

Questioning Divine Absence: Interpretations of Exodus 17:7 through Contemporary Theological Discourse: Implications for Therapeutic Language

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the theological implications of divine absence and human questioning in Exodus 17:7, focusing on the interpretive frameworks provided by Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, Nahum Sarna, Shani Tzoref, and recent contributions to the theology of divine absence. The biblical episode at Massah and Meribah (Ex 17) represents a critical moment of theological crisis in Israel's wilderness experience, encapsulated in the question, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Through close examination of selected prooftexts, this study illuminates how the experience of divine absence functions not merely as a failure of faith but as a generative theological space. The analysis demonstrates how these scholarly perspectives contribute to a nuanced understanding of doubt as an inherent component of religious experience rather than its antithesis. Implications for contemporary theological discourse on divine hiddenness are considered and the use of language in the therapeutic encounter.

Keywords

Historical-Contextual, Therapeutic contexts.

Prooftexts

ויקרא שם המקום מסה ומריבה על־דבר בני ישראל ועל נסתם
את־יהוה לאמר היש יהוה בקרבנו אם־אין (פ)

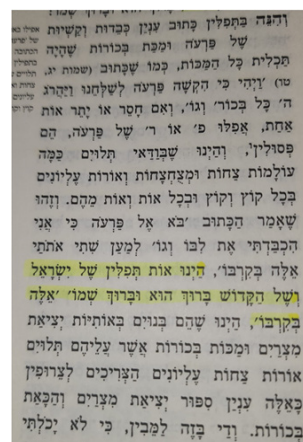
The place was named Massah* and Meribah,* because the Israelites quarreled and because they tried יהוה, saying, "Is יהוה present among us or not?"

Ex 17:7

"Rather, Rabbi Shim'on said as follows: They wanted to discern between the Ancient One—concealed of all concealed, called אין (Ayin), Nothingness—and the Short-Tempered One. Therefore it is not written *Is YHVH among us or לא (lo), not?*—corresponding to what is written: *whether they will follow My teaching or lo, not* (Exodus 16:4)—but rather, *Is YHVH among us or Ayin, Nothingness*."539

"If so, why were they punished? Well, because they caused a separation and acted by testing, as is written: *and for their testing YHVH* (Exodus 17:7). They said, 'If it is this, we will ask in one way; if it is that, we will ask in another way.' Immediately, Amalek came... (ibid., 8)."540

ZOHAR II 64b [1]



Degel machaneh Ephraim Parsha Bo

Introduction

The narrative of Exodus 17:1-7 presents a pivotal moment in

Israel's wilderness journey, culminating in Moses striking the rock at a place subsequently named "Massah and Meribah." The text reads: "And he called the name of the place Massah [testing] and Meribah [quarreling], because of the contention of the children of Israel, and because they tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" [1].

This question "Is the Lord among us or not?" emerges as one of the most direct articulations of theological doubt in the Hebrew Bible, particularly striking given its temporal proximity to numerous divine interventions including the exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea. This article examines how prominent Jewish biblical scholars, and contemporary theological voices interpret this moment of questioning and its theological implications. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg's psychoanalytic and literary methodology, Nahum Sarna's historical-contextual framework, Shani Tzoref's tripartite model of wilderness purpose, and recent theological work on divine absence provide rich resources for understanding this biblical episode beyond conventional readings that emphasize Israel's faithlessness or ingratitude. Collectively, these perspectives illuminate how the experience of divine absence generates rather than diminishes theological meaning.

Historical-Contextual Approach

Nahum Sarna's analysis of Exodus 17:7 in "Exploring Exodus" situates the episode within its broader historical and literary context [2]. Sarna emphasizes that the Israelites' questioning occurs within a recurring pattern of complaint narratives (Exodus 15:22-25, 16:1-36, 17:1-7) that each addresses a fundamental survival need: bitter water, hunger, and thirst, respectively. For Sarna, these complaints reflect not merely spiritual failings but the genuine existential anxieties of a recently liberated slave population navigating an unfamiliar and hostile environment.

