

# Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism

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The classic and essential guide for the educated, skeptical, and searching Jew, or for the non-Jew who wants to understand the meaning of Judaism.

If you have ever wondered what being born Jewish should mean to you; if you want to find out more about the nature of Judaism, or explain it to a friend; if you are thinking about how Judaism can connect with the rest of your life—this is the first book you should own. It poses, and thoughtfully addresses, questions like these:

- ❑ Can one doubt God's existence and still be a good Jew?
- ❑ Why do we need organized religion?
- ❑ Why shouldn't I intermarry?
- ❑ What is the reason for dietary laws?
- ❑ How do I start practicing Judaism?

Concisely and engagingly, authors Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin present Judaism as the rational, moral alternative for contemporary man or woman.

Dennis Prager, one of America's most respected thinkers, is a nationally syndicated radio talk show host and syndicated columnist. He has written four books, including the #1 bestseller *Happiness Is a Serious Problem*. He has lectured on all seven continents and may be contacted through his website, [DennisPrager.com](http://DennisPrager.com). Question 1

### Can One Doubt God's Existence and Still Be a Good Jew?

God may have His own reasons for denying us certainty with regard to His existence and nature. One reason apparent to us is that man's certainty with regard to anything is poison to his soul. Who knows this better than moderns who have had to cope with dogmatic Fascists, Communists, and even scientists?

Emanuel Rackman, in *The Condition of Jewish Belief*

If the believer has his troubles with evil, the atheist has more and graver difficulties to contend with. Reality stumps him altogether, leaving him baffled not by one consideration but by many, from the existence of natural law through the instinctual cunning of the insect to the brain of the genius and heart of the prophet. This then is the intellectual reason for believing in God: That, though this belief is not free from difficulties, it stands out, head and shoulders, as the best answer to the fiddle of the universe.

Milton Steinberg, *Anatomy of Faith*

DOUBT

Does God exist? This is life's most crucial question. The implications of the conclusion have the most significant consequences for the meaning of human existence.

Yet, despite its overwhelming importance, serious discussion of God is usually confined to theologians and philosophers. The rest of us form simple opinions of belief, agnosticism, or atheism at a relatively early age and are content to retain them without questioning for the rest of our lives.

We must therefore begin our presentation of Judaism with a discussion about God. First, let us briefly note Judaism's attitude toward a most common contemporary sentiment about God: doubt.

Can you doubt God's existence and still be a good Jew? Yes.

Belief in God is often difficult. Crises of faith are to be expected, and acknowledging such crises is not an irreligious act for a Jew. There are four significant reasons why doubts about God's existence should not be an obstacle to your being a good Jew.

#### 1. Judaism emphasizes deed over creed

Judaism stresses action far more than faith. The Talmud attributes to God a declaration which is probably unique among religious writings: "Better that they [the Jews] abandon Me, but follow My laws" (for, the Talmud adds, by practicing Judaism's laws, the Jews will return to God, Jerusalem Talmud Haggigah 1:7). 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.

It is not, of course, our intention to deny the centrality of God in Judaism, but merely to emphasize that Judaism can be appreciated and practiced independently of one's present level of belief in God. You can incorporate Judaism into your daily life through study and practice even while doubting God's existence, because Jewish study and practice in and of themselves are extraordinarily valuable to the individual and society.

Moreover, our experience has confirmed that once you begin to study and live Judaism, you will find belief in God much more feasible. As the Talmud notes, whereas a man or woman may begin to practice Judaism for reasons unrelated to God (such as rational and ethical conviction), he or she will eventually do so because of God (Pesahim 50b).

#### 2. Absolute certainty in faith leads to fanaticism

In the words of Emanuel Rackman, one of the foremost Orthodox rabbis of our time: "Judaism encourages doubt even as it enjoins faith and commitment. A Jew dare not live with absolute certainty, because certainty is the hallmark of the fanatic and Judaism abhors fanaticism, [and] because doubt is good for the human soul, its humility....God may

have had His own reasons for denying us certainty, with regard to His existence and nature. One apparent reason is that man's certainty with regard to anything is poison to his soul. Who knows this better than moderns who have had to cope with dogmatic Fascists, Communists, and even scientists?"

### 3. If God were known, moral choice would end

If we knew God existed and would punish us for evil acts, then good acts would be much less freely chosen. An element of unknowability about God is necessary so as to allow us to choose good. In order to choose good, we must feel free to do bad, and we would not feel this way if we had definite knowledge that God was present and recording our every action. (How much choice do we have to speed when we know a police car is present?)

