

Can You Be a Good Jew If You Don't believe in God, or
Should an Atheist Still Come to Synagogue on the High Holidays?

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The High Holidays are an amazing gift. They are so beautiful, inspiring, powerful, and filled with meaning, which is why we come together as a community to celebrate them. We set aside these days, take off of work, and turn off our cellphones, tablets, and televisions. We refrain from using Facebook, text messaging, computers and electronic devices so we can focus and not be distracted from the sacred task at hand. And if you haven't or don't, let me suggest you try it, because those of us who do can attest that disconnecting from technology on the High Holidays allows us to connect with a deeper internal and eternal essence. Eliminating the constant chatter that clutters our minds and inboxes allows us to focus instead on the clarion call of the ages beckoning us back to our roots and linking us to our past.

Everything about the holiday is orchestrated to lead us to reflect on our fate and to contemplate our future. We tune in to the words and longings of those who came before us, and listen to our inner voice. It is a time to think about the adjustments and alignments we need to make in our behavior. The prayers and liturgy motivate and prod us to reflect on what kind of people we are and where we fall short. The imagery of a God who is a King and who judges us is meant to cause us to stop, pause, and take inventory; to assess who we are and who we should be, to be introspective and examine our deeds to consider if we are living up to what it is that God and our tradition expect of us.

But what about those for whom that imagery does not resonate, those who may not believe in a Divine Supreme Being who is a sovereign who judges and watches over all?

Millennials, young people, and adults have told me they are conflicted because they do not believe in God and as a result question their Judaism. Some say this is the reason they do not come to services. Some are bold and brash and even defiant in their assertion. Some are timid or embarrassed to admit it, and some are indifferent.

Regardless of the tone, at the core of the matter is a fundamental question, an appropriate one to consider on the New Year. It may take different forms, but basically, people want to know -- if I don't believe in God, can I be a good Jew? Some frame it by asking, if religion has to do with belief, and I don't believe in God, how can I be Jewish, and why should I come to synagogue?

This sermon is for those of you who have these questions and doubts. Those of you who do believe in God can get comfortable, close your eyes, nod off and take a nap. I will have the ushers wake you when the sermon is over.

...Seeing that just about everyone is still awake, I guess there are a lot of people who feel this way.

While according to the 2013 Pew Research Study of the American Jewish population over 70 % of American Jews said they believe in God, 2/3 of American Jews say you can be Jewish without believing in God.

There are those who feel God is a primitive concept invented by humans. Rather than believe that we are created in the image of God, they believe people created God. There are those who look upon the Bible as a myth or fabrication. Guilty of oversimplification and mistakenly thinking that it must be taken literally they do not appreciate the noble truths and bold ideals it contains, how it was a revolutionary break with the past and the tremendous positive impact it has had on the world.

There are those who reject belief because they place their faith in science or rationalism. They cannot fathom how the theory of evolution can be harmonized with what Judaism says about creation. Without going into detail, those who hold this do not realize that the two disciplines, science and religion come to different conclusions and have different answers because they ask and answer different questions. It is not necessary to choose between the two, because it is not a binary proposition. It is possible to maintain and believe in both, for science is the search for explanations, while religion is the search for meaning.

Confusing God with Santa Claus, people whose prayers are unanswered may give up on prayer – as illustrated by the story about a very religious and pious man whose neighbor was an unabashed atheist. He couldn't help but be disturbed that his friend was so much more successful than he was. One day, he cried out to God, and said, "Dear Lord, I honor and pray to you every day. I ask your advice for every problem I encounter. I confess my sins to you daily. Yet my neighbor who does not believe in You and does not pray to You prospers and is blessed, while I suffer. Why do you bless him, and not me?" He is startled by a voice out of heaven, which proclaims, "Why? You ask why? Simple. Because he doesn't bother me."

Not seeing evidence of God, skeptics like Woody Allen want tangible proof. "Why can't God show me He exists?" he asks. "If only he would give me a sign, like making a large deposit in a Swiss bank account in my name."

Some assume that since they do not believe in miracles they cannot believe in God, overlooking the fact that Judaism does not require us to believe in miracles to believe in God. As Edmund Fleg wrote in the early 1900's, a sentiment expressed also by Albert Einstein, one of the things he loves about being Jewish is that it does not demand of him any abdication of the mind.

