

## Pondering the Existence of God

**IDEA BASED ON RABBI YAACOV HABER AND THE OU PARDES PROJECT BOOKLET, "WHO MOVED?"**

Many of us participate in religious services on the High Holidays even if we rarely go to synagogue during the rest of the year. This is a time of introspection that can lead us to think about the nature of our belief in the existence of God. Whether we define ourselves as believers or skeptics, one way or another our lives are based on a set of assumptions about the world. We may or may not have carefully analyzed and thought these assumptions through, but they impact the way we view and act in life. The High Holidays are a good opportunity to clarify what we really believe and what we have simply accepted from society at large. Do I buy what Judaism teaches about God?

### How Would You Respond?

*Have you ever wondered why there are so many books and movies that present a tiny artificial world and a hero who breaks free from it? The plot is very familiar. We see people living in a world which has a few odd things about it. We, the outsiders, immediately recognize that something is wrong, but the people in the story are oblivious to it. They think that's just the way things are, and they are completely unaware of the real world which exists beyond their experiences. A hero emerges who gradually learns the truth and escapes against all odds.*

*We see it in movies like THX-1138 (1971), Logan's Run (1976), The Truman Show (1998), The Matrix (1999), even children's movies like Madagascar (2005). The oldest such story might be Plato's allegory of the cave in The Republic (380 B.C.E.), but we also see it in books like Anthem, by Ayn Rand (1938), Orphans of the Sky, by Robert Heinlein (1963), This Perfect Day, by Ira Levin (1970).*

*Why does this genre strike a chord in so many people? Stories like these force us to wonder: If I were trapped inside that artificial world, would I be aware of the fact? How do I know I'm not in some tiny artificial world right now? (Ralph Forrest-Ball, Yahoo! Contributor Network)*

Perhaps we would like to believe that we are not living in some "tiny artificial world." But the notion that we are living our lives against a certain backdrop that we have yet to test or fully analyze does seem to resonate. None of us were born in the pristine Garden of Eden; we grew up in a well-established society. That society is founded on specific values that are themselves the product of a particular vision of the world. The worldview that our society has implanted in us is so deeply ingrained – somewhat like the operating system of a computer which is the platform for all of our programs – it doesn't even seem like it's there. But in the back of our minds, we know it is.

For instance, take a person born and raised in Pakistan; what are the chances that he'd be a faithful Muslim? Imagine a person born and raised in a traditional tribal family in India; what

are the chances he'd be a practicing Hindu? Now, imagine you were born in Pakistan or raised in India – what do you think you'd believe? What do you think you would think of the way you live your life now?

Every society produces people who are passionately convinced that their beliefs are right, even to the extent that they are willing to die for them. And a substantial sector of the population is at least somewhat influenced by what they are raised to believe. How can we be sure that our understanding of God is correct? Is there any way to be objective about our beliefs?

## Sources for discussion:

### How do our surroundings influence our views about religion?

#### Max Anteby, *The Jewish Theory of Everything*, Ch. 1

On April 12, 1961, a young Russian cosmonaut stepped in front of the cameras, as he was about to board his spacecraft, Vostok 1, for what was going to be man's first voyage into outer space. Yuri Gagarin announced, "Now I go to meet nature face to face in an unprecedented encounter." For the next several hours, Gagarin encountered nature in a way that no man had done before, far beyond the reaches of the clouds, to a place bordering on the infinite. He had an awesome responsibility to chronicle for mankind what existed outside the Earth's realm and man's control.

Upon his return to Earth he remarked, "Now I know that God does not exist, because I was there and I didn't see him."

Less than one year later, John H. Glenn entered his spacecraft, Freedom 7, in America's attempt to beat the Russians in the race to space. He brought a Bible along with him. As he peered through the small window of his capsule, he looked out on the enormity of the universe and on the delicate fragility of our own Earth. He felt the presence of the "Hand of Almighty God" as he recited from the first chapter of Genesis.

Two men, with identical experiences, unprejudiced by anything that had gone before them. One saw God, the other denied His existence.

#### Rambam (Maimonides), *Laws of Character Development* 6:1

It is the inherent nature of mankind to be drawn, both in attitudes and deeds, after one's friends and associates, and to act in the manner of the inhabitants of one's country. Therefore, a person is obligated to befriend the righteous and to constantly be in the presence of the wise in order to learn from their acts. One should [likewise] distance oneself from the wicked who go in darkness in order not to learn from their ways. This is as Solomon stated, "[One who] walks with the wise will become wise, and one who befriends fools will suffer harm" (Mishlei/Proverbs 13:20).

## Can we be expected to clarify our religious beliefs?

### Rabbeinu Bachaya ibn Pakuda, Duties of the Heart, Ch. 3, The Unity of God

Is it one's duty to investigate the subject of God's existence and oneness?

I say that whoever is capable of investigating – through reason – this and other matters that can be understood by the intellect, is obligated to do so, according to his powers of perception.

If you are a person of intellect and understanding, and through these faculties are capable of verifying the fundamentals of religion...then you are obligated to use these faculties until you gain a clear understanding of the subject...It would demonstrate nothing but laziness to rely solely on what you have been taught, when instead you can obtain certainty by way of rational argument.

### Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, The Way of God 1:1:1-2

Every Jew must believe and know that there exists a First Being, without beginning or end, Who brought all things into existence and continues to sustain them. This being is God.

These things are known by the body of wisdom handed down from the patriarchs and prophets. With the revelation at Sinai, all Israel perceived them and gained a clear grasp of their true nature. They then taught them to their children, generation after generation, until this very day. Moses had thus commanded them, "You shall not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes...and you shall make them known to your children and to your children's children" (Devarim/Deuteronomy 4:9).

