



The **Eilu V'Eilu program**, under the auspices of the Union for Reform Judaism, invites two scholars to address a particular question over a four-week program. In the first week, each respondent offers a position paper. In the second week, he or she responds to the other. In the third, they take up questions from the 5000 or so on-line subscribers to this program. And in the final week, the commentators offer a summary statement. Rabbi Schweitzer was honored to be invited to participate in one of these dialogues in March 2008.

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## **Can a person consider her/himself to be a good Jew and not believe in God?**

### **Rabbi Peter Schweitzer's Opening Statement**

To its credit, the question before us recognizes that disbelief does not cancel one's membership in the Jewish people. It seems to be asking instead about the quality of one's Jewishness. But usually the question that is put rhetorically is the preceding one: how, without a belief in God, can one even be Jewish, not to mention a "good Jew."

For nearly fifty-per cent of the Jewish population who do not profess a belief in God and still declaratively affirm their Jewish identities, these questions not only ignore the demographics but are out of touch with reality. For this vast number of Jews, including, by the way, many who are undoubtedly affiliated with the Reform movement, being a good Jew means sharing a common heritage and culture - more accurately, cultures - and does not rest on a shared set of beliefs or religious practices that has remained constant for all times. It's inaccurate and an oversimplification to say that 'Jews are people of deed, not creed' - surely we can't overlook Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith - but the fact that this maxim has been elevated to a kind of mantra suggests that many people take it for a truism. Jewish identity, in short, does not require some sort of oath or confessional statement.

The supposed prerequisite of belief in God rests on assumptions that only made sense in ancient and medieval times when a belief in God - or in many gods - was a given. It was from this belief that people understood the way of the world, especially as it impacted on matters of survival, in cases of drought, hunger and war, or illness, death, and personal pain and suffering. One could not "not believe." There was simply no other explanation for how the world functioned.

However, with the emergence of Hellenism in the third century BCE., a new way of thinking emerged. It was called skepticism. Previously held "final truths" were now called into question. Perhaps the most dramatic of these challenges was the observation by Copernicus, in the early 1500s, that the earth is in daily motion around its axis and is in yearly motion around a stationary sun. By the time of the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the ghetto walls fell not only physically but mentally. Now there emerged a viable alternative to a theistic monopoly on explaining the world. The new way was called secularism. It championed rational inquiry and

the scientific method. It gave forth to teachings like evolution, economic justice, self-reliance and gender equality.

Historically, to be a good Jew meant it was okay to argue with God over the injustices of the world. In fact, we have a time-honored tradition of protest, from Abraham to Tevye. But for many good Jews today, this exercise is no longer appropriate and may feel not only hollow and ineffective, but disrespectful in the shadow of the Holocaust, 9/11, Darfur, and the recent Tsunami.

Our argument isn't with a god who we may no longer believe in, who has all but vanished into abstraction, but with flesh-and-blood religious fundamentalists and demagogues, with bullies and bigots. And in the face of the cruelties of an amoral universe, we don't turn to a personal deity for solace but to each other for strength and support. We, too, can be good Jews who defend the poor and disenfranchised but without needing to invoke God's name.

Some will say, however, that being a "good Jew" is not just or even about *tikkun olam* – *bettering the world* – and that it really requires a life of ritual and prayer to mark the holidays and life passages and better face the often painful challenges of living. But can one do that without a belief in God? The answer is, "Absolutely!" Secular humanistic Jews are forming our own communities where we are developing creative celebrations and observances that connect us to our heritage and culture while remaining consistent with our secular non-theistic principles. We do this at Shabbat, Passover and High Holidays, as well as at bar/bat mitzvahs, weddings, and funerals. And we joyfully teach our children that they, too, can be heirs to this wonderful heritage and culture.

Notably, we are not alone in recognizing that "good Jews" can have ritual without belief in God. The Reform movement itself provided this kind of non-theistic option in the Gates of Prayer over a generation ago in acknowledgement of the diversity of belief of its own members. The tent is big. The table is broad. How good it is that there are seats here for all of us to sit together.

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