blessed our ancestors—now please do this because these are our ancestors. We're connecting ourselves to these important historic figures.

Belief is dynamic. Finally, it is important to note that belief in God is not necessarily static. Beliefs about God continue to evolve, influenced by personal and communal experiences, social context, and stages of life. Eva noted the following:

Every time I want to say something, I think of a contradictory thing that I also think is true . . . maybe other people believe in some things more than I do, but we're not set in stone, what we believe changes all the time. . . . I am and I'm not. What you believe on Tuesday might not be true on Wednesday.

For some liberal Jews, belief was present at some times and not at others. Lisa spoke of these fluctuations as she tried to explain why she found the *Mi Sheberach*, a Jewish prayer for healing, so powerful at some times but not at others.⁴

I have a very strong belief in the connectedness of the universe. It's this universal karmic energy. And when I say someone's name for the *Mi Sheberach*, I feel like I'm connecting them to that energy. . . . But when I'm home sick, on a Friday or Saturday morning at the time when the *Mi Sheberach* would be said [for me], do I feel this surge of energy coming my way? Not at all. Do I even think about it? No.

At times, the presence or absence of belief depended on who one was with (see Davis et al., 2013). One interviewee, explaining how a friend had taught him a spiritual practice that proved transformative, said simply “[s]ome people find God in other people, not in a burning bush.” Several people told stories of the influence of their more Orthodox friends, whose belief in an omnipresent, personal, God was more certain than their own:

What God is to us changes over time, over people's lives, depending on what's going on, where we are, who we're with, what those people believe. Years ago, I spent a summer at a Hebrew ulpan⁵ in Israel, and everyone there had a strong belief in God, and so I started to believe too. Things would happen all around us, just little things, like we were wandering all over town looking for the post office, and then someone finally said, “God, help us find the post office,” and then we turned around and it was there. But after that summer, I didn't really believe that way again. It's about openness, about being open to what God is trying to tell you, about getting out of the way and letting things happen.

Discussion

Given previous studies of Jewish religious practice (Buckser, 2011; Pew Research Center, Religion & Public Life, 2013; Prell, 1989), we anticipated that discussions of God would be infrequent

in these qualitative interviews, and that study participants would express disbelief in God or uncertainty about God. In fact, many participants had experienced the presence of God and spontaneously brought that up in conversation, although they had many different ways of expressing, explaining, and understanding this presence. As expected, expressions of uncertainty and descriptions of God as unknowable and indescribable were common.

It is clear from this qualitative study that Jewish representations of God are complex and that belief versus disbelief may not be the right framework for capturing this complexity. Many people have difficulty articulating their thoughts about God, and their views are dynamic and even sometimes inconsistent and contradictory. Similar to what Davis et al. (2013) described, participants moved back and forth between representational categories (sometimes within the same interview), often depending on the specific context or what they were describing. Contexts can include the interview setting, social and cultural environments, change over the life span, and the other topics being discussed. In this study, the contexts were discussions of illness and loss or times when people were often likely to turn to spiritual and religious beliefs for solace, strength, and comfort.

Furthermore, Jewish belief develops in a complex relationship to Jewish ritual and communal practice. Jewish practices serve many purposes, beyond expression of belief. Jewish prayer, for example, can create feelings of connection, comfort, and strength, and may catalyze emotional shifts and spiritual transcendence (Cohen, 2002; Cohen & Hill, 2007). It connects people to their communities and to their history in an ongoing dialogical and relational process (Silverman, 2014b).

Struggling with God is also a quintessential Jewish activity. Before Jews were called Jews, they were known (and sometimes still are) as the “people of Israel.” *Israel* literally means “one who struggles with God.” Israel is the new name given to Jacob after he wrestled with an angel (Genesis 32:22–32). Although none of our interviewees referred to this traditional interpretation when they described their own theological searches, our findings certainly reaffirm this teaching.

