



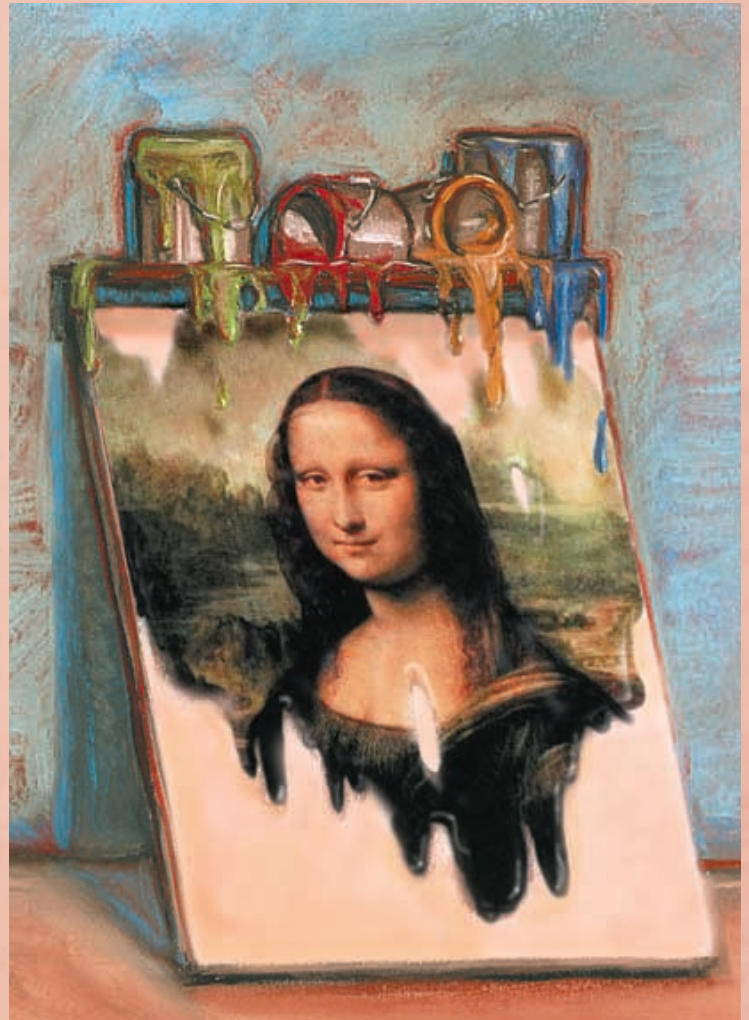
Jewish Atheism

... and what God thinks about it

Two older Jewish men were staring at the Mona Lisa. There they were in the Louvre, looking at the real thing. They agreed that it was a painting of unsurpassed quality. Every detail was perfect.

However, Hyam commented to his friend Bernie, "It's the darndest thing, you know. A few jars of paint fell on the canvas and by sheer accident this painting was created." Bernie, the avowed atheist, responded with a smile of appreciation for the painting's beauty, "No. It's too perfect, Hy. Too detailed. This was no accident."

Hyam continued with a smile of his own, "It's like the universe, you know. If this work on a small piece of canvas is too complex to have possibly been created by accident, how can you say the universe—billions of times more complex than this painting—could have happened by chance?" Bernie thought for a moment and said, "Hmm. I suppose you're right. It is possible for a few jars of paint to have fallen and accidentally have created the Mona Lisa!"



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The above humorous story brings to the level of absurdity what a confirmed atheist might do when faced with the possibility that there is a God. Is atheism a valid position to take? The great thirteenth century Jewish philosopher-physician, Maimonides, would argue most strongly that it is not:

The fundamental principle and the pillar of all knowledge is to know that there is a First Being who brings everything into being, and everything in the heavens and on earth derives from His existence.

Nothing can exist without this Being and everything depends on Him; for this Being can exist without the creatures of the universe but they cannot exist without Him.

