The idea of the courtroom conjures up dual images in the imagination. On the one hand, a courtroom is an overly familiar place, permeating contemporary Western culture in fiction, film and television. In Western thought, the image of the courtroom has often run in tandem—if not outright taken the place of—the image of justice. This comforting familiarity of the courtroom is at the same time belied by the often ominous proceedings that take place within it. The courtroom is a place of justice, but it is also one of anger, of tears, of passion and of betrayal. Leaving their routine, litigants force themselves into a separate space in which the very decrees of life and death, of innocent and guilty, carry existential meaning.

This conference will consider the idea of the divine courtroom broadly, in both its historical and thematic senses. Like the physical courtroom of the Western world, the divine courtroom can be seen as a space both unique and ordinary, at once foreign and familiar. The image of God as judge and the divine court as the place of judgment is ubiquitous in religious literature. Yet, while in theory the concept of a God presiding over a divine courtroom is comforting in its sense of order and control, in practice the divine courtroom has the potential to be somewhat terrifying. The courtroom in religious literature is the place in which God is often found to arbitrate and eventually mete out ultimate justice.

However, the divine courtroom is not simply the place where God judges man. It is also the space—perhaps the only place—where man has the opportunity to advocate before, as well as, perhaps, arbitrate against God. In this sense, the divine courtroom is a locus of power and religious authority, not simply for God, but also for man.

The possibility for justice in the divine courtroom, like that in the Western courthouse, is also an open question. In biblical works such as Job, God’s courtroom becomes the place where the destruction of a saintly life is germinated, where the accuser is given free reign by a complicit Judge to torment the defendant. In this sense, the divine courtroom can also represent those less laudable physical courtrooms which, throughout history, have persistently twisted the law for unjust purposes.
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 5

9 a.m. Welcoming remarks

9:15 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

On Earth as in Heaven?

TZVI ABUSCH
Brandeis University
Divine Judges on Earth and in Heaven

STEVEN FINE
Yeshiva University
The Architecture of the Divine Courtroom: An Exercise in Rabbinic Imagination

RICHARD HIDARY
Yeshiva University
Why Are There Lawyers in Heaven? Rabbinic Court Procedure in Halakha and Aggada

MICHAEL PUETT
Harvard University
Justice Human, Justice Divine: The Nature and Practice of Justice in Classical China

1:30 – 4 p.m.

The Authority of the Divine Courtroom

ZEV HARVEY
Hebrew University
Rabbi Nissim of Girona on the Heavenly Court

ADRIAAN LANNI AND VICTOR BERS
Harvard Law School and Yale University
Disqualified Olympians: The Skeptical Greek View of Divine Judges

RACHEL MAGDALENE
Universität Leipzig
Abuse of Authority and the Divine Courtroom: The Case of Naboth’s Vineyard (1 Kgs 21; 2 Kgs 9)

4:30 – 6:30 p.m.

Agents of the Divine: Reflections on Judicial, Papal and Rabbinic Infallibility (open to the public)

ROBERT BURT
Yale Law School
The Divine Constitution and Judicial Infallibility

LAWRENCE KAPLAN
McGill University
‘Even if They Tell You that Left is Right and Right is Left, Listen to Them’: The Multiple Roots and Functions of Da’as Torah

KENNETH L. PARKER
Saint Louis University
‘A Perpetual Doctrine Tested by a Perpetual Rule Needs a Perpetual Judge’: Papal Authority and the Infallibility Debates of Nineteenth-Century Roman Catholicism

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 6

8:45 a.m. – noon

The Social and Rhetorical Function of the Divine Courtroom Motif

JOSEPH ANGEL
Yeshiva University
The Divine Courtroom Scenes of Daniel 7 and the Qumran Book of Giants: A Textual and Contextual Comparison

MEIRA KENSKY
Coe College
Getting Perspective: The Divine Courtroom in Tertullian of Carthage’s Apologeticum

ANDREW LINCOLN
University of Gloucestershire
The Divine Courtroom and the Gospel of John: A Life of Jesus as Testimony

1 – 4:15 p.m.

The Divine Courtroom as Theological Expression

CHAYA HALBERSTAM
King’s University College

JOB JINDO
The Tikvah Center for Law & Jewish Civilization, New York University School of Law

4:15 – 5:15 p.m.

Summation Remarks

ADAM BECKER
New York University