Study 2: Survey of U.S. Jews' God Representations

The results of Study 1 provide rich insights into the Jewish beliefs about and experiences of God. In Study 2, we sought to survey the God representations of Jews across the United States, using a quantitative measure to assess the extent to which Jews view God as authoritarian, benevolent, mystical, ineffable, or nonexistent. A secondary goal of Study 2 was to contrast Jewish God representations with those of other monotheistic religious groups and with those of atheists, agnostics, and people who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious.

Method

Via the Amazon.com Mechanical Turk website, participants were recruited to complete one of five surveys on beliefs and

⁴The *Mi Sheberach* is a Jewish prayer for healing that is recited on Shabbat mornings as part of the weekly Torah reading in synagogue. It calls on “the one who blessed our ancestors” to bless those in need of healing with “a complete healing, of body and of spirit.”

⁵This is an intensive Hebrew language study.

social attitudes. The total sample consisted of 570 participants (290 males [51%], 280 females [49%]). The average age was 33.76 years ($SD = 11.41$). Participants were 412 European American (72%), 43 Black (8%), 30 Hispanic (5%), 44 Asian or Asian American (8%), 21 Middle Eastern (4%), and 19 “Other” or “Multiple Ethnicity” (3%). All participants were located in the United States, and we used a quota system to limit the number from each of seven religious groups: atheist ($n = 77$ [14%]), agnostic ($n = 100$ [18%]), Catholic Christian ($n = 77$ [14%]), non-Catholic Christian ($n = 103$ [18%]), Muslim ($n = 70$ [12%]), Jewish ($n = 72$ [13%]), and spiritual but not religious (SBNR; $n = 71$ [12%]).

Data regarding Jewish denomination were collected from a small subset ($n = 26$) of the Jewish participants. Of these participants, 9 reported being Reform (35%), 7 Nondenominational (27%), 7 Conservative (27%), 2 Other (8%), and 1 Orthodox (4%). These frequencies are reasonably consistent with the results of a recent national survey showing that 35% of Jews in the United States are Reform, 30% are Nondenominational, 18% are Conservative, 10% are Orthodox, and 6% identify as Other Jewish Denomination (Pew Research Center, Religion & Public Life, 2013).

Materials and procedure. The online survey consisted of a number of general questionnaires not reported here (e.g., values, political attitudes, volunteer experience, personality), followed by the God representation measures of interest in the present research.

God representations. We assessed God representations on a 36-item scale, with items presented in random order across participants. The 18 items assessing authoritarian and benevolent God representations were from Johnson et al. (2015). Additionally, we generated three new measures of other aspects of God representations, which are mystical, ineffable, and nonexistent. Of the five subscales, the Ineffable subscale was specifically designed to assess uncertainty among agnostics and Jews. The Mystical subscale was developed in other research (not reported here) to reflect the beliefs of individuals who are SBNR. In generating items for the three new measures, we used adjectives that were consistent with (a) the language in the qualitative interviews in Study 1 (e.g., “energy”), (b) the philosophies of Maimonides (e.g., “incomprehensible”), (c) reports of mystical or spiritual experiences that are common across religious traditions (e.g., “mystical”; see James, 1902/2002), or (d) language used on spirituality websites (e.g., “consciousness”).

Participants were instructed as follows:

There are many ways of thinking about God, a Higher Power, or a divine Life Force, but some of God’s traits seem more relevant to us than others. Using a wide range of the scale below, please rate how well each word describes God—based on your own personal experience and beliefs (as opposed to what you ‘should’ believe or what is theologically or philosophically correct).

Participants then rated the extent to which they agree that each of the adjectives describes God, using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). (See Table 1 for correlations.)

Authoritarian God. Items for the Authoritarian God (AGod) scale were as follows: “God is . . . Wrathful, Punishing, Angry, Strict, Stern, Judging, Commanding, Restricting, and Controlling” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .94$).

Benevolent God. Items for the Benevolent God (BGod) scale were as follows: “God is . . . Caring, Forgiving, Accepting, Compassionate, Gracious, Tolerant, Helping, Generous, Merciful” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .97$).

Mystical God. Items for the Mystical God (MGod) scale were as follows: “God is . . . Mystical, Nature, Energy, Cosmic, Consciousness, Om, Universe, and Oceanic” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$).