Pointing to good people who are atheists, there are those who question if it is necessary to believe in God to be good and ethical human beings. They may refer to themselves as cultural Jews.

Some lose faith after experiencing tragedy and cannot come to terms with a God who is supposed to be perfect, yet who permits evil and suffering to exist. Others justify abandoning belief because they are upset by the Biblical portrayal of a vindictive God, overlooking the emphasis in Scripture of God's compassionate side and of the commandment to show mercy to His creatures.

Some are turned off because of the evil done in the name of God. Religious extremists who proclaim God is great while they commit murder do not help the cause of those who believe in a loving God who values kindness and good deeds. These radical fanatics must have missed the part in the Bible which says: *“uvecharta behayim, therefore choose life!”*

Indeed, there are plenty of reasons not to believe in God.

While I cannot empirically prove God’s existence, and am not always absolutely certain about it, I live and strive to live my life with faith in the existence of a superior being, even when I harbor doubts. I reject the approach of Humanistic Judaism and Reconstructionism which eliminates or limits God’s role in the world because I want those who doubt and question to be a part of the traditional synagogue community. I maintain that this questioning is precisely what Judaism wants us to do. It is in our DNA. Our very name “Yisrael” reveals a great deal about our identity and nature. It means to struggle with God.

I sense God’s presence when I hear beautiful music, or witness exceptional accomplishments of gifted individuals. It’s hard to rationally explain, but I felt the existence of God when I saw the amazing feats of Olympic athletes reaching new heights of perfection with their extraordinary achievements this summer.

I am inspired by our ancient texts and how relevant they are. I marvel at the unbelievable wisdom of our sages, and am awed by how applicable their insights are for today.

Beauty in nature – be it seeing a flower grow and unfold, meticulous ants working fastidiously, or the magnificence of the grandeur of magnificent creations such as the Grand Canyon all arouse within me an appreciation for the wonder that God created and placed in our world. After seeing the array of colors and assortment of fish, floral and coral life in the Red Sea in Eilat on my first visit to Israel when I was 20 years old I was inspired to write that the beauty I saw were creations from God’s palette.

Nothing can compare to the birth of a child, with the possible exception of discovering as I have the last few years, yet another dimension of God’s grace and the mystery of the universe as I feel the blessing of unconditional love for and by grandchildren.

I am touched when I see expressions of concern and acts of goodness, kindness, and selfless generosity, acts which Rabbi Harold Schulweis called manifestations of “godliness”. When I visit other Jewish communities around the world, I feel connected both to our people and to an Eternal Being greater than any one of us. I get goose bumps every time I see the Shabbos candle lighting scene in Fiddler on the Roof. In worship services, be it here, in Israel or anywhere in the world, the liturgy inspires and uplifts me. I aspire to hear God’s voice speak to me and to hear what God asks of me as I am linked to the longings and expressions of my people. In the face of centuries of oppression and persecution the rabbis succeeded in keeping Judaism alive by composing liturgy and creating a way of life that sanctifies life. By creating an alternative universe they managed to form and transmit a tradition that gave our ancestors hope and dignity despite the degradation that threatened to encompass them.

In times of loneliness, despair or personal struggle I have felt God's reassuring presence that He is with me, and that I am not alone.

These are a few of the reasons I believe there is a God, a God who calls upon me to be His partner in creation, who has chosen us for a sacred purpose and who places demands on me and all of us as members of a covenanted people.

This is not to say that I have not had moments of doubt and uncertainty, or that my theology has been stagnant and stayed the same over the years. There are times when I have challenged and felt anger, yes anger, and even outrage towards God. It usually is provoked when seeing or thinking about cruelty or injustice. Yet this does not cause me to turn away from God, prayer or Judaism. In moments such as these I am comforted to know that I am in the company of revered sages and pious rabbis who came before me and that such questioning is not only within the bounds of our tradition, but even encouraged. The very first Jew, Abraham established the precedent when he stood up and questioned God's commitment to justice as he defended the people of Sodom and Gemorrah. The Yom Kippur haftarah is the story of Jonah, a reluctant prophet, who when his ship is about to capsize is the one guy who does not pray to end the storm that threatens to overturn their boat.