### 4. Since God's existence is unprovable, doubt is natural

God cannot be known to exist in the sense that we know a table or a cat exists. Their existences can be physically demonstrated and verified through our senses. But God's existence cannot, since God possesses no physical qualities. One can prove the existence of the natural, the physical, the finite; God, however, is supernatural, metaphysical, infinite. The inability to prove God's existence reflects, then, only on the fact that God has no physical qualities, a position that Judaism has always maintained.

To have doubts about God is, then, normal, permissible, and consistent with being a good Jew. But a good Jew may not deny God's existence. Indeed, the primary task of the Jewish people since its inception has been to bring the idea of a universal God and morality, or ethical monotheism, to mankind. As we shall see below, the most important values of life are dependent upon positing the existence of God: morality, or good and evil as objective realities that transcend personal and national opinions, and ultimate purpose and meaning to human existence. To put it another way, if there is no God, then there can be no objective good and evil, and no ultimate purpose to our existence. For these reasons, among many others, a committed Jew (a) may not deny God's existence, (b) must struggle with his doubts about God (the name of the Jewish people, Israel, means "struggle with God"), and (c) must advocate ethical monotheism, the ideal of a universal God as the basis of a universal standard of ethical behavior. As Elie Wiesel stated it: "The Jew may love God, or he may fight with God, but he may not ignore God."

## THE NEED TO POSIT GOD'S EXISTENCE

### MORALITY

The first value whose existence is dependent upon positing God's existence is morality. If there is no God, there are no rights and wrongs that transcend personal preference. Gases and molecules, the laws of nature, are not "good" or "evil," "right" or "wrong." If the natural world is the one objective reality, and there is no moral source beyond nature, good and evil possess no objective reality. Moral judgments then become purely subjective. They are popular or personal opinions which are objectively meaningless and represent no reality. It

is self-evident and acknowledged by the foremost atheist philosophers that if a moral God does not exist, neither does a universal morality. Without God, all we can have are opinions about morality, but our opinions about "good" and "evil" behavior are no more valid or binding than our opinions about "good" and "bad" ice cream.

This is why in secular societies morality is generally considered to be a matter of opinion. Moral relativism is the only possible consequence of the denial of God's existence; morality becomes a euphemism for personal opinion. As this century's most eloquent atheist philosopher, Bertrand Russell, wrote: "I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values but," Russell conceded, "I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don't like it."

Russell's second point is our whole point. All that can possibly be wrong with wanton cruelty according to atheism and its moral relativism, is that we may personally not like it. Amorality is inherent to atheism.

To illustrate this point, assume there is no God and attempt to explain why Hitler was morally wrong. For the atheist and moral relativist, the only thing wrong with Nazi atrocities, as Russell said, "is that I don't like it."

One may answer that we know "deep down" that Hitler's mass murder and torture were wrong. But from where does this "deep down" feeling of right and wrong come? If there is no God, such feelings are just feelings, and objective morality must transcend subjective feelings. And if in fact we do possess "deep down" knowledge of good and evil, what source of morality put it within us?

Or, one may answer that Nazi-type murder is wrong for pragmatic reasons -- citing the argument that "if we kill them, they'll start to kill us and society will fall apart." This is not a moral argument, but merely a pragmatic one, and it is in any event invalid, since committing evil can be regarded as highly practical. In fact, pragmatic arguments usually favor committing the crime. The Nazis, for example, would have correctly dismissed the argument that "if we kill them, then they will kill us" by noting that "they" will not be able to kill "us." As in the rest of nature, only the weak will be destroyed. The pragmatic argument against committing evil is naive. If you can get away with a crime, there is no pragmatic argument against committing it -- only a moral argument, which is often quite impractical.

Take, for example, the relatively minor crime of tax evasion. The pragmatic argument again argues for, not against, committing the crime. The argument that "if everyone cheated on their tax returns, we would all suffer," understandably dissuades almost no one from cheating. On the contrary, tax evaders are quite certain that nearly everyone else is cheating, and it is precisely this fact that serves as their justification for doing the same. Precisely because one believes nearly everyone else is cheating, he, too, should cheat. Otherwise he loses. Pragmatism dictates immoral behavior at least as often as it dictates moral behavior.

Or, one may answer that reason tells us that Hitler was wrong, and, that in general, evil is

wrong. Reason, according to this common attitude, suffices to lead us to moral behavior without the necessity of positing the existence of God. But is this so?

Reason often suggests evil behavior

Reason rarely argues for moral behavior. In fact, reason can nearly always be used to justify immoral behavior -- from supporting Nazism to petty cheating in everyday life. The use of reason to justify what is wrong is so common that we have a special word for it -- rationalization.