Ineffable God. Items for the Ineffable God (IGod) scale were as follows: “God is . . . Unknowable, Unimaginable, Inconceivable, Incomprehensible, Unknown, and Hidden” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$).

No God. We assessed disbelief in God (NoGod) using four items: “God is . . . Non-existent, Not Real, Imaginary, and Absent” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .92$).

We had a number of predictions regarding differences between Jews and other religious groups in terms of scores on the five God representations subscales. First, we expected Jews to be more likely than atheists to believe in God. Second, we expected agnostics and Jews to have similar scores for the Ineffable subscale, because individuals in both groups may be uncertain about the nature of God or think of God as unknowable or incomprehensible. Third, partly because Jesus Christ is central in Christian theology, we expected Christians to be more likely than Jews to represent God as a benevolent personal being (see also Johnson et al., 2015). Fourth, we expected SBNRs, on average, to be more likely than Jews to represent God as Mystical. We did not have a clear

Table 1
Correlations Between God Representations and Godviews in Study 2

Variable	Authoritarian God	Benevolent God	Mystical God	Ineffable God	No God
God representations					
Authoritarian God	—				
Benevolent God	.00	—			
Mystical God	.09	.44**	—		
Ineffable God	.24**	-.30**	.22**	—	
No God	.16**	-.64**	-.23**	.52**	—
Godviews					
Personal God	.16**	.56**	.13**	-.35**	-.58**
Cosmic force	-.17**	.08	.46**	.15**	-.09
No view	.02	-.46**	-.06	.56**	.60**
God does not exist	.00	-.60**	-.26**	.36**	.79**

Note. $N = 421$. Atheist religious group is excluded.
** $p \leq .001$.

prediction regarding Muslim versus Jewish God representations. On the one hand, like Jews, most Muslims see it as a great sin to create a material representation of God and believe that God is beyond understanding (Qur'an 50:16). Thus, Muslims and Jews may be equally likely to represent God as ineffable. On the other hand, there is some evidence that Muslims are more likely than Jews to view God as a personal being (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008)—perhaps as both benevolent (e.g., compassionate and merciful) and authoritarian (e.g., judge).

Godview. To assess the external validity of our God representation subscales, we adapted the multiple-choice question from the General Social Survey, in which various God representations are assessed and labeled as “Godviews” (Association of Religion Data Archives, 2015). In a U.S. national survey of the general public, 71.79% responded that they viewed God as a personal being, 14.52% viewed God as something like a cosmic force, 7.42% responded having no view of God, and 3.74% responded they did not believe in God (2.53% failed to respond).

In the present research, we asked a subset of the participants ($n = 421$ [74%]) to rate the extent to which they agreed with each of the four Godview choices, using a 7-point scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): (a) God is a personal being, (b) God is a cosmic force, (c) “I have no view about God,” and (d) God does not exist. As an indicator of the validity of our new measures, we expected to find that AGod and BGod are associated with the view that God is a personal being, MGod is associated with a view of God as a cosmic force, IGod is associated with no view of God, and NoGod is associated with the view that God does not exist.

Results

Our data analysis consisted of three steps. First, we conducted a principle components analysis of the five proposed God representations and examined the correlations between God representations and Godviews. Second, we examined both God representations

and Godviews in our Jewish sample. Finally, we contrasted Jewish God representations with other religious groups.

God representations and Godview. The scores for the 36 items of the God representations scale for the full sample were subjected to principal components analysis by using a direct oblimin rotation. As expected, we found five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, explaining 32.17% (BGod), 20.11% (AGod), 10.91% (IGod), 4.64% (MGod), and 3.36% (NoGod) of the variance, respectively. All five factors showed strong factor loadings (ranging from .41 [“Hidden” on the IGod scale] to .93, [“Forgiving” on the BGod scale]), with all variables loading substantially on the intended factor.