The Torah opens with the words, "*Bereshit bara Elohim et haShamayim v'et haAretz*, In the beginning God created the Heaven and the earth..." We are a people whose journey began when God summoned Abraham. He replied immediately and without hesitation, "*Hineni*. Here I am." The Ten Commandments opens with the words, "I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt". It commands us not to have any other gods. The first five of Maimonides' 13 principles speak of our belief in God.

Yet despite all this "God-talk", we do not have a catechism or formal creed that one must accept in order to be considered a Jew. Many Jews are often uncomfortable when talk of God gets too serious. Throughout the ages our sages have presented differing opinions about the nature and even about the necessity of a belief in God.

For Christians, faith and belief constitute the essence of their religion. It is difficult for a Christian who does not believe in Jesus to be considered a practicing Christian. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine an individual who does not believe in Allah to be considered a faithful adherent of Islam. But what about a Jew who does not believe in God? Can they still be part of the tribe?

One of the problems is our definition and understanding of God. Judaism is a religion which is complex, not at all simplistic. It thrives on debate, disagreement and discourse. We do not have one fixed, monolithic definitive description of God. In fact, Maimonides says that we cannot say what God is, only what God is not.

Rabbi Neil Gilman, professor of theology at the Jewish Theological Seminary put it this way, "Describe to me the God you don't believe in, and chances are I will tell you I do not believe in that God either." In other words, it is possible that the God you think you don't believe in might be a primitive unsophisticated one that is not a Jewish approach. Before declaring outright that one is an atheist, one should explore more deeply what options Judaism offers.

When I take my confirmation class to New York and we visit the Chasidic community they are exposed to the thinking of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism, who expounded that no leaf falls to the ground unless it is willed by God.

Yet the Mitnagdim, also highly observant Jews reject the notion of divine predestination and believe in free will and self-determination. More closely aligned with the rationalist approach of Maimonides, this movement is equally entrenched and rigorous in their commitment to strict observance of Jewish tradition.

So although we have a number of diverse opinions in Jewish theology and a variety of ways to understand God, there still are many who cannot find a belief they can subscribe to and with which they are comfortable.

God has such poor PR I think he must use the same PR firm that Israel uses!

For all of those in this camp, and I know I am speaking to a sizable number, because many of you are still awake, I want to respond to the very legitimate question of whether you can be considered a good Jew if you don't believe in God, and how to reconcile belonging to a faith community?

How do we deal with these very real and legitimate questions and how does it impact on your being a part of the Jewish community, coming to services, and how can you pray when you do not feel that a Divine Being exists?

There is a story about a couple who had two little boys, ages 8 and 10, who were extremely mischievous and who were always getting into trouble. Since nothing the parents did seemed to work, the parents decided to send the children to speak to the rabbi to see if he could help discipline the children. The rabbi agreed, and met the younger child in his office. He said to the little boy, "I have a simple question for you, "Tell me young man, where is God?"

The boy's mouth dropped open, but he said nothing, so the clergyman repeated the question, this time in a sterner tone, "Where is God!?" Again the boy made no attempt to answer. So the clergyman who by now was getting aggravated and frustrated by his inability to get through to the child, raised his voice, shook his finger in the boy's face and bellowed one more time, "WHERE IS GOD?"

With that the child screamed and bolted from the synagogue, ran home, and dove into his closet. When his older brother found him in the closet later that afternoon, he asked, "What happened Tommy?" The younger brother, barely able to speak blurted out, "Now we are really in trouble. God is missing and they think WE did it!"

Our sense of humor is fun and funny, so if nothing else, stay for the jokes.

To be a Jew is to be a member of a people who is constantly searching for God. The Kotzker Rebbe likened the search for God to the game of hide and seek. Sometimes, however, God is sad when He is hiding because we have given up and stopped looking for him.

While I wish all had a belief in God, things have changed since the 1700's when Baruch Spinoza was put in *herem* and excommunicated from the community for his heretical ideas. Even if you do not believe, you can and should still be part of the people who has traversed history with God.

Shortly before his death, Edgar Bronfman penned a beautiful book called, "Why be Jewish?" Describing himself as a nontheistic Jew, he wrote nostalgically about the traditions and rituals he recalled from his childhood. Although I disagree with his premise of taking God out of the equation, I love how he shows that being Jewish is so richly rewarding. He correctly points out that in the choice between deed and creed, Judaism emphasizes what we do and how we act.