Sarna writes: "The complaint about water is not to be dismissed as mere contentiousness but must be understood as arising from genuine distress... The fact that the people had experienced God's miraculous intervention at the Sea of Reeds and at Marah did not automatically dispel anxiety when confronted with a new crisis" [2]. This contextualizing move resists simplistic moral judgments on Israel's lack of faith, instead recognizing the psychological reality of traumatized individuals whose trust had been damaged by generations of enslavement.

Particularly significant is Sarna's linguistic analysis of the place names "Massah" and "Meribah." He notes that "Massah" derives from the root meaning "to test" or "to prove," while "Meribah" comes from a root meaning "to quarrel" or "to strive" [2]. This dual naming captures both dimensions of the crisis: Israel's testing of God and their quarreling with Moses. Sarna observes that the theological question "Is the Lord among us or not?" represents not necessarily a denial of God's existence but a questioning of divine presence and providence in their immediate circumstance a distinction with significant theological implications. Sarna further connects this episode to the broader theological framework of covenant. He suggests that Israel's questioning, while problematic,

reflects the reciprocal nature of the covenant relationship established at Sinai [2]. Just as God tests Israel's faithfulness, Israel tests God's faithfulness to covenant promises. While this testing exceeds appropriate boundaries, it nevertheless emerges from the dialogical structure of the covenant relationship rather than representing its complete abandonment.

Psychoanalytic Reading

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg's interpretation of Exodus 17:7 in "The Particulars of Rapture" offers a psychoanalytically informed reading that probes the deeper psychological and theological dimensions of Israel's questioning [3]. Where Sarna contextualizes Israel's doubt historically, Zornberg explores it as a universal human experience of divine absence.

Zornberg writes: "The question 'Is God in our midst or not?' (Exodus 17:7) is the essential human question, the one that defines the human being as the questioner of God's presence" [3]. This framing transforms Israel's questioning from a moral failure into an archetypal religious experience that reflects the inevitable tensions of human-divine relationship. The question becomes not an aberration but the foundational religious question.

Central to Zornberg's analysis is her concept of "the trauma of the invisible," which she develops through engagement with psychoanalytic theory [3]. For Zornberg, Israel's experience after the visible miracles of the exodus creates a paradoxical expectation: having witnessed God's dramatic interventions, the subsequent experience of divine hiddenness becomes all the more disorienting. The invisibility of God in ordinary experience creates a traumatic rupture between memory and present experience.

Zornberg writes: "The trauma of the invisible is complex: it involves not only the anxiety about water, but the memory of a God who has revealed Himself in Egypt, at the Sea, and who now seems to have abandoned His people" [3]. This psychoanalytic frame reveals how Israel's question emerges not from simple unbelief but from the cognitive dissonance between remembered divine presence and experienced divine absence.

Particularly innovative is Zornberg's interpretation of Moses striking the rock as a response to this dissonance. She suggests that Moses' action materializes the abstract question of divine presence into tangible evidence: "The rock, the most obdurate of natural phenomena, becomes the site of God's response to human questioning. The solid materiality of the rock transforms into flowing water matter itself testifies to divine presence" [3].

Zornberg further argues that the naming of the place as both Massah and Meribah preserves the tension between questioning and answer rather than resolving it fully. The dual name enshrines the questioning itself as part of Israel's identity and religious heritage: "The question 'Is God in our midst or not?' remains inscribed in the landscape and in Israel's consciousness, not as a moment of failure but as an essential dimension of Israel's relationship with God" [3-6].

This analytic approach emphasizes that the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" is not a rejection of faith but it's essential expression. The question functions not as a failure to be overcome but as a generative space where authentic religious identity emerges. As articulated in this framework: "Divine absence creates the necessary space for human theological agency not replacing God but participating in the divine-human relationship through active interpretation rather than passive reception" [7]. Ungar's detailed analysis of the Massah and Meribah episode specifically demonstrates how "the Israelites' questioning at Massah and Meribah established a paradigm for constructive theological questioning that continues to generate meaning across Jewish interpretive traditions" [8,9]. This contemporary discourse moves beyond viewing divine absence as a theological problem to be solved and instead explores its constructive dimensions in religious experience.

