

A Response to Atheism

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A few years ago a bus in London carried an advertisement paid for by an atheist group that had launched a campaign to spread its gospel. Critical of religious adherents for the sin of spreading their beliefs by proselytizing, the atheists sought to do a little proselytizing of their own. Although one of their critiques of religion is that it attempts to sway people, this did not stop the atheists from seeking converts to their position.

The slogan they choose, was, I must admit, rather clever, catchy and at first glance, even appealing. Being pithy and concise gave it a certain panache. The ad said: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." It certainly sounds enticing, and attractive. In a very compelling and simplistic way it advocates a lifestyle that holds the promise of a sunny outlook and positive way to live life.

But as is true in any campaign, the problem is that the way in which it portrays the other side, is neither correct, nor is it a fair assessment of the religious view of life, and certainly not of Judaism. In fact, what most worries politicians and their high paid advisers and consultants during a political campaign, and something they have learned must be avoided at all costs: is to not allow the other side to define who you are.

The implication of the billboard is that, if only religion and God didn't get in the way, we would be able to have a good time. It is saying, "Drop God, and you are free." It is meant to make you think that the guilt imposed by religion and the constraints on behavior which accompany religion are onerous and cumbersome. It is as if this is the source of your inability to enjoy life and is what makes you miserable. Therefore, their solution is to propose that the way to enjoy life is to just get rid of religion. Life would be dandy without this albatross.

Although it all sounds so simple and appealing there are a number of problems with this approach.

Long ago Judaism opposed hedonism. In contrast to the idea of focusing on satiating our own appetites, Judaism holds that we have responsibilities to help and care for others. Our prophets taught the importance of not neglecting others and that we can find fulfillment by working for a better world for all.

Referring to the ad on the bus in the May 2012 issue of the British journal, *Standpoint*, Melanie Phillips wrote, "I think this fatuous slogan gets to the heart of why people have turned away from biblical religion — not because it is irrational but because it puts constraints on their behavior. This is the source of the hatred — that biblical religion is seen as a restraint on the ability to behave exactly as you want. What such people don't realize is that true freedom only exists within constraints; and far from expanding freedom, unconstrained libertinism leads straight to abuses of power."

The basic premise of this notion is that religion by its very nature is restrictive and oppressive. Yet Judaism teaches that the mitzvot are a source not just of guidance and that *halakha*, Jewish law does not just govern our lives. It is a path that offers fulfillment, meaningfulness, and enrichment. In fact the Torah commands us "*vesamachta behagecha*: you shall rejoice and be happy on your festivals." Leaving aside the joy experienced in community on joyous occasions such as Purim, Simhat Torah, and even Shabbat, there is the joy from the celebration of milestones, such as marriage, a bar or bat

mitzvah, the birth of a child, and so on. Judaism provides the means whereby the happiness of these occasions is magnified because we are not alone, but part of a vast continuum spanning the ages and transcending generations.

The whole point of the holiday cycle we just concluded, the linking of Pesah and Shavout is that freedom is only truly found in the context of responsibility, as represented by the Torah.

I think one of the fallacies of the notion of atheists derives from the passage in the Torah we read this Shabbat, about the Nazirite. The Nazirite was one who was supposed to refrain from wine and from many earthly pleasures. But as some of our commentators point out, the sin offering brought by the Nazirite upon the conclusion of his period of abstinence was precisely because he had withdrawn from the community and had led such a restrictive life. Reflecting this attitude about the importance of enjoying life, a key passage in the Talmud says that when we die, we will be asked to make an accounting for all of life's permitted pleasures that we did not enjoy.

The second problem with the approach of the atheist is that it portrays religion as being antithetical to science and reason. Even more than that, they portray those who are religious as unsophisticated, intolerant, dogmatic and unintelligent.

I am reminded of the joke about the atheist who sat down next to a priest on a bench in a zoo and started arguing with him about God and religion. The priest affirmed the logic of God's creation, while the atheist tried to poke holes in the priests' assertions. The atheist pointed out how silly and illogical it is that birds can fly. "It is not necessary for birds to be able to fly. They eat so little. All they need to consume is within their reach. On the other hand, look at the hippopotamus, an animal that eats hundreds of pounds of food every day, but it can barely move more than a few feet. If anything," the atheist challenged the priest, "God should have made it the other way around. Why didn't God make it so hippos can fly?" Feeling proud of the logic of his argument, just then a bird flying overhead dropped a load on the park bench next to them. The priest looked at the atheist, looked at the huge hippopotamus near them, looked at the bird's dropping, and said, "I guess you just got your answer."

Religion is not primitive. The reality is that science is the result of the novel and revolutionary concept posited by Judaism and embedded in the Bible, that the universe is rational and coherent. Nature follows a pattern of laws, known as physics. As Thomas Cahill points out in his book, *The Gift of the Jews*, through our Bible the Jews introduced a linear concept of time to the world. As Phillips wrote, "This meant history was progressive; every event was significant; experience could be built upon. Progress was thus made possible by learning more about the laws of the universe and how it worked... Science could only proceed on the basis that the universe was rational and coherent and thus nature behaved in accordance with unchanging laws."

It is interesting that some of the same people who deny the existence of God are willing to believe all kinds of crazy theories about earth being invaded by aliens from outer space to populate our world.

Rather than say "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." I would counter with an ad that proclaimed, "There probably is a God. Now go and find meaning, and thereby enjoy your life."

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