

**Unity Spiritual Center of Portland**

**Winter SpiritGroup 2021**

# *God of Love*

*By Mirabai Starr*

**GOD OF LOVE: A GUIDE TO THE HEART OF JUDAISM,  
CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM**

Dear Friend,

Welcome to our 2021 winter SpiritGroups, where we will be journeying together with Mirabai Starr's book, "The God of Love: A Guide to the Heart of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," a gentle loving approach to the three Abrahamic Religions. We seem to be living in a world that wants to divide rather than unify. The God of Love pays homage to the teachings and practices that unify, and remind us of common humanity, rather than divide and separate us. The mystical and social justice teachings discussed by Mirabai are a common core of the three monotheistic religions. She uses the term "interspiritual," because the book focuses not only on the dialog between the established religions, but also on an "intermingling of their common heart, The God of Love. "This study guide is created to facilitate meaningful group discussions and group wisdom and is also made to support those who are following along as a self-study program. The power and wisdom of a group is mighty, and we invite you to take advantage of one of the groups that form here. That being said, there are many ways to participate in this seven-week series, and you are welcome to participate at whatever level you are called to do so.

## At each session:

- Pray in and/or do a Mindfulness Practice
- Go over guidelines for group discussion agreements
- Close with prayer, sharing a word, a Namaste, or a moment of silence and release three deep breath.

## Session 1: God of Love

### Read the story of Abraham: GENESIS 12-14

**Genesis 12** 1 The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. 2 “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” 4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. 5 He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. 6 Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7 The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. 8 From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. 9 Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev. 10 Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. 11 As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I know what a beautiful woman you are. 12 When the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me but will let you live. 13 Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.” 14 When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman. 15 And when Pharaoh’s officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. 16 He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels. 17 But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram’s wife Sarai. 18 So Pharaoh summoned Abram. “What have you done to me?” he said. “Why didn’t you tell me she was your wife? 19 Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!” 20 Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.

**Genesis 13** 1 So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. 2 Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold. 3 From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier 4 and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the LORD. 5 Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. 6 But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that 4 they were not able to stay together. 7 And quarreling arose between Abram's herders and Lot's. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time. 8 So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are close relatives. 9 Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." 10 Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) 11 So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company: 12 Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. 13 Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD. 14 The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. 15 All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. 16 I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. 17 Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you." 18 So Abram went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he pitched his tents. There he built an altar to the LORD.

**Genesis 14** 1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. 2 Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." 3 Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, 4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. 5 No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. 6 I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. 7 I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. 8 The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God." 9 Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. 10 This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. 13 Whether born in your household or bought

with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. 14 Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." 15 God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. 16 I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her." 17 Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" 18 And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" 19 Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. 20 And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. 21 But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year." 22 When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him. 23 On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him. 24 Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, 25 and his son Ishmael was thirteen; 26 Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that very day. 27 And every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him.

### **Questions for Reflection:**

What do you know about Judaism and Islam?

Have you ever experienced a service in a temple or mosque?

Why is monotheism such a powerful teaching? Writing exercise:

Write about your idea of God when you were a child and how it changed over time.

What name for God did you use as a child, and what name do you prefer to use now?

### **Writing exercise:**

Write about your idea of God when you were a child and how it changed over time.

What name for God did you use as a child, and what name do you prefer to use now?

## Session 2: Toward the One

Pages 11-22, additional reading Pages 39-40

### Questions:

**Page 17:** “Called by many names—and by no name at all—the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is One God.” Here are names used by various traditions: God or Goddess, The Divine, The Holy One, The Creator or The Creation or Creatrix, Father or Mother God, The Great Spirit, Allah, Shiva, Shakti, Ram or Kali, Kuan Yin, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Intelligent Consciousness, Universal Love, Father-Mother Creator, Ha Shem, the Almighty, The Beloved, The One, Hu, I Am That I Am, the All of All, The Source, Higher Self.

Which do you prefer and why?

### Pages 20-22: Smashing Idols

What stands in the way of your dedication / understanding / worship / oneness with God?

Do you hold false beliefs about yourself?

What spiritual practice helps you to let go of them?