This Being is the God of the universe, the Lord of the entire world.¹

Yet Jewish atheists today would take exception to his assertions. For atheism spans the whole Jewish spectrum of belief—from the views of the religious Jew to those who would identify as secular.

Religious Atheism

On the 14th day of Nisan, Jewish families around the world gather around a table to celebrate Passover. It is one of the most popular events in the Jewish year. For some, it is merely a ceremony; something to do because we are Jews. Unfortunately, too many Jews celebrate Passover without considering the fact that the holiday commemorates a real event in history—a time when the living God delivered the ancient Israelites from slavery. To most, God is extraneous to Passover.

Likewise, on Yom Kippur, while many of our people refrain from regular work and go to synagogue and chant the Al Chet (prayers of confession), few believe that there is a God who is hearing their plea for mercy.

The true story is told of an Orthodox Jewish atheist who was confronted by his son with the question, “Dad, since you don’t believe in God, why do you regularly attend the Orthodox shul?” The father thought for a moment and then explained, “Listen son. If I’m going to be a real Jew, I’m going to be a part of the Orthodox shul. Being an atheist has nothing to do with it.”

HOW DID THE
ISRAELITES
CROSS THE RED
SEA?

SON, MOSES WAS
SMART ENOUGH TO
KNOW WHERE THE
SAND BARS
WERE.



The Jewish atheist can even find it necessary to defend the faith that he doesn’t have by pronouncing that “we Jews believe in ONE God!” Now for the Jewish atheist, the complexity of the trinity [the Christian belief that the one God exists in three persons] should not even be an issue. If one denies the existence of God, why bother nit-picking over exactly what you don’t believe about him?

The subject of Jewish religious atheism has been addressed by popular Jewish authors Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin. While they clearly believe in the existence of God, they concede:

According to Judaism, one can be a good Jew while doubting God’s existence, so long as one acts in accordance with Jewish law. But the converse does not hold true, for a Jew who believes in God but acts contrary to Jewish law cannot be considered a good Jew.²

If a belief in God is not necessary to be considered a good Jew, one can rightfully ask, “Why, then, is Jewish law significant?” After all Jewish law comes from the historical teachings of the rabbis, which in turn are rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. Those Scriptures point to the living God. Therefore, how can a Jewish atheist find authority in the Jewish law?

This contradiction has resulted in some Jews abandoning their faith, and others seeking to reinterpret or refashion it. The Society of Humanistic

Jews was organized in 1969. This organization with a membership of over 30,000 embraces a “human-centered philosophy that combines rational thinking with a celebration of Jewish culture and identity.”³ It denies the existence of God and promotes human reason as not merely an allowable alternative but the only viable conclusion. Humanistic Jews maintain a Jewish lifestyle, although they have a reinterpreted version of history and the holidays. Their leading spokesman, Rabbi Sherwin Wine, gives a rationale for the perpetuation of Jewish identity:

*Jewish identity has humanistic value because Jewish experience testifies to the need for reason and dignity. To be Jewish is to feel the indifference of the universe and the terror of self-reliance. . . . Being Jewish—with an authentic and realistic attachment to Jewish history—is a way of strengthening our awareness of the importance of reason and dignity.*⁴

It would appear that for Wine and his disciples, Judaism is a means of promoting humanism. Perhaps this view should be respected for being honest about what many Jews already believe but have not taken the time to formalize in their own lives. On the other hand, what hope, joy, meaning or purpose is presented in a system which acknowledges the indifference and “the terror of self-reliance” in the world, with merely an affinity to Jewish history as the solution?