Next, we examined the correlations between each of the five dimensions of God representations and, as a test of the validity of our new measures, the correlations between the five God representations and the various Godviews from the General Social Survey, as discussed in preceding text. As expected, AGod and BGod were associated with a view of God as a personal being. MGod was associated with a view of God as a cosmic force. IGod was associated with no view of God, and NoGod was associated with the belief that God does not exist. The results of these analyses supported the use of the five dimensions of the God representations scale (AGod, BGod, MGod, IGod, and NoGod), when it comes to examining the complexity of Jewish beliefs about God.

Jewish God representations. Figure 1 depicts the mean scores for each of the five God representations scales, for the 72 Jews in Study 2. Comparing only the Jewish responses across each of the five subscales, we found that Jews, on average, had the lowest scores on NoGod ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.74$, skew = 0.28), suggesting that the Jewish participants in this study were more likely to believe than not believe. Jewish participants had the highest scores on BGod ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.59$, skew = -0.69), MGod ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.24$, skew = -0.52), and IGod ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.51$, skew = -0.11). The mean score for AGod was $M = 3.44$ ($SD = 0.06$, skew = -0.21).

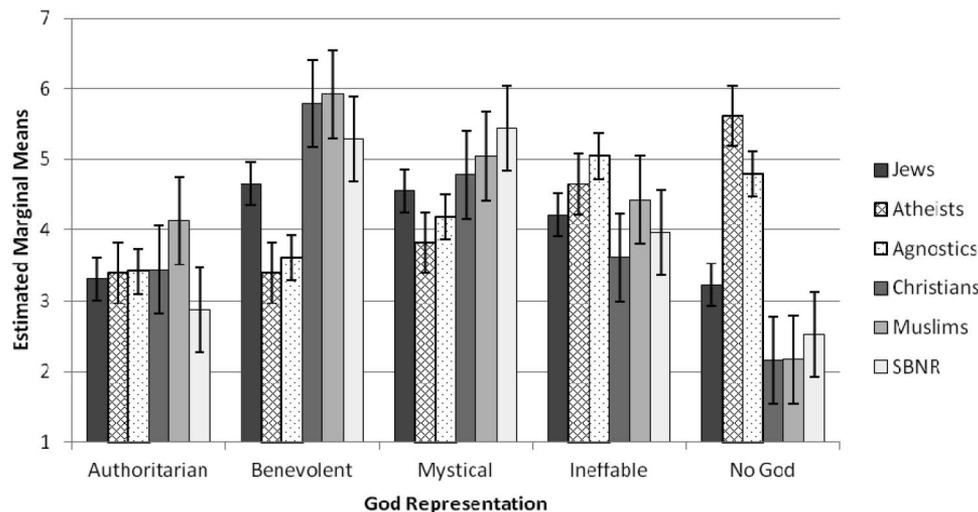


Figure 1. Estimated marginal means of God representations by religious group. SBNR = spiritual but not religious. Error bars represent standard errors.

Paired sample *t* tests (comparing the scores for Jews only) for all possible pairs of God representations showed that the scores for BGod, $t(71) = 6.24, p < .001$; MGod, $t(71) = 7.02, p < .001$; and IGod $t(71) = 4.06, p < .001$, were all significantly higher than the scores for AGod ($M = 3.31, SD = 1.36$). Scores for BGod $t(71) = 4.00, p < .001$; MGod $t(71) = 4.71, p < .001$; and IGod $t(71) = 5.27, p < .001$ were also significantly higher than the scores for NoGod. AGod and NoGod scores did not differ significantly ($p = .730$). Differences between BGod, MGod, and IGod were also nonsignificant, with *ps* ranging from .155 to .587. These results indicate that Jews are most likely to represent God as a benevolent being, a mystical cosmic force, or as ineffable, and they are much less likely to represent God as authoritarian or nonexistent.