In my "The Absent Divine: Struggling to Make Sense of God in a World Without His Presence" [7] I suggest that divine absence should not be understood primarily as divine withdrawal or human faithlessness but rather as a necessary condition for authentic religious subjectivity. Just as the Israelites could not fully conceptualize their relationship with God until they experienced the tension between divine presence and absence, contemporary religious subjects develop authentic faith precisely through navigating moments when God seems absent. This perspective complements Zornberg's psychoanalytic reading by exploring how divine absence functions within religious communities rather than merely within individual psychology. It extends Sarna's historical-contextual approach by examining how the dynamics observed in Exodus 17:7 continue to operate in contemporary religious experience. And it enhances Tzoref's tripartite framework by exploring how the punitive, examinational, and educational aspects of divine absence manifest in contemporary theological responses. Ungar's specific analysis of how the Massah and Meribah narrative has been reinterpreted across Jewish interpretive traditions demonstrates that "the theological potency of this questioning moment lies precisely in its resistance to definitive resolution" [9].

Divine Purpose

Shani Tzoref's work on the theological purpose of wilderness wandering provides an additional interpretive framework for understanding the Massah and Meribah episode [6]. In "Biblical Theodicy & Why God Made Israel Wander in the Wilderness," Tzoref identifies three distinct yet complementary explanations for the wilderness experience presented within the biblical text:

Punishment: As articulated in Numbers 14:33, the wilderness wandering functions as "suffering for your faithlessness" in response to the sin of the spies.

Examination: Deuteronomy 8:2 frames the wilderness experience as a test "that He might test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts."

Education: Deuteronomy 8:16 and 29:4 present the wilderness

hardships as pedagogical, "in order to test you by hardships only to benefit you in the end" and "that you might know that I the LORD am your God."

This tripartite framework illuminates new dimensions of the Massah and Meribah episode. The question "Is the Lord among us or not?" can be understood through each of these lenses: as an expression of faithlessness deserving punishment, as a moment of examination revealing the state of Israel's hearts, and as an opportunity for divine pedagogy demonstrating God's providential care.

Tzoref's framework is particularly valuable for understanding the narrative's resolution. The provision of water from the rock fulfills all three purposes simultaneously: it comes with punitive naming (Massah/testing and Meribah/contention), it reveals the state of Israel's trust, and it educates them about divine providence [6]. This multivalent understanding resists reductive interpretations that focus exclusively on Israel's failure or God's response. Moreover, Tzoref's analysis suggests that the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" serves a necessary theological function within Israel's wilderness experience. Rather than representing a simple failure, it creates the conditions for divine revelation, examination, and instruction. The questioning itself becomes an essential component of Israel's formation as a covenant people [6].

Žižek's Atheistic Approach

While the interpretations of Exodus 17:7 examined thus far operate within theistic frameworks that presuppose God's ultimate existence despite experiences of divine absence, Slavoj Žižek's atheistic approach offers a provocative counterpoint that nevertheless converges with these readings in surprising ways. Žižek's philosophical engagement with theology, particularly in works like "The Fragile Absolute," "The Puppet and the Dwarf," and "God in Pain" [10-14], provides a framework for understanding divine absence that paradoxically resonates with theological interpretations while operating from explicitly atheistic premises. For Žižek, the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" takes on radical significance not as a momentary doubt within an otherwise faithful relationship but as the foundational recognition that structures authentic religious subjectivity. Žižek's reading of Christianity, particularly through his Hegelian-Lacanian lens, focuses on the moment of Christ's abandonment on the cross ("My God, why have you forsaken me?") as revealing the truth of divine absence rather than merely a temporary experience of it. Several points of convergence and divergence emerge when comparing Žižek's atheistic approach with the theological interpretations discussed previously. Like Zornberg and Ungar, Žižek views divine absence as constitutive of religious subjectivity rather than opposed to it. However, where theological interpretations frame absence as a mode of divine presence, Žižek argues that "God himself is the ultimate catastrophe: 'God' is the name for a radical annihilation of God in self-relating negativity" [12]. Paradoxically, this atheistic formulation converges with theological readings in recognizing absence as generative rather than merely negative.