The Midrash (Lamentations Rabbah Prologue 2) comments on a verse from the book of Jeremiah when God laments, "They have forsaken Me, but kept My law." The rabbis add a word, "*Would* that 'they had forsaken Me, but kept My law,'" imagining God as saying, "If only My people will occupy themselves with practicing the halacha (Jewish law), the light it contains will lead them to follow the proper path." The rabbis teach that what is important to God is that we should perform mitzvot and observe Judaism, regardless of what we believe. They understood that behavior affects thought, rather than the other way around. As AJ Jacobs explained in his TED talk, "My year of living biblically", "If you visit sick people, you will become compassionate."

With its emphasis on action and on the here and now, Judaism is a pragmatic, practical religion. Bronfman contends that our ethics, regardless of their source or origin are of tremendous intrinsic value, for they offer a principled way of interacting with our fellow human beings, based on fairness and justice. The oft-repeated biblical injunction to care for the orphan, stranger and the widow inculcated and implanted in us an almost inherent genetically transmitted commitment to justice and compassion. Judaism demands that we take responsibility for our actions and for the condition of our society, leading us to work to make the world a better place, and to act responsibly towards others, what we call *tikun olam*, a message driven home by the prayers we hear and say in synagogue on the holidays.

Bronfman's journey to explore his identity began when he was 60 years old on a flight back from a trip to the Soviet Union on behalf of Soviet Jews and saw his aide, Rabbi Israel Singer, poring over a page of Talmud. Although president of the World Jewish Congress at the time, he realized he did not know much about Judaism since he stopped taking it seriously when he was a child. Wondering what it was that motivated the Soviet Jews who derived from their heritage the courage to stand up and defy the communist regime's attempt to suppress their religion and culture, he decided to embark on a program of study and devoted the rest of his life to understand how Judaism managed to stay alive while so many other civilizations had disappeared.

One of the qualities he identified with and that others admire is our emphasis on study. It is no wonder that Jews consistently rank among the most educated segment of the population. The rabbis grappled with problems which often mirror issues we face, and provide a guide for ethical behavior. Study coupled with prayer is intended to motivate us to perform acts pleasing to God and thereby to be better people.

As he delved deeper into Jewish study and observance Bronfman acquired a new-found appreciation for the importance of family and community to Jews. He recognized how the celebration of holidays unites and sustains both by encapsulating and perpetuating our values and our people.

Passover, for example, the favorite holiday of many has all the ingredients necessary for a popular holiday: family, food, a great story, and universal values. But let's not overlook the role ritual plays in reinforcing and transmitting its noble message. The ritual act of eating matzah and bitter herbs reminds us of our experience as slaves in Egypt and reinforces the imperative that since we were once slaves in Egypt we are obligated to help the oppressed.

For Jews, religion is one of many threads, albeit an essential one, that is part of the tapestry that is Judaism. While belief in God is neither a prerequisite for Jewish practice, nor required to live a Jewish life, and there are many threads to hold onto, you should not be dismissive of your heritage. You should not deprive yourself of this unbelievable wealth and treasure trove of literature, of poetry, prophecy and prose that has had such a profound impact on the world just because you may not believe in God.

So what about to do about prayer for the non-believer, especially the High Holiday liturgy with its references to a King and Judge that may seem distant and difficult to accept?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that belief in God is an antidote to narcissism. "Believing that there is a God in whose presence we stand means that we are not the centre of our world. God is... When we place the self at the centre of our universe, we eventually turn everyone and everything into a means to our ends... (but) when God is at the centre of our lives, we open ourselves up to the glory of creation and the beauty of other people. The smaller the self, the wider the radius of our world." Shoftim, Sep 2016

He goes on to point out that being a part of a faith community offers meaning and purpose, for it leads to altruistic behavior. We come together and express gratitude for what we have, turning away from self-centered consumerism to work for the common good, which is why according to numerous studies members of synagogues and churches are more charitable than those who do not belong. This could be because it is God who proclaims that all are created in the Divine Image. As the source of life He can mandate that we love the stranger and can demand that we care for the weak and feed the hungry. Knowing that God is the source of our ethics is compelling and anchors our values.