Data for the Godview measure were collected from a subset of the Jewish sample ($n = 41$). As expected, an investigation of the bivariate correlations between BGod, MGod, and IGod and the three related Godviews revealed that (a) BGod was positively correlated only with viewing God as a personal being ($M = 3.80, SD = 1.94, r = .46, p = .002$); (b) MGod was positively correlated only with viewing God as a cosmic force ($M = 4.36, SD = 1.86, r = .38, p = .014$); and (c) IGod was positively correlated only with no view of God ($M = 3.71, SD = 2.08, r = .58, p < .001$). There were no significant differences between Jewish ratings of God as a personal being, cosmic force, and no view (*ps* ranged from .280 to .960).

God representations by religious group. To evaluate the extent to which Jews' beliefs about God differ from those of atheists, agnostics, and monotheists in other religious groups, we conducted a one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance. The five dependent variables were authoritarian God, benevolent God, mystical God, ineffable God, and no God (i.e., God does not exist). The independent variable was religious group.

Comparing religious groups, there was a statistically significant difference for the set of God representations, $F(25, 2081) = 22.84, p < .001$, Wilks' $\lambda = .406$, partial eta squared = .16. There also were statistically significant differences for each of the God representations when considered separately (with all *ps* $\leq .001$). The means for each God representation, by religious group, are graphically depicted in Figure 1.

Because our primary research focus was on differences between the God representations of Jews and other religious groups, we limited our follow up tests to simple contrasts comparing Jews respectively with atheists, agnostics, Christians, Muslims, and SBNRs, for each of the five God representations. When contrasted with atheists, Jews were significantly more likely to represent God as benevolent and mystical and less likely to disbelieve (all *ps* $< .001$). When contrasted with agnostics, Jews were significantly more likely to represent God as benevolent but less likely to represent God as ineffable and less likely to disbelieve (all *ps* $< .001$). When contrasted with Christians, Jews were significantly less likely to represent God as benevolent but more likely to represent God as ineffable and to disbelieve (all *ps* $< .004$). When contrasted with Muslims, Jews were significantly less likely to represent God as authoritarian ($p < .001$), benevolent ($p < .001$), or mystical ($p = .005$) and significantly more likely to disbelieve ($p < .001$). Finally, when contrasted with SBNRs, Jews were significantly less likely to represent God as benevolent ($p = .006$) or mystical ($p < .001$) and significantly more likely to disbelieve ($p = .002$).

Discussion

In a recent poll of U.S. Jews, nearly two thirds reported seeing no conflict between being Jewish and disbelieving in God, which may indicate that beliefs are generally unimportant or less important than other factors in Jewish religiosity (see also Morris, 2005). Nevertheless, the Jews in Study 2 were significantly more likely to believe than to disbelieve. These results are generally in accord with national surveys showing that 72% of Jews do believe in God (Pew Research Center, Religion & Public Life, 2013).

Recent studies have also shown that Jews often view God as distant and uninvolved in human affairs (Froese & Bader, 2010). Thus, we had predicted that Jews would have no clear view of God and that they would represent God as ineffable (i.e., incomprehensible and unknowable). However, although the Jews surveyed in the present research often represented God as ineffable, they were just as likely to represent God as a benevolent personal being or as a mystical cosmic force. Some people may point to the Hebrew Bible as portraying God as authoritarian, vengeful, and full of wrath. However, and in contrast to our predictions, the Jews in the present research generally did not characterize God in this way.

In comparison with other religious groups, Jews were less likely than were Muslims to represent God as authoritarian, less likely than Muslims or Christians to represent God as benevolent, less likely than SBNRs to represent God as mystical, and less likely than agnostics to represent God as ineffable. However, when compared with both agnostics and atheists, the Jews in the present research were also significantly less likely to disbelieve.

In sum, the results of Study 2 suggest that Jews, on average, believe in God and they represent God in at least three distinct ways: as a benevolent personal being, as a mystical cosmic force, but also as unknowable and incomprehensible. Yet they do not hold any of these beliefs as strongly as do Muslims, Christians, SBNRs, or Agnostics, respectively.