Žižek emphasizes the productive dimension of questioning rather than seeing it as failure. However, for Žižek, the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" is productive precisely because its honest confrontation leads to the recognition that "the big Other does not exist" [13] there is no transcendent guarantor of meaning. This atheistic conclusion nevertheless parallels theological readings that emphasize human interpretive agency in response to divine absence. While theological interpretations emphasize how questioning divine presence creates rather than dissolves religious community, Žižek similarly argues that authentic community emerges only through shared recognition of absence rather than shared certainty. As he writes, "The Holy Spirit is the community deprived of its support in the big Other" [14]. This formulation parallels theological emphases on communal response to divine absence while rejecting their theistic premises.

My analysis of therapeutic spaces as sites for navigating divine absence finds an unexpected parallel in Žižek's discussion of psychoanalysis as a practice of confronting absence. Where Žižek views the psychoanalytic process as enabling subjects to relate to the absence of ultimate meaning in productive rather than destructive ways, I see the therapeutic container as preserving theological meaning amid experiences of divine absence. Both our approaches emphasize how specialized discursive spaces (therapeutic) enable the articulation of absence that conventional religious discourse might suppress.

The question at Massah and Meribah "Is the Lord among us or not?" thus generates productive theological meaning across interpretive frameworks ranging from traditional Jewish exegesis to radical contemporary philosophy. What unites these diverse approaches is the recognition that questioning divine presence serves as a generative theological act rather than a failure to be overcome. As Žižek provocatively suggests, "To be a materialist means not to accept fully the consequences of God's inexistence" [14] implying that authentic theological engagement with divine absence may paradoxically require the courage to question divine presence even more radically than conventional atheism.

Theology of Divine Concealment

Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschütz's theological exposition in "Va'avo Hayom el Ha'ayin" ("And I came this day to the well") provides another significant interpretive lens for understanding the question at Massah and Meribah. Eybeschütz (1690-1764), a prominent rabbinic authority and kabbalist, develops a sophisticated theology of divine concealment that bears directly on the interpretation of Exodus 17:7, though he approaches the question through exegesis of different biblical passages [15].

Eybeschütz's exposition centers on the narrative of Eliezer finding Rebecca at the well (Genesis 24), which he interprets as an allegory for the soul's search for divine presence amid apparent absence. The well (ha'ayin) in his interpretation becomes a multivalent symbol representing both the source of living waters (divine presence) and the Hebrew word "ayin" meaning "nothingness" or "absence." This linguistic and conceptual duality creates a framework for

understanding divine concealment as simultaneously absence and presence. Several aspects of Eybeschütz's theology illuminate the Massah and Meribah episode. Eybeschütz argues that divine concealment (*hester panim*) itself constitutes a mode of revelation rather than its opposite. He writes: "The highest form of divine presence manifests precisely at the moment when God seems most absent, for in that moment of apparent abandonment, the soul searches most earnestly" [15]. This framework reframes the Israelites' question "Is the Lord among us or not?" not as faithlessness but as an expression of spiritual longing that itself manifests divine presence.

Eybeschütz interprets divine testing not primarily as punishment but as an expression of divine love that creates space for deeper relationship. He writes: "The beloved tests the lover not to cause suffering but to intensify desire and demonstrate faithfulness" [15]. This perspective aligns with Tzoref's identification of the examinational purpose of wilderness wandering while emphasizing its fundamentally relational rather than punitive nature.

Most significantly for understanding Exodus 17:7, Eybeschütz suggests that questioning divine presence constitutes an authentic form of prayer. He writes: "When the mouth asks, 'Where is God?' the soul already stands in God's presence, for the question itself is the beginning of the answer" [15]. This framework transforms the Israelites' questioning from a theological failure to a paradoxical expression of divine intimacy.