These concepts can also be verified logically by demonstrable proofs. Their veracity can be demonstrated from what we observe in nature and its phenomena. Through such scientific disciplines as physics and astronomy, certain basic principles can be derived, and on the basis of these, clear evidence for these concepts deduced.

## Is there a universal religion?

### Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb, Living Up to the Truth, p. 12 – The world's major religions maintain core beliefs that are incompatible with one another.

Now, when it comes to religions, and I am talking now about the major world religions, they contradict each other on some crucial aspect of belief. That is to say, if you take any two of the major world religions, there is some proposition about which they disagree. And that being the case, no more than one can be wholly true. For, if religion A is wholly true then each of the others is wrong at least on the proposition in which it disagrees with religion A.

For example, according to Catholicism, a certain man was God. According to Islam, no man ever was God and no man ever could be God. Islam believes that Mohammed was a true prophet while Catholicism denies this. They cannot both be right. At least one of them has to be wrong.

Hinduism, in the mainstream of Hindu thought, believes that the world is infinitely old, that there was not a creation at a finite time in the past. Since Catholicism and Islam share a belief in creation, and Hinduism rejects it, that means that no more than one of the three can be wholly true.

Buddhism goes further and denies the existence of a creator altogether. (Hinduism would allow a creator who has always been creating the universe from infinity.) Then, no more than one of the four can be wholly true.

Since Judaism believes in creation of finite age, that no man was God and that Mohammed was not a prophet, Judaism is opposed to all four. That means that no more than one of these five can be wholly true.

And so it goes. Take any major world religion and it will contradict the others on some fundamental aspect of belief. Therefore no more than one can be wholly true.

### Are all views equally valid? Is it intolerant to say that someone else's religion is wrong?

#### Rabbi Dr. Asher Meir, *The Jewish Ethicist*, "Discriminating Against Discrimination"

There are indeed profound paradoxes in the seemingly straightforward ideals of toleration and freedom. These ideals raise perplexing questions: Should I be tolerant even of intolerance? Should I support freedom even for tyranny?

The key to resolving paradoxes like these is to go beyond superficial slogans and reflexive statements and examine the deeper meaning of our ideals.

A commitment to tolerance means an acknowledgment that no single person can encompass the totality of truth. Reality is so vast, so complex, that a myriad of distinct individual viewpoints are necessary in order to enable us to begin to comprehend it. The Talmud prescribes a special blessing on seeing 600,000 people at once, blessing God Who comprehends the "wisdom of secrets." The Talmud's explanation for this blessing is that "Just as each person's face is different, so are each person's beliefs different." Only when we have thousands upon thousands of people together do we begin together to approach an understanding of the world's inner being. This variation among human beings is not only acceptable – it elicits a unique blessing.

Yet this doesn't mean that all beliefs are valid! The Sages of the Talmud certainly acknowledge that some beliefs are completely false and dangerous. They identified

a few fundamental ideas as being so contrary to the very foundation of Jewish belief that they stated that those who hold them endanger their place in the World to Come.

When probing the limits of toleration, we must ask ourselves: Is this opposing view an additional, alternative piece of the puzzle of existence? Is it one more facet of the “wisdom of secrets”? Or does this view attack the foundation of existence?

This unique approach allows us to remain passionate in our own beliefs, while remaining tolerant of many other points of view because we recognize some essential insight or lesson they convey.

### Is there a part of us that is sensitive to spirituality regardless of our social surroundings?

**Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifteï Chaim, Emunah & Bechirah, Vol. II, p. 17**

Each person has a spiritual soul that is connected to God above. In this world, God places the spiritual soul into the body of the physical person. It is true that the powers of nature were created by rules of cause and effect, but the soul of the spiritual person, which is connected to God above, is beyond the rules of reason.

The soul is not enslaved to any natural laws, but only to doing the will of God. Although a person has unique capabilities and characteristics which challenge or facilitate his freedom to choose, yet the choice between good or bad is through the spiritual soul, which is not compelled by the person’s constitution.

**Rabbi Abraham Besdin, Reflections of the Rav, p. 71**

There are four media through which man reaches out to God, transcending his finiteness and communicating with Infinity. These are the intellectual, *limmud* (Torah study); the volitional, *shemirat hamitzvot* (observance of the Torah commandments); *tefillah* (prayer); and the emotional, *ahavat Hashem* (love of God).

### Why do certain people seem to perceive God in their lives more than others?

**Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifteï Chaim, Moadim, Vol. II, p. 323**

When we are disconnected from God and are unaware of Him, then God does not show His providence. It appears as if the hand of nature rules over us.

To the degree that we strengthen our belief in His providence, that is how much we will merit the manifestation of His special providence over us.

**Rabbi Natan Meir Wachtfogel, Leket Reshimot, Inyanei Purim, pp. 98-100**

Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz explained that the Midrash which says that the verse “You should follow after God,” (Devarim/Deuteronomy 13:5) refers to the Clouds of Glory that led the Jewish people in the desert (Shemot/Exodus 13:22)...is telling us that there is a positive obligation for every person to follow after God’s providence...

If we don’t try to see providence, then we won’t see or experience any, and we won’t even know what providence is. If, however, one does try to see providence, he will immediately see it in every single step. This is the principle that unless one searches one will never see...

[As an example,] Moshe [Moses] merited everything because he halted in order to see the burning bush (Shemot/Exodus 3:1-22). There were many other shepherds that had passed by and seen the bush burning, but they didn’t stop...Moshe stopped to see because he knew that everything that a person is shown has a purpose. Every single movement within the creation demands a reaction. Once he had stopped to look, he immediately saw that the bush was burning with fire and wasn’t being consumed. He wondered, “What is this great vision?” (Shemot 3:3), and he drew close. And then, “God saw that he turned to look,” and as a result “God called to him” (ibid. 3:4).