What do you need to let go of in order to recognize your relationship with the Divine within and without as sacred ground?

What is your practice to connect with Divine Presence?

### Pages 75-77: Dazzling Darkness

If God is love and we are God, how do we practice Divine Love?

What holds us back from doing so?

How can we remind ourselves that we have enough love if we draw from Divine Source?

### **Before session 3:**

Spend some time in a natural setting if possible or enjoy houseplants and pets. If this is not possible, remember a time you were out in nature. Pay attention to your senses, notice color, temperature, sound, scent, and movement. Move mindfully and try to blend into the environment rather than just observe. Notice how you feel. Is there a sense of awe or wonder or gratitude and if so, can you enhance it by settling into stillness and breathing it in?

## **Session 3: All Creation Praises God**

Pages 23-36

### **Questions:**

#### **Page 27, paragraph 2**

“If we believe that the Holy One handed us the world like a cosmic crackerjack box, then we may feel entitled to stuff the entire contents into our mouths...If on the other hand, we embrace creation as our family, we may do everything in our power to wrap it in a cloak of protection...”

What do you think about this statement?

How is the creation your family?

What shifts if you think of all living beings as family instead of things?

What gifts do you receive from being in nature?

#### **Page 28, paragraph 3**

“Our challenge is not only to recognize the face of the Creator in the beauty of the Creation, but also to serve the Divine by taking care of the land.”

How do you serve the Creation beyond the human family?

What must we do to recognize our place in the Sacred Hoop?

What practical things do you do to practice stewardship of Mother Earth?

What is hardest to do?

How do your beliefs impact your stewardship, balance, harmony, and care of living things?

What more could you do? **CALL TO ACTION:** What promise can you make and keep to protect the planet and its inhabitants?

### **Pages 34 last paragraph**

How do we use Unity principles as practical means of staying hopeful in this time of climate change?

What does taking action look like or include?

### **Pages 39-40**

How are suffering and climate crisis connected?

### **Questions for further reflection:**

Through the lens of the natural world, what is the most painful part of the times we are in?

What have you lost personally?

How do you find ways to be in nature and what do you experience there?

## **Before session 4:**

### **Page 35, second paragraph:**

“and God saw that it was ‘good.’” This week as you encounter the living organisms that make up the web of life, practice blessing with intention: I bless you, Tree. I bless you, Bird. I bless you, Sun.

## **Session 4: The Divine Summons**

Page 47, Page 53 Longing for the Beloved Page 55-68

### **Questions:**

#### **Page 47:**

When have you experienced being filled with Divine Presence?

How can you prepare for Divine Presence to be a felt experience?

What rituals help?

What does it feel like to encounter Divine Presence in the company of others?

Is there a way to deepen that feeling of Presence?

#### **Page 53:**

What can we do when we forget?

#### **Page 59, first paragraph;**

“The lover of God wants to lose himself in love, leaving no trace of a separate self.” This is the path of the mystic, which is very rare, but we experience this at times.

What does the longing feel like and how can it be satisfied?



Do you experience the sense of no longer being separate when you hear stirring music, when you fall in love, when you heal after trauma, when you are overcome with gratitude, when you are lifted up by a vista, when you drum or dance, when you are caring for a loved one, when you sit by the side of someone who is giving birth or dying, when you read poetry, when you create?

**Page 61, last paragraph:**

“Longing may be our legacy but wholeness is our birthright.”

What do you think of this statement?

What forms of brokenness have you experienced?

What losses brought you to a dark night of the soul and how did you navigate it?

How did Unity principles help?

Who accompanied you?

Was there a hidden blessing?

## **Before session 5:**

Notice acts of kindness given to you and notice the ones that you offer. How do you feel when someone is kind who is a stranger, a friend, a family member, or a professional? In what ways do you change from receiving an act of kindness and in what ways do you change when you give kindness?