This perspective converges with Zornberg's psychoanalytic reading in recognizing the productive psychological dimensions of questioning, with Tzoref's educational framework in identifying divine pedagogy in apparent absence, and with Ungar's contemporary theological approach in framing questioning as generative rather than destructive. Yet Eybeschütz's distinct contribution lies in his mystical reframing of absence itself as a paradoxical mode of presence a perspective that generates a unique response to the question posed at Massah and Meribah.## Žižek's Atheistic Approach to Divine Absence.

The Letters of Divine Encounter

The Hasidic master Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sudylkow, in his work "Degel Machaneh Ephrayim," offers a profound mystical approach to understanding divine absence that complements the interpretive frameworks discussed thus far. Though he addresses divine absence through commentary on a different biblical passage God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus 10:1 his mystical approach provides valuable insights for understanding the question posed in Exodus 17:7 [16].

The Degel's commentary begins by exploring the concept of "ot" (תּוֹ) typically translated as "sign" or "wonder" but also meaning "letter" in Hebrew. He connects this multivalent term to both the signs God performed in Egypt and the letters written in the tefillin (phylacteries) worn by both God and Israel in rabbinic imagination. The tefillin contain four biblical passages describing the Exodus, including narratives of divine absence and presence,

hardened hearts, and divine intervention.

Several aspects of the Degel's approach illuminate the question posed at Massah and Meribah:

Divine Presence in Absence: The Degel observes that the divine name becomes manifest precisely through the narrative of hardening Pharaoh's heart suggesting that divine absence or resistance serves as the necessary context for divine revelation. He writes: "God's signs and letters are revealed 'bekirbo' (within him) within Pharaoh's hardened heart" [16]. This perspective suggests that the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" at Massah and Meribah similarly creates the necessary space for divine presence to manifest.

The Necessity of Every Letter: The Degel emphasizes that if even a single letter in the tefillin's narrative is missing even a פ or ך in the word "Pharaoh" the entire tefillin becomes invalid. He explains: "Each jot and tittle and every letter contain supernal worlds of refined light and spirituality" [16]. This insight suggests that the questioning at Massah and Meribah, rather than representing a regrettable moment of doubt, constitutes a necessary "letter" in the larger narrative of Israel's relationship with God.

The Organic Wholeness of Sacred Text: Most significantly, the Degel uses tefillin as a metaphor for the entire Torah, suggesting that "the divine body is the Torah" and "it must be made and kept whole" [16]. This perspective transforms the questioning at Massah and Meribah from a failure to be overcome into an essential component of the complete divine-human relationship. As he writes: "We are to see the organic living breathing letters that pulsate through the text alive the good, the bad, the ugly" [16].

The Degel's interpretation reveals a profound theological claim about the nature of sacred text and divine manifestation. By reading God's statement about hardening Pharaoh's heart "so that I may place my signs (אֶת־חַטְּאֵי) within him" atomistically and midrashically, the Degel transforms what appears to be divine manipulation into a necessary component of divine self-disclosure. The letters contained in the tefillin which include narratives of Pharaoh's resistance and God's response become channels for divine consciousness (mochin) to flow into the world. This mystical reading has radical implications for understanding divine absence. The Degel suggests that God Manifests Himself precisely "bekirbo" (within Pharaoh) not despite the hardened heart but through it. As I argue in my analysis: "It is ONLY 'bekirbo' in Hitler, through Hitler, we recognize the 'sheleimut' of the Divine Its dark side, but its fullness" [16]. This perspective transforms questioning divine presence from a religious failure into a necessary component of divine self-disclosure.

The Degel's approach functions as a metaphor for the entire Torah, suggesting that every letter including narratives of doubt, absence, and resistance serves as an essential component of the divine body (the Shiur Qoma). As I note in my commentary: "The lettering of Torah contains the mind of God and the secrets from

above, both the good and the not good. All must be in a unique organic whole for the system to work" [16]. This perspective transforms the question at Massah and Meribah from a moment of faithlessness into a necessary component of the complete divine-human narrative. Most significantly for understanding divine absence, the Degel suggests that sacred language functions not merely as a vehicle for communicating meaning but as a theurgical channel through which divine consciousness flows into the world. As my commentary explains: "Sacred language conveys not only meaning but also, theurgically (through the emotional attachment to the divine via the donning of T'fillin) produces an influx of divine consciousness into the world which sustains it, allowing good to come down and elevating the good and allowing evil to fall away" [16]. This perspective transforms questioning divine presence from a theological problem into a necessary component of the theurgical process through which divine presence manifests in the world. The Degel's approach resonates with Eybeschütz's mystical framework in recognizing divine presence within apparent absence but extends this insight by emphasizing the textual dimension of this dynamic. For the Degel, the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" represents not merely a psychological or spiritual moment but a necessary textual component of the divine-human relationship a letter without which the entire "text" would be invalid.