Adolph Eichmann and other Nazi murderers acted "reasonably" when they obeyed orders to murder people and thereby furthered their careers. When the average German citizen remained silent while his Jewish neighbors were shipped to concentration camps, he was acting entirely according to reason. Reason suggested preserving one's life and not endangering it by aiding a Jew. It may in fact be argued that among the only people in Nazi Germany who acted against reason were those who acted morally.

To cite a more mundane example, according to the New York Times, one out of every three hotel guests steals something from his room. Since it is probable that most of these people consider stealing immoral, are we to assume that millions of Americans consider themselves thieves? No. Undoubtedly most will deny that what they have done is thievery; they rationalize their actions by claiming that the hotel overcharges, or that "everyone else" also takes "souvenirs," or that the towel (or ashtray, or painting) will not be missed.

In sum, reason is amoral. It is a human tool that can be used as easily for evil as for good.

Reason cannot demand good behavior (even when it suggests it)

The preceding examples should make it obvious that if reason often does not even suggest good behavior, it cannot possibly be relied upon to demand good behavior. And even when reason does argue for moral behavior, it is not reason that compels a person to act morally. Reason may very well have suggested to many Germans during World War II that they actively oppose Nazism and to many Americans that they not steal from their hotel rooms, but it in no way would compel them to act accordingly. And for the few Germans who did actively oppose Nazism, it was not reason that dictated their moral behavior. It was a recognition of something higher than reason that compelled them to act morally.

Thus, given these two facts, that reason can suggest evil, and that it cannot compel good behavior even when it suggests it, we can accurately characterize the notion that reason alone can or will produce moral behavior as a dangerous myth.

To return to our original question: If there is no God whose moral will transcends personal opinion, then we cannot say that Hitler was morally wrong. All we can say is "I don't like it."

The source of morality must itself be moral, and since reason is amoral, it cannot be the

source of morality. That source must be something higher than reason. From the time the Jews stood at Mount Sinai to this day, that higher source has been called God.

## ULTIMATE PURPOSE

Morality is not the only value whose existence is dependent upon positing the existence of God. If the physical world is the only reality, i.e., if there is no metaphysical source to life, then life is ultimately purposeless. Life is then nothing more than the chance result of innumerable coincidences, and human beings are nothing more than self-aware molecules. We differ from all other molecular combinations only in that we want to believe that our particular combination has some ultimate meaning and purpose. But this desire is mere delusion. We simply cannot bear to awaken each morning and look in the mirror at a molecular coincidence, so we make up a meaning to our lives.

The purposelessness of life if there is no God is not some argument created by theologians. It is a fact, and it underlies all secular existentialist thought. The argument of secular existentialism develops as follows: Given that God does not exist, life is mere physical coincidence with no meaning. Hence, we must endow our "being and nothingness," to use the well-chosen words of Jean-Paul Sartre, with some arbitrary meaning, or we cannot survive the pain of life.

For the Jew, the physical world is very real. But it is not the only reality. There is a metaphysical reality as well. The source of this metaphysical reality, God, has created the physical reality and has endowed the human being with a touch of the divine. This element can be called spirituality, or soul, or the image of God, or sanctity. By any name, it means the same: We are not purposeless physical creations of a cruel and apathetic universe, but purposeful spiritual creations of a loving and just God.

In order, then, to spread a universal standard of good and evil in the world, and because the death of belief in God must lead to moral chaos and a pervasive sense of meaninglessness, the Jew must posit and advance ethical monotheism even when he is in doubt about God. God's existence is demonstrably necessary for a moral world and for ultimate meaning to life.

Nevertheless, one may conclude that while God's existence is clearly necessary, belief in God's existence is irrational and even perhaps impossible. Let us therefore address ourselves to the question of the probability of God's existence.

## DOES GOD EXIST?

There are strong arguments on both sides of this question, but in our view the case for the existenc...

### Other Books

Toward a New Israel. This book represents an original interpretation of the state of Israel, a Jewish political renaissance in the modern era. It probes the meaning of Zionism in the historical context and examines critically the founding of the state, its underlying principle

themes, and political orientation. At root, the analysis focuses on the secular ideological basis of Israel and the rejection, in 1948, of any search for an authentic projection of the new state as a philosophical continuation of Judaism. The book is organized primarily around the Jewish-Arab completion and conflict in the land of Israel, while the deeper philosophical and ideological topics provide a framework and context for Israel's collective political identity.

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