## **Session 5: Sacred Service: Compassionate Action**

Pages 103-128

Before beginning this session, share the *Loving Kindness Blessing* as a group

Some suggestions for using the *Loving Kindness Blessing*

- Print out the blessing and put it up somewhere to remind you to say the blessing whenever you see it
- Share the blessing with a friend or family member
- The blessing could become the prayer you say at the start or end of meal time for yourself and or with your family
- It could also be used during your daily meditation
- The blessing could be something you say before you go to sleep
- Be creative and let this prayer be active as part of your day

## **Loving Kindness Blessing**

May I be free from inner and outer harm.

May I be safe and protected.

May I be free of distress.

May I be happy.

May I be free of physical pain and suffering.

May I be healthy and strong.

May I be able to live in this world with joy and ease.

May you be free from inner and outer harm.

May you be safe and protected.

May you be free of distress.

May you be happy.

May you be free of physical pain and suffering.

May you be healthy and strong.

May you be able to live in this world with joy and ease.

May everyone be free from inner and outer harm.

May everyone be safe and protected.

May everyone be free of distress.

May everyone be happy.

May everyone be free of physical pain and suffering.

May everyone be healthy and strong.

May everyone be able to live in this world with joy and ease.

## **QUESTIONS:**

### **Pages 106-107 Follow your heartbreak**

Do you sometimes feel overwhelmed by all the world's need?

What is the heartbreak that speaks to you the strongest?

What are your gifts and talents?

How can you use them to serve?

Do you think being in prayer makes a difference? How? How do you know?

What have you been doing, what can you do more of?

What commitment do you have to those who need your gifts and talents?

### **Page 108, second paragraph:**

How do we replenish our own wells so we can be of service?

Do you feel you do this often enough and what can you do to change it if you don't?

### **Page 113, second paragraph: Stretching beyond our comfort zone.**

What does this mean to you?

## **CALL TO ACTION:**

This week, make a commitment to care for yourself with a variety of ways:

Meditation and prayer

Sending out the Loving Kindness Blessing

Inspirational reading and affirmations

Quality call with a loved one

Uplifting music experience

Humor and laughter

Mindful movement: yoga, stretching, walking

Creating something that fills your senses.

**CALL TO ACTION:**

This week, if you are not already involved in compassionate action, make a commitment to do so.

**Here are some ideas:**

Feed someone by cooking or donating money to a food bank.

Send a card of appreciation to your neighbor, your mailperson, a nurse, a grocery clerk or a teacher.

Compliment someone on Facebook or through an email.

Offer to run errands for a senior (through Unity if you don't know anyone)

Write or call your congressperson

Buy a book written by a Black author

Attend a virtual event and give a donation or pay for a ticket

Leave books in a Little Free Library

Add to a scholarship fund

Invite your friends to BIPOC shows and events

## **Before session 6:**

Has anything changed this week as you paid attention to the ways you take care of yourself and the ways you are kind to others?

## **Session 6: Mercy: Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

Pages 129-152 Fire and Wine Pages 201-203

### **Questions:**

#### **Page 131 paragraph 2:**

What is your definition of grace?

Is it the same as Mirabai's or different?

When have you felt graced?

#### **Pages 132-133:**

Coming into right relationship, how can we or do we take responsibility for our actions?

What are ways to not only feel remorse but take action?

#### **Page 134:**

In Judaism, the High Holy Days are celebrated as a time to ask forgiveness of any one wronged individually and as a congregation.

How do you think asking for forgiveness in a ritual of prayer, fasting, and giving to the poor changes the way we ask for and accept forgiveness?

What do you do when you need to ask someone for forgiveness?

What do you do when someone asks you for forgiveness, how do you move forward?

What if the wrong done is one that endangers someone's life or livelihood or family or causes trauma?

How do you find forgiveness in those situations?

**Page 203:**

"There is no more significance placed on her failures than she did on her triumphs."

How is this possible?

How does it relate to your own life?

Could you do the same?

How does this relate to session 3: "The lover of God wants to lose himself in love, leaving no trace of a separate self."

What is your typical response to failure?

What Unity principle might help with this?