This mystical approach complements Zornberg's psychoanalytic reading by providing a textual rather than psychological framework for understanding the productive dimensions of questioning. It extends Sarna's historical-contextual approach by suggesting that the narrative's meaning transcends its historical particularity to reveal essential metaphysical truths. And it enhances contemporary theological approaches to divine absence by emphasizing how questioning itself participates in rather than threatens the divine presence it seeks.

My analysis of the Degel's approach reveals how he radically reorients our understanding of sacred text. Rather than reading Torah as primarily conveying historical events or religious instructions, the Degel invites us to experience it as "the Divine body" itself an organic, living entity whose completeness is essential for divine manifestation (Logos). This perspective transforms our understanding of narratives of questioning divine presence, like that at Massah and Meribah. Such moments are not regrettable failures but essential components of the complete divine-human relationship. The question "Is the Lord among us or not?" becomes comparable to the פ or ך in the word "Pharaoh" in the tefillin scrolls a seemingly small element whose absence would invalidate the entire sacred text. As I suggest: "Language has a metaphysical primordial function... Its letters, the building blocks work as a spiritual periodic table of the elements. Were one element be missing or not exist, the entire chemical/spiritual makeup of the universe would be different" [16].

The Degel thus invites us to transcend conventional interpretive boundaries, challenging us to "jettison the midrashim and secrets clinging to the text like barnacle on the keel of a ship" and instead

to "see the organic living breathing letters that pulsate through the text alive the good, the bad, the ugly" [16]. This approach transforms divine absence from a theological problem into a necessary component of divine self-disclosure an invitation to experience "a living vital pulsating God, alive as long as the text is maintained in its integrity, without lack or blemish, with no surface wounds to bleed" [16].

Implications for Therapeutic Spaces

The theological framework developed through analyzing Exodus 17:7 has significant implications for understanding divine presence and absence in therapeutic contexts. The therapeutic environment, like the wilderness of Exodus, often becomes a space where individuals confront questions of divine presence and absence with particular intensity. "The therapeutic journey often parallels Israel's wilderness experience individuals move from crisis through questioning toward new formulations of meaning, frequently wrestling with the question 'Is God present in this suffering?'" [11].

This application of the Exodus 17:7 framework to therapeutic contexts demonstrates how ancient theological narratives continue to illuminate contemporary experiences of divine absence. Rather than positioning the therapeutic space as secular in opposition to sacred space, this approach reveals how therapeutic environments can function as contemporary wilderness spaces where essential theological questioning occurs. As Ungar concludes: "The therapeutic container becomes sacred precisely in its capacity to hold questions of divine absence with neither premature theological closure nor abandonment of theological meaning altogether" [11].

Comparative Analysis

The Degel Machaneh Ephraim's approach suggests that the question represents a necessary "letter" in the sacred text of divine-human relationship, without which the entire "text" would be invalid [16]. What unites these diverse approaches is their recognition that the question posed at Massah and Meribah generates rather than forecloses theological meaning. Whether that generation occurs through historical contextualizing (Sarna), psychological processing (Zornberg), systematic theological categorizing (Tzoref), contemporary theological reframing (Ungar), philosophical subversion (Žižek), mystical transformation (Eybeschütz), or textual necessity (the Degel), the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" functions as a productive rather than destructive theological moment.