Dogmatic Atheism

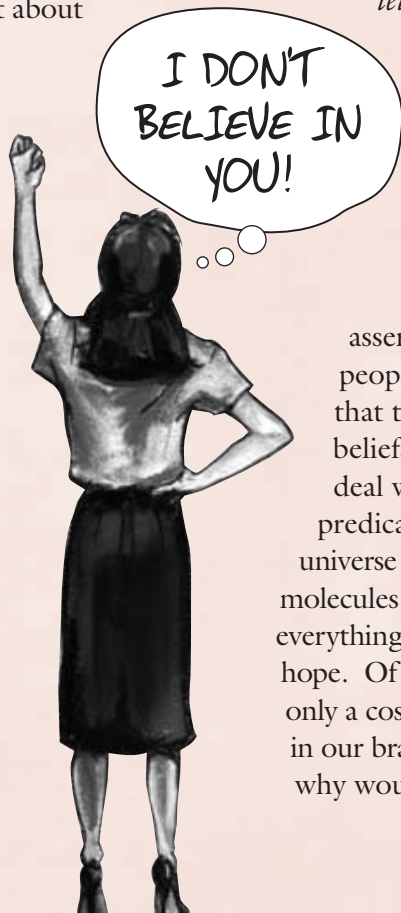
There is a mishnaic saying that goes, “We have not seen? is no proof.”⁵ For example, just because we cannot see electricity, or perhaps don’t know exactly how it works, doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. Every time we turn on a light switch, we are demonstrating our belief in this unseen thing called electricity. Yet, when it comes to belief in God, it’s not uncommon to hear the words, “**I** haven’t seen any proof,

therefore there’s no reason for me to consider whether or not it is true!”

Cynicism (the negative attitude which assumes the worst and looks for reasons not to believe) can lead to dogmatic atheism. Skepticism (the attitude which merely doubts the truth of a given issue) leaves open the possibility that there is a God. Unseen proof is not a license for cynicism.

Yet atheism, or at least agnosticism, is regarded as the thinking person’s religion. It is seen as intelligent and rational. Since Nietzsche declared at the end of the nineteenth century that God was dead, atheism, not religion, has become “the opiate of the masses.” Novelist Herman Wouk noticed a trend some four decades ago, which still exists today:

*We live in a time when non-belief is in fashion; it has been for about 100 years. Hence the regular pulsing of rationalist books from popular book clubs and paperback publishers. But this popularity of one point of view should be enough to make any serious man suspicious. Sheep are sheep, whether they are all leaping over the fence or all huddling in the fold. . . . It is becoming all too clear that—speaking of crutches—Freud can be a crutch, Marx can be a crutch, rationalism can be a crutch, and atheism can be two canes and a pair of braces.*⁶



Some atheists are as dogmatic in their assertions of disbelief as the religious people they often rail against. Could it be that they remain preoccupied with the beliefs of others so that they won’t have to deal with the problems of their own predicament? Think about it—if indeed the universe is one big accident caused by molecules that collided by chance, then everything is without a purpose and without hope. Of what benefit is human reason if we are only a cosmic accident? The molecules and fluid in our brains would be equally meaningless. So, why would anyone brag about their own

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reasoning ability with an attitude of superiority! And if one truly believes in natural evolution, why bother mocking the theist? It only means that when the atheist's ancestors arose from the primordial slime they were coincidentally more developed. So what? Is this really a point to gloat over?

The atheist might respond that this lack of purpose is no reason to start believing in God. Moreover, such a pursuit would merely create a false hope. This argument has its merits. No one should believe in God simply because atheism is pointless. Likewise, no one should discount God because some of his followers are hypocrites. Human frailties, while they may be an obstacle to belief for some, don't diminish the reality of God's existence. It is always easier to knock something down than to defend it.

Jewish atheists have all the more reasons to refrain from mocking belief in God, as the very existence of our Jewish people is evidence of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Not surprisingly, Rabbi Wine discounts the supernatural elements of Jewish survival (e.g., the miracles of the Exodus story and the provision of the manna in the wilderness). He sees man's inhumanity to man, in particular, in the legacy of Jewish suffering as an indictment of God.

*The Jewish people, whose official establishment proclaimed for over two thousand years that Jewish history is a testimony to the presence of God, is, indeed, the strongest testimony to the absence of God.*⁷

But if problems such as Jewish suffering are caused by people, why would anyone speak so enthusiastically about the need to be *more* humanistic? Indeed, how can anyone put their faith in humanity?