**CALL TO ACTION:**

**Page 134-135:**

Lent is a time to let go of what no longer serves. Make a list of what you want to let go of, including habits, patterns of behavior, attitudes, and where you put your focus and energy. Pray over each item on your list and symbolically release it: write it down and burn it, bury it, or put it in your God box.

### **Before session 7:**

What would it be like to substitute She and Goddess or Mother God or Mother Creator whenever you pray or connect to the Source? What if instead of Our Father who art in heaven, we said Our Mother? What shifts for you? Is it uncomfortable or comforting? What images of the Divine Feminine are you familiar with and what images can you create? Check out the ones on the Internet such as:

<https://www.pinterest.com.au/debrahgailewis/goddess-divine-mother-feminine-divine-sacred-femin/>

## **Session 7: Indwelling Presence: The Feminine Face of the Divine**

Pages 153-170

### **Page 157:**

“The masculine has been severed from the feminine” Where do you see the repercussions or impact of this?

**Page 158:** “The holiest day of Jewish life is the Shabbat...” What aspects of this day of rest and spiritual revitalization do you long for?

In Israel almost everything shuts down in the Jewish community starting from Friday evening until Saturday evening: shops, cafes, and all forms of work, from going to work to housework. People visit each other, especially families. The religious attend synagogue and have a meal that can include singing as well as praying and blessing family members, and on Saturday, they eat a pre-prepared meal. Non-religious may go to the beach or play games and they usually light a candle or two and have a good meal together. People greet each other by saying “Shabbat shalom,” “Sabbath peace.” In Mexico, also, many commercial areas are closed and in Europe shops are closed as well, although museums and theaters may be open. How would you spend the day if there was no commerce and no cafes or restaurants open?



**Page 164:**

Mirabai writes about wearing a scarf out of respect and in the second paragraph, writes about her friend who wears a hijab. Did this surprise you?

What do you think of women having the freedom of not being looked as a sex object by covering parts of their bodies?

In what ways can you invite the Feminine into your spiritual practice and daily life?

If the feminine represents the intuitive and emotional side of ourselves, where do you see that needs to be strengthened and where do you see it needs to be balanced with the intellectual, rational masculine aspect?

How does interlacing the feminine and the masculine impact your wise, courageous, nurturing, and playful self?

**Before session 8:**

Write about a time that was very difficult, either in the far past or near past. How have you taken it to God? What do you feel the difficulty was telling you? What did you do to gather support, resources, healing and understanding? What was the outcome? You can choose to share this or not.

**Session 8: Fire and Wine: The Path of Suffering and Exaltation**

Pages 191-208

**Begin session 8 with this meditation:**

Settle into your chair with your feet flat on the ground. Shrug your shoulders, then relax them, wiggle your toes, then relax them. Clench your fists, then relax them on your lap. Maybe roll your head a little from side to side, then relax. Take a breath in and let it out slowly. With each breath, draw in the in-breath as deeply as you can, hold it for a count of 5, then release it as slowly as you can. On the fifth breath, let your breath out with a sigh. Do that again. Then the leader will read this affirmation:

“The God of Love is extravagant, overflowing with riches, lifting and filling the most broken and empty heart, impelling the joyous to share their bounty with the whole world.”

Repeat the words. Take three more slow breaths and come back to the circle.

**QUESTIONS:**

How do you experience these words?

Where do you feel them in your body?

How do you share your bounty with the whole world?

**Page 197:**

How do we claim and hold onto this experience of joy when we encounter suffering, our own or others?

What spiritual practices have guided you when undergoing a time of suffering?

Which ones come to you naturally and which do you have to work on?

**Page 215 paragraph 1:**

“Remind yourself that just because you think of something, it doesn’t make it true.” Can you tell a story of a time when you believed something to discover it wasn’t true and by doing so, felt relief, comfort, peace, renewal, or joy?

**Page 218:**

What brings you joy?

How can you enhance moments of joy?

How can you move from painful memories to positive thoughts?

**CONCLUSION:**

Have you become more aware of how the basic teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are similar?

What has changed for you?

What question, response, or activity will stick with you?

*It is with heartfelt appreciation that we say “Thank you” to Wendy Brown-Baez  
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