

Is God a "Person"?: Neil N. Gillman

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Transcript - Short

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Neil, Is God a person in Judaism?

Neil Gillman:

Yeah, as long as you understand personhood as a metaphor. Look, there are, there are Jewish theologians, Jewish philosophers today, who, who insist that we speak of God as person entering into personhood, Martin Buber, I and Thou, this thou is very personal. In opposition to Jewish process theologians, for example. Who, who will speak of God as a force, not as a noun but as a verb, as activity. When I pray, I very much want God to have feelings and to be a person. And to hear and to relate to me in a very personal way. When I do philosophy, I want God to be beyond personhood.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

That's the tension.

Neil Gillman:

That's the tension, that's what you live with all the time. I'm in and out of each of these roles. I am a human being who worships and has a relationship with God I hope. And then I go into the classroom, and become a philosopher, and then I'm worried about being too concrete, too vivid, and diminishing God's transcendence. And then I work with my head, it's really, word pictures that speak to my head and some that speak to my heart, and I need both and I think the interesting thing is that the Bible is very free with attributing feelings to God. God is angry, God is pleased, God is frustrated, God is disappointed. I think God is vulnerable. God allows God's people to injure, to disappoint, and comes back for more. In a sense, God has failed consistently through the Bible. Failed with Adam and Eve, failed with Cain and Abel, failed with the generation of the flood. Failed with the people that God took out of Egypt. It's a history of failure, this is not a hugely successful God. But this is a God who keeps trying. Who never lets, lets up. This frustration gets transformed into yearning, endless yearning, and hope, and expectation that things will be better.