While the humanist has one view of Jewish survival, others have a very different take on the subject. For example, the non-Jewish Mark Twain wrote the following concerning the Jews:

He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose,

*filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?*⁸

Twain wrote those words a half century before the resurrection of an ancient nation (Israel) and before the reestablishment of an ancient language (Hebrew). Indeed, the very fact that Jews exist today creates a dilemma for the thoughtful atheist. Regarding the probability of our survival, the argument for coincidence (or anything else) becomes a bigger leap of faith than a belief in an all-powerful God.

HEAR, O
ISRAEL, THE
LORD OUR
G-D . . .



Disguised Atheism

While some Jewish people incorporate their disbelief in God into their religious framework, and others are busy mocking those who do believe in God, there is a more subtle form of atheism that is also quite popular. Some people are asked if they believe in God and after thinking for a moment say, "yeah . . . I guess so," but then never think about the subject again. Other people say, "I believe in God in my own way." But, this is not a belief in God at all; it is a belief in one's own ability to create their own version of God.

The Hebrew Scriptures—God's message to us—begins with a most important lesson in theology: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." If we grasp this, everything else will fall right in line. These words in Genesis tell us that God created us and not the other way around. His ways are not just opinions or alternative options for the spiritually eclectic. And as the Biblical story unfolds, we read that God continued to take the initiative with humanity. He directed our people to follow and worship the Creator, and not any part of the creation. This theme is

repeated throughout the Scriptures, most famously in the words of the Sh'ma, Deuteronomy 6:4-5:

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one:
And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart,
and with all thy soul and with all thy might.*⁹

The central point here is that God alone is to be worshipped (i.e., loved with all of our heart, soul and mind). The Sh'ma has always enjoyed a special place in Jewish life and liturgy and is familiar to even the most secular Jew. It has also become a pledge of allegiance—a statement of pride and faith in our people. If there is any “creed” within Judaism, this is it. The problem, however, is that so much emphasis is placed on the Sh'ma as a Jewish litmus test that its very content is often overlooked. For example, one modern rabbi in a primer on basic Judaism, writes:

*One could deny God and still be a Jew, but to deny the unity of God would be to remove oneself from the Jewish fold. The center of Jewish worship is the recitation of the verse from Deuteronomy 6:4 which affirms the oneness of God.*¹⁰

Ironically, according to this view, it is more important to declare God's oneness than it is to actually believe it. In other words, remaining “within the fold” of Judaism has become more important than acknowledging the One who created the fold. It is like a man who brags that he has only one wife, and yet he has no relationship with her and never spends any time with her. What is the point of such a marriage? In the same way, conceding a belief in God's oneness without recognizing the need to have a personal relationship with him, without desiring to love him with “all thine heart” is no more than a disguised form of atheism.

Alternative to Atheism

The Jewish atheist needs to grapple with the possibility of a personal God who has revealed himself in many ways, not the least of which is the beauty and the perfection of the created universe.

The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork. Psalm 19:1

One noted astronomer and scientist, Dr. Hugh Ross, explains this in another way:

God so loved the human race that he was prepared to construct 100 billion stars, and shape and craft them over the course of many billions of years so that at this brief moment in history we can have a pleasant place in which to live—namely planet Earth. . . .

*For me, that was a complete turnaround from where I started at age seventeen when I thought that this universe was so vast that God could not possibly pay attention to us. Now what I realize is that this whole vast universe was built by God expressly for the purpose of giving us a home. So how can we deny God's love and care for us?*¹¹



The personal nature of God is also revealed in how he has intervened in history on behalf of our Jewish people. God promises in his Scriptures to keep us, to preserve us forever.

Fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Isaiah 41:10

The sad truth is that if it were up to the nations and powers of this world we would have been vanquished. The Hamans and Hitlers and Hamas followers would have had their way and succeeded in our annihilation. But a caring God would not allow that to happen. The most astounding fact of the Holocaust was not the murder of six million Jews, but God's preservation of twelve million. Mark Twain's question, “What is

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In The Little Shtetl Of Vaysechvoos

It was somewhat out of the ordinary—a distinction that the shtetl of Vaysechvoos would have preferred to do without—but it was true nonetheless. Vaysechvoos had a resident atheist. Actually, Simon the Atheist didn't live in Vaysechvoos proper; his hut sat on the very outskirts of the town. Still it was closer to Vaysechvoos than to any other place in the district.

Now it wasn't that the villagers of Vaysechvoos were the most religious of Jews, but even the least pious among them agreed that it would be a disgrace to miss going to shul on Shabbos. Further, it would be disrespectful to do any sort of business on the day of rest. And even if someone didn't feel especially religious on the High Holidays they would at least go through the motions. But not Simon.

"People who believe in God were born with weak brains," he mused to himself. "They talk to the air and they expect it to listen. They are like children." Simon the Atheist not only absented himself from anything that might be considered religious, but he would watch from

afar as the townspeople prepared for the Sabbath. Sometimes he shook his head and wagged his finger as if to scold them. Simon made no secret of his disdain for those who participated in what he called "acts of senseless worship."

Those who ventured to speak to Simon about such things all received the same answer. "I believe in rubles . . ." he would boast, ". . . therefore I don't need to believe in a creator."

What made Simon so cynical about religion no one knew. He lived alone and was an independent sort. Rumor had it that he had a small inheritance. Simon did not know a trade and he was no great scholar either, (although he did like to read books by some philosopher called Spinoza). Therefore, people reasoned that a departed relative must have left him a little something to live on.

Actually, Simon had some hens and a small potato patch to provide for his sustenance, and then of course, there was his pride and joy, a cow whom he affectionately called, "Yetta" after his departed mother. She was not just any cow, she was the finest milk cow in the area. Yetta

EVIDENCE for GOD'S EXISTENCE

produced so much milk, Simon was even able to earn some rubles from her output. And since, according to his own religion, he believed in rubles, Yetta, the bringer of milk, cheese and yes, a few rubles, was the sole recipient of Simon's devotion.

But then it happened. He woke up one bright clear morning and stepped outside to greet the day and his dear Yetta. Yet he could see right away that something was wrong.

You see, Yetta was lying down a distance away in his small pasture. And it wasn't a sleeping or a resting kind of lying down. Simon ran to his milk cow and as he got closer he was horror stricken to see her on her back, her legs heavenward. Yetta was still. Yetta was dead.

Simon the Atheist was beside himself. "How could this happen? I took such good care of my Yetta. And she had not yet reached her prime."

There was no indication that Yetta had been attacked by other animals or harmed in any way by humans. Being a man of reason, he eliminated all the possibilities but one. "It had to be God who did in my Yetta," he concluded. "He was jealous of her and angry with me since I don't believe in him."

When the townspeople of Vaysechvoos heard Simon's logic, they smiled. But the Rabbi of Vaysechvoos did one better. He invited Simon to shul so that he could express his disappointment to the Creator first hand.



The order and complexity of the physical universe

If one came upon a watch in a field and asked where it came from, the obvious response would be that someone made it. Likewise the complexity and unique workmanship of the universe demands an intelligent designer.

Human personality

"No one has presented an idea, let alone demonstrated it to be feasible, to explain how the impersonal beginning, plus time, plus chance, can give personality." —Francis A. Schaeffer

The accuracy of the Bible

Historians, archaeologists and scientists continue to find solid evidence to corroborate the Bible's accuracy.



Fulfilled biblical prophecy

Specific predictions and prophecies made hundreds, even thousands of years prior to events have come to pass precisely as predicted.