General Discussion

This mixed-methods research paints a complex picture of a religious population generally in agreement that God may exist but with beliefs about God which are quite varied. Many participants in Study 1 spontaneously explained their experiences and perceptions about God. Some felt that belief in God was irrelevant yet also felt compelled to explain their disbelief. Others spoke of God easily and with certainty. They have an explicit belief and a clear God representation, although they experienced God in many different ways—as a universal energy, as a relationship with a personal being, or as a metaphor. Others have experiences that they have difficulty articulating in words, and still others think they should think or believe something, but do not. All of these experiences are characteristically Jewish ways of believing in and talking about God and were supported by survey data in Study 2.

One outcome we did not expect was that Jews would think of God as a universal energy or cosmic force. Representing nature as an extension of the Divine is embedded in Jewish tradition and was elaborated upon by influential Jewish philosopher, Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) (who, we acknowledge, was eventually excommunicated for his beliefs). We can speculate that many Jews are at least somewhat familiar with the view of God, often associated with the mystical, Kabbalistic tradition in Judaism but prevalent in other texts as well, as both unknowable and infinite (*Ein Sof*) and yet

revealed in all that exists in perfect unity. Additionally, religious individuals in the 21st century are exposed to a mixture of Eastern and Western philosophies and religious ideas which have impacted current religious beliefs and practices (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009) to the extent that religion and spirituality have sometimes been referred to as a bricolage (Altglass, 2014; Saroglou, 2006). This syncretic, cobbling together of varied philosophies, worldviews, and religious beliefs is not unique to modern times (see Johnson, Hill, & Cohen, 2011; Seltzer, 1980) and almost certainly has influenced the beliefs and God representations of the Jewish participants in the present research.

The use of mixed-methods research plays an important role in understanding syncretic views of God which are not easily captured in a single questionnaire with predetermined descriptors. For example, a retired rabbi who had spent many years leading congregations, and who was now working as a volunteer hospital chaplain, was very aware of the impact of both personal and communal history on representations of God. He explained that many of those he visits have a complicated reaction to his presence, and that their beliefs in the present are deeply influenced by experiences in the past:

I try to help them see that it's about our relationship to the holy, however they understand that, about the connection to something greater than yourself. When a rabbi comes into the hospital room, the rabbi represents God, or whatever you call it. . . . They're reacting not just to me, but to their bar mitzvah teacher, or the rabbi they were close to, or sometimes the opposite—the rabbi represents everything they hated. I have to get them out of that. I try to meet them wherever they are Jewishly—pious, questioning, traditional, nothing—and give them an opportunity to connect to something beyond themselves. But not at a 1st grade level, or even a college level. They tell me they do not believe in God, and I ask, which God? Tell me about that God. I probably do not believe in that God either.

The rabbi's comments underscore the dynamic nature of Jewish belief, and the challenges of studying it. He understood that beliefs evolve over the lifetime, that personal experiences and social context all influence Jewish beliefs, and that he could also play a role in that process.

Likewise, for many of the participants in Study 1, their present-day understanding of God represented a moment in an ongoing process of personal discernment, exploration and evolution. Their perspectives on God reflected and incorporated the broader contexts of shifts in American Judaism, both post-Holocaust and as immigrant generations absorbed into U.S. society, as well as personal experiences, family background, and the social and cultural environments in which they lived their adult lives. Indeed, Jews have survived persecution, exile, the Diaspora, and been under the rule of pagans, secularists, Muslims, and Christians over the ages. It may have been this (albeit implicit) strategy of deemphasizing and revising group beliefs from time to time, in order to conform to the dominant culture, that facilitated their survival—yet all the while retaining a focus on genealogy and practice as the plumb line of Jewish religiosity (see also Cohen, 1999). In this case, information gleaned from the qualitative data point to a limitation of survey data, and again demonstrates the value of mixed-methods research. Few of our existing quantitative research methods have the capacity to adequately describe, measure, and

document these multifaceted individual, communal, and historical processes.

Limitations and Future Directions

These studies, of course, have several limitations. One of the central challenges of conducting research on perceptions of God is that we are studying something that people do not usually talk about, answer questions about, or articulate verbally. Our sample sizes are relatively small, and do not allow for analysis of important criteria such as gender, age/generation, geography, denomination, level of Jewish involvement, and in what type of Jewish environment the person was raised—or whether the participant was a convert to Judaism. Furthermore, the two studies included only one Orthodox participant, and Orthodox Jews do differ from non-Orthodox Jews in the role of beliefs, such as in how beliefs relate to mental health (Rosmarin et al., 2009).

