



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 Responses to Questions  
Submitted by Subscribers**

*Question*

I find the discussion very disturbing, in that the conclusion seems to be that the answer is yes. God and worship of Him are certainly present in the *Gates of Prayer*. God is certainly present in all the services I have attended. God is present in private prayer as well as in corporate prayer.

If one chooses to say "I do not believe in God," that excludes that person from the covenant. A covenant is between two. If one chooses not to believe that God exists, then for that one there is no covenant. We can still argue with God, but that does not mean that He does not exist; incomprehensible things happen. Can one be a Jew at all and not be in covenant with God?

Ann Thorington

*Answer*

Putting aside Ms. Thorington's archaic masculine formulation to describe God, the idea of covenant, itself, has also come under scrutiny. Many Jews have replaced the historical notion of "chosen people", which they regard as elitist, particularistic and privileged with "choosing people", that evokes the idea of equality, universalism and opportunity to select any number of ways to express their Jewish identity, from secular to religious. This also supports the idea that one ought to enter into a covenant freely and not from compulsion.

According to one midrash, however, God chose the Hebrews after being turned down by various other nations. In order to make sure the Hebrews didn't follow suit, God lifted Mt. Sinai over their heads and threatened to drop it on them if they didn't agree. With a God unwilling to take "no" for an answer, the people responded without due deliberation and without free choice.

With such a God it is no wonder that many people prefer to side-step a theistic relationship altogether and covenant with each other. Nothing, in fact, is more profound than Ruth's freely-given pledge to Naomi, "Your people will be my people." Yes, Ruth also pledged fealty to Naomi's God, but note, she made that oath not to or with God, but to her mother-in-law.

### *Question*

Rabbi Schweitzer seems to be intentionally missing the point. While we as a people have slipped into assimilation and denial of the God of our Fathers and the God of our Mothers, the definition of the Children of Israel has not changed. Israel was one who struggled with God and persevered in that struggle.

Struggle or "wrestling" is an engagement. To wrestle with God is to be engaged with God. Denial of God is not engagement—it is just a measure of how small and powerless you believe your God to be, and how large your own ego has grown.

Engagement has been a community effort since Israel stood at Sinai. If you are not engaged with God, how then can you claim even to be a member of the community? Goodness in *not* a self-pronounced determination. It is a community judgment.

Joel Hunter Crook

### *Answer*

Out of the crucible of argument comes refined thinking. But did Jacob really wrestle with God or with his own conscience? Just as Dorothy discovered that there was no wizard, but merely a man behind the curtain, I venture to say that most Jews have come to realize that the illusive and hard-to-pin-down God of Jewish debates is just a foil for our own self-reflection or communal conversation. Few posture themselves any more like Tevye shaking their fists at God and when Hillel and Shammai argued whether to light the menorah going up or descending they didn't tangle with God but pitted two schools of thought against each other, *eilu v' eilu*.

Or, in a totally different era, consider Margalit Fox's description of Grace Paley's childhood in her obituary last summer (New York Times, August 24, 2007): "Grace's childhood was noisy and warm. There was always argument. The Communists hollered at the Socialists, the Socialists hollered at the Zionists, and everybody hollered at the anarchists."

We absolutely have been and continue to be a community of engagement and we continue to thrive on debate. But a belief in God is not essential to the equation.

*Question*

Judaism is a religion, not just a lifestyle or a culture. How can Rabbi Schweitzer say that you can be Jewish and not believe in God? It seems to me that Rabbi Schweitzer is more about the Jewish culture than the beliefs that the Jews hold dear.

Barbara Simon  
Buffalo Grove, Illinois

*Answer*

Defining Judaism as a religion is to over-simplify the richness of Jewish culture and civilization and impose on it a model or template more suited for Christianity. Judaism – or, as some prefer – Jewishness – is about belonging to a people, a nation, a land, a set of languages and foods, an ethnicity, a way of life, and also ritual practices, in any or all combinations. Imbedded in this complex tapestry are values, principles, and ideals that have defined us and serve to motivate us. The true watchword of our people is not “Hear, O Israel,” but “We were slaves in Egypt.” These collective experiences and memories – real or legend – inspire us, if not compel us, to a purposeful life of justice and responsibility.

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