This understanding aligns with contemporary philosophical approaches to divine hiddenness, particularly those articulated by scholars like Michael Rea [4] and Eleonore Stump [5], who suggest that divine absence may serve constructive rather than merely negative theological functions. Tzoref's framework particularly resonates with these philosophical approaches by systematizing the constructive purposes of divine testing within biblical theology [6]. The framework of "The Absent Divine" extends this by exploring how divine absence continues to function constructively in contemporary theological contexts [7]. The question "Is the Lord

among us or not?" becomes not a failure of faith but a necessary articulation of the experiential reality of divine hiddenness that serves multiple theological purposes across historical contexts. Moreover, these diverse scholarly perspectives suggest that Israel's question at Massah and Meribah is not definitively answered within the narrative or within subsequent religious experience. The provision of water responds to their physical need but does not fully resolve the theological question.

This ambiguity suggests that living with the tension between divine presence and absence, rather than resolving it conclusively, may be integral to religious experience. Tzoref's identification of the multiple simultaneous purposes of wilderness testing punishment, examination, and education further illuminates how this ambiguity serves productive theological functions [6]. Contemporary theological reflection on divine absence suggests that this productive ambiguity continues to operate within religious communities navigating contexts where God seems absent, generating new theological interpretations rather than foreclosing religious meaning [7]. "The ongoing theological vitality of the question 'Is the Lord among us or not?' lies in its resistance to definitive resolution across historical contexts each generation must wrestle anew with the tension between divine promise and apparent absence" [8,17].

Conclusion

Through examining diverse interpretive approaches to Exodus 17:7 including Nahum Sarna's historical-contextual methodology, Avivah Zornberg's psychoanalytic reading, Shani Tzoref's tripartite framework, contemporary theological reflection on divine absence, Slavoj Žižek's atheistic approach, Jonathan Eybeschütz's mystical framework, and the Degel Machaneh Ephraim's textual approach this article has demonstrated how divine absence and human questioning function as generative theological spaces rather than mere failures of faith. These varied perspectives, despite their different philosophical premises, converge in recognizing the productive capacity of questioning divine presence.

Sarna's approach illuminates how Israel's questioning emerges from their particular historical circumstances, Zornberg's reading explores the universal psychological dynamics of experiencing divine hiddenness, Tzoref's framework systematizes the multiple theological purposes served by wilderness testing, and contemporary theological work demonstrates how these dynamics continue to operate in religious communities navigating divine absence. Žižek's atheistic reading, while operating from radically different premises, nevertheless converges with these theological approaches in recognizing how experiences of divine absence generate rather than foreclose productive meaning-making. Eybeschütz's mystical approach transforms absence itself into a paradoxical mode of presence, reframing the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" as itself a manifestation of divine intimacy. The Degel Machaneh Ephraim's textual approach suggests that the question constitutes a necessary "letter" in the sacred text of the divine-human relationship, without which the entire "text" would be invalid. Together, these diverse perspectives reframe the

question at Massah and Meribah from a moment of faithlessness to a paradigmatic expression of the human experience of divine absence that serves essential functions in religious formation across historical contexts. This reframing has significant implications for contemporary theological discourse on doubt, questioning, and divine hiddenness, suggesting that theological questioning emerges not despite faith but because of it a position that finds support across theological, philosophical, mystical, and textual frameworks.

The application of these frameworks to therapeutic contexts [11] further demonstrates the continued relevance of the Massah and Meribah narrative for contemporary experiences of divine absence. By understanding therapeutic spaces as analogous to wilderness spaces where essential theological questioning occurs, this approach reveals how ancient biblical narratives continue to illuminate contemporary struggles with divine presence and absence.

These diverse interpretive approaches demonstrate the continued vitality of Exodus 17:7 for understanding the complex interplay between divine presence, divine absence, and human questioning that characterizes religious experience across traditions and time periods. The question posed at Massah and Meribah continues to resonate as a paradigmatic expression of authentic engagement with ultimate questions whether that engagement occurs within historical-contextual, psychoanalytic, systematic theological, contemporary theological, atheistic philosophical, mystical, or textual frameworks. What unites these diverse approaches is the recognition that questioning itself generates rather than forecloses meaning, suggesting that the capacity to articulate the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" may be more theologically significant than any particular answer.

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