



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 Second Statement**

I consider myself a traditional Jew, being raised fourth generation in the Reform movement. But early in my rabbinate, as I concentrated more on the content of the message and not its choreography, my thinking shifted. I raised questions about my own beliefs and convictions that we were never asked to think about at seminary and I found that a traditional theistic message didn't suit me. Happily, I found my way to Humanistic Judaism which has provided an intellectual and spiritual home these last sixteen or so years.

When I was given the invitation to participate in this dialogue I was intrigued that the Reform movement was prepared to raise this question. Back in 1994, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now the Union for Reform Judaism) rejected the application of Congregation Beth Adam, whose liturgy makes no reference to God, to join the movement. I wondered what has changed since then.

As an outsider, I welcomed the chance to share my views, but I also was concerned if they would be met with consideration and acceptance or polite dismissal if not outright rejection. I was heartened to learn that my co-respondent would be Rabbi Judy Lewis. We go back many years together, even to a shared undergraduate alma mater, and I believed from earlier conversations that she would largely be sympathetic to my message. I am pleased to say that I was not wrong.

Rabbi Lewis astutely breaks the initial question into several components. One of them has to do with the elusive definition of "God" in the first place. This, for all intents and purposes, ought to be the end of the discussion. After all, if "we cannot know God", or if the definition of God is not agreed upon and is constantly reconstructed, how can we even talk about this topic?

Rabbi Lewis handily sidesteps that conundrum by moving on to consideration of who a "good Jew" is, which, for her, is a specific version of a "good person." This was a fascinating shift. Now we were not only removed from the "belief in God" question, but also even from one of Jewish identity. This led her to an examination of ethical behavior, which may be what defines a "good person." Then, circling back, she observed that ethical individuals may or may not attach their ethical mandates to a belief in God and, moreover, believing in God may or may not make one ethical.

But I think there is more. As I wrote in the opening, I believe that for many people being Jewish – and being a good Jew – is not just or even about ethics and fixing the world. Nor is that compelling enough a reason to perpetuate our Jewish identity. It is also about celebration and community and comforting one another in difficult times. It is about making connections to our heritage and our culture and our aspirations for the future.

Notably, there are those individuals not born Jewish who want to join our Jewish family because they embrace these notions. They too want an opportunity to be “good Jews” but for the non-believers among them, the traditional entry is a contradiction. As one woman I know put it, she no longer professed a belief in the God of her Christian youth. Why would she suddenly embrace a Jewish God in her adulthood? However, she wrote, “I regularly wished that I could do a cultural conversion to Judaism – to fully join and belong to the Jewish people just as much as someone doing a traditional religious conversion; but without making a religious commitment that I did not really mean.” We offer that opportunity through Humanistic Judaism. If born Jews don’t need to profess a belief in God to be or remain Jewish, non-believing non-Jews wanting to join us need to be welcomed on the same terms. This woman, to her pleasure and ours, is now another good Jew among us.

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