On Rosh Hashanah, our prayers assert that every person is important to God and that every act matters to God. I suggest those who have trouble with this concept regard the notion that the Book of Life is open as a metaphor, a powerful metaphor. Knowing that we are judged, and that each action counts and can make a difference cannot help but motivate us to strive to be better people.

Yes, you can appreciate nature, but immersion in Jewish tradition provides you with the vocabulary to express gratitude to the one we call the Author of creation.

Yes, you can be a good person without believing in God or being connected to Judaism. But these ideals, such as the obligation to work for tikun olam take on a more emphatic imperative in the context

of a Divine Commandment and are difficult to pass along if they are not grounded in your identity and you are not part of a community that supports and strives to abide by these values.

All of which brings us to the High Holidays and what to do if you are not a believer.

Coming together as a community to collectively and individually reflect on our actions and fate is an amazing experience, unique to Judaism, which is why I call it a gift, and which is why you should participate even if you do not accept all that the prayerbook says.

I urge you to come to synagogue, even if you don't believe in all the images and pageantry because the atmosphere of being part of a retrospective community will encourage you to think about life and your actions.

Come because the prayers prompt you to be introspective and to consider who you are and who you should be.

Come because it leads you to think about the consequences your actions have on others and the kind of world we want to create.

Come because even if you are a moral person, being reminded of the standards Judaism has established for us can help you aspire to be even better.

Come for the nostalgia of hearing the melodies which touch your soul and link you to your past and to your fellow Jews.

Come because your mother would be upset if you don't.

And finally, come because you are a part of a people with a proud history and heritage.

You cannot turn your back and leave because a fundamental tenet of all Jewish thought is the centrality of the Jewish people, and that we are not whole when some are not present. This is why the hagadah calls the one who excludes himself from the community *rasha*, the wicked child. It is why Moses smashed the Ten Commandments when he saw the people violating the second commandment when they worshipped the golden calf. Forced to choose between the Torah and the people of Israel, Moses chose to smash the evidence that could be used to convict his beloved nation of idol worship. This devotion to his people is why he boldly said to God, when He threatened to wipe out the people of Israel for their faithlessness, "If you intend to do that, then wipe me out as well." Patrick Henry said, "Give me liberty or give me death." Moshe Rabbeinu said, "Give me the Jewish people or give me death."

So even if you decide to give up on God if you must, do not give up on the Jewish people, on your people. Together, those of us who believe in God and those who do not, acted on behalf of our brothers and sisters behind the Iron Curtain, and did something unprecedented in history. Not only did we put freedom for Soviet Jews on the international agenda of world leaders, not only did we gain freedom for our fellow Jews, but we ultimately brought down the Soviet communist regime and the entire Iron Curtain.

We Jews share a common fate and destiny. To use the crudest of images, when Jews were being marched to concentration camps they were not asked if they believed in God or not. They were not asked about their level of observance or personal beliefs. They were viewed as Jews.

Or to put it in more positive terms, we all stood at Mt. Sinai. No litmus test was applied there as to who would receive Torah. It was given to all of us!

I do not want what happened to Moses Mendelsohn, widely recognized as the father of modern Judaism and the Enlightenment, a movement which brought Jews into the modern world to happen to us or to your children. Immersed in Judaism and Jewish tradition, Mendelsohn was a great Jewish philosopher of the 19th century who translated the Hebrew Bible into German to facilitate the assimilation and integration of Jews into Germany. He advocated for being “a Jew at home, and a man in the street.” He was so successful that none of Mendelsohn’s offspring today are Jewish – neither in the street nor at home. Within two generations, most of his grandchildren had converted and abandoned the faith their ancestors had preserved for millennia. We and they are the losers – they because they miss out on the beauty of this amazing people, and we because we miss out on having them as part of our people and are denied the contributions they might have made to Jewish civilization.

I want this people to survive, with all its various components and think we are the better with skeptics and cynics challenging the faith of the rest of us. I hope you will remain loyal members of this sacred community, regardless of what you believe and will continue to attend services and like those who came before you, struggle with these critical issues. Be with us, with your people and help us write the next chapter of Jewish history.

My prayer for the New Year is: *Zochrenu lechayim*, Remember us for life, King who delights in life. *Ucktov be sefer HaHayim*, and may we all be inscribed in the Book of Life ----- even those who don’t believe there is such a thing.

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