The survival of Israel and the Jewish people

"All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?" —Mark Twain

"Evidence of God I have found in the existence of Israel." —Edmund Fleg

Universal religious impulse

"There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God the Creator made known through Jesus Christ." —Blaise Pascal

Humanity's moral sense of right and wrong

"If God is dead, then everything is justifiable." —Dostoyevsky

The resurrection of Jesus

"I accept the resurrection of Easter Sunday not as an invention of the community of disciples, but as a historical event." —Rabbi Pinchas Lapide



The failure of alternatives

"Hard as the world is to explain *with* God, it is harder yet without Him." —Claude Montefiore

the secret of the Jews' immortality?" is a rhetorical one for those who believe in the God of Israel.

However, God's personal love and care is seen most dramatically in Y'shua (Jesus). Jewish believers in Jesus believe that God actually chose to come and live as a human being in order to die as an atonement for us. Why? So that we could live forever with him. If that is true, then God's intention toward us is not as a disinterested creator. Nor is his interest limited to occasional divine intervention in history. If Jesus really did come to lay down his life for us, then God is a warmly personal wooer of humanity.

But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ [Messiah] died for us. Romans 5:8

In contrast to the despair and hopelessness that is the logical outcome of atheistic thinking, the belief that God sent a redeemer for us in Jesus produces incredible joy and courage. Whoever knows the love of God in Y'shua can say along with one of the first Jews for Jesus, "If God is for me, who can be against me?" (Apostle Paul)

An atheist might counter that the need to feel loved by such a God leads believers to delude themselves into thinking God is real. And certainly wanting God to exist is not enough to make that so. Either God exists or he doesn't. Jesus is or is not the Jewish Messiah regardless of our wishes.

But is it possible for a committed atheist to be objective about these things? Isn't the certain belief that God is not real a matter of faith in itself? Perhaps the

committed atheist is one who, based on the circumstances of this life, has judged God and found him not worthy of existence. Rather than denying that God is real, a thoughtful atheist should be willing to consider that God has made a way to right the wrongs. A thoughtful atheist is one who knows that if there is a

God, he would be beyond our comprehension. Therefore it is reasonable to leave open the possibility that Jesus is who he claimed to be.

Because if there is a God, and if that God is a caring and compassionate God looking for a way to reconcile a headstrong and wayward creation to himself, it makes perfect sense that he would come and live among us, and make a way for us to be with him.

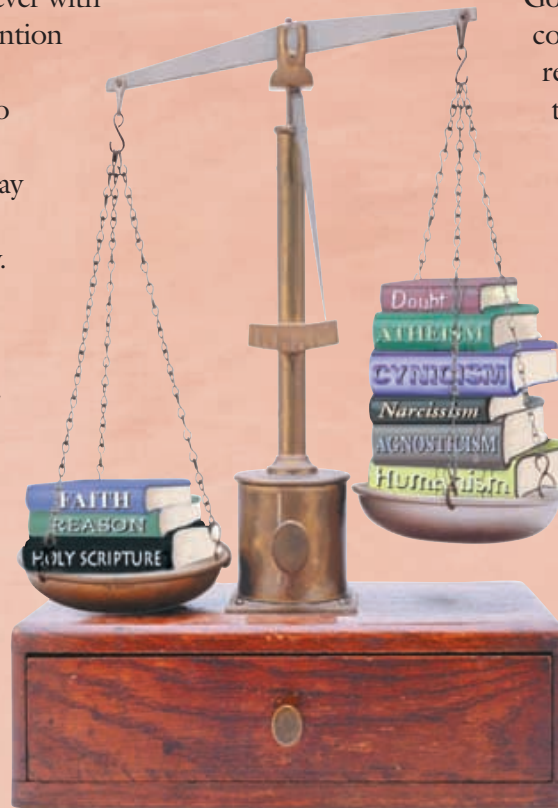
The Jewish atheist must admit that there are many things we do not understand; that our finite minds cannot comprehend it all.

It was Yom Kippur and two Jews were davening side by side at the neighborhood shul. One was religious, the other was an atheist. The religious Jew

turned to the atheist and curiously asked, "Ben, why are you here?" The atheist replied, "Jack, I could be wrong."

Isn't it worth investigating the possibility that God exists and that he wants you to know him personally . . . what have you got to lose?

—David Mishkin



End Notes

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