Further, beliefs about God may reflect explicit, doctrinal representations (i.e., God-concepts) or implicit, experiential representations (i.e., God-images) as defined by Davis et al. (2013) and Zahl and Gibson (2012). Although we asked participants to respond to the items in our survey based upon their personal experience rather than according to what may be theologically or philosophically true, we suspect that participants are drawing on both doctrinal and experiential representations in responding to the interviewer or to the survey items. Thus, more research is needed to ascertain the extent to which our God Representation scale may be assessing God-concepts versus God-images.

An additional challenge is that neither of the research methods we used allowed us to explore changes in perceptions of God over time, and in different contexts. In the present research, we are capturing self-reports at one moment in time, which may or may not reflect people's beliefs about, and experiences with, God at previous or future times in their lives, or in different social contexts.

Finally, other researchers may wish to investigate the links between Jewish God representations and Jewish well-being. Some people might see such questioning and wrestling with issues of theodicy as a kind of religious and spiritual struggle or as indicative of anger at God (e.g., Exline, 2013). However, we can speculate that, for many Jews, these struggles may be religiously and culturally normative and, consequently, may be less likely to be associated with anxiety, distress, or depression compared with the effects of religious struggle among Christians.

Conclusion

Research in the psychology of religion has focused mainly on whether or not an individual believes in God, where God is often conceptualized as a personal being with human-like characteristics such as social monitoring (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012; Norenzayan, 2013) or benevolence (Johnson, Li, Cohen, & Okun, 2013; Johnson, Okun, & Cohen, 2015). Indeed, the two underlying assumptions in the investigation of relational spirituality (i.e., ways of relating to the sacred) as discussed by Sandage and Shults (2007) are, first, that the individual believes in the Sacred (i.e., God) and, second, that the sacred can be related with. Inasmuch as Christian religious beliefs center on the person of Jesus Christ, on God as a heavenly Father, and on the Holy Spirit as comforter and

teacher, these basic assumptions are met. Thus, relational spirituality among Christians has become an important research topic (this issue).

Yet, as Sandage and Shults (2007) also point out, the various ways of relating to the sacred are often shaped through relations with others or within a religious community. As previous studies have shown, in the nonorthodox Jewish community, belief in God is not always a central factor in either Jewish identity (Reimer, Dueck, Neufeld, Steenwyk, & Sidesinger, 2010) or Jewish practice (Pew Research Center, Religion & Public Life, 2013). Using a mixed-methods approach, we also confirmed with members of the nonorthodox Jewish community that belief in God is a complex issue. Furthermore, our interviews and survey data indicate that Jewish beliefs about the nature of God are often unclear and in flux. For many Jews, God is sometimes represented as a benevolent being amenable to relationship; but, just as often, God is represented as an energy or cosmic force, or as ineffable, inconceivable, unfathomable, beyond knowing, and past finding out. Given the complex nature of Jewish representations of God, *believe* may not be the correct verb, and measures of belief may not be able to capture the variety of ways in which this population conceives of, and relates with, God.

We conclude that no single research method is sufficient for fully assessing and interpreting Jewish representations of God (for a more detailed discussion of advantages of such mixed-methods approaches and ways to get the most out of such multimethod work, see Davis et al., 2016). Rather, we suggest that an iterative mixed-methods approach, such as that reported here, can play an essential role in exploring the dynamic and diverse experiences of different religious traditions, practices, and beliefs. Survey data can identify patterns, and qualitative data can add depth and richness to the meanings behind these patterns. This qualitative data can then inform further quantitative studies by identifying language and concepts that may resonate more fully with a Jewish population. In sum, it may be necessary to develop new measures of religiosity in order to take into account different people's and different groups' ways of understanding (or not understanding) the nature of the Divine.

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