

The Orthodox Jew and the Atheist

How I learned that righteousness and morality are a question of behavior,
not belief

BY REBECCA KLEMPNER FEBRUARY 28, 2020



My friend Jeremy was driving me from St. Mary's City, Maryland, to Baltimore one Saturday morning, 25 years ago. We'd passed through the picturesque rural scenery and had hit suburban sprawl. It was March, and although we were on spring break, spring hadn't really hit. Around bland single-family homes, skeletal trees jabbed branches at the overcast sky and patches of grass still looked scruffy. Strip-mall parking lots had begun to fill with shoppers.

"Do you honestly believe only people who believe in God can be upstanding citizens?" Jere asked.

It was one of the last times I rode in a car on Shabbat. I'd tried to find someone to drive me to my great-aunt's on Sunday, but this was the latest ride I could find. While not fully observant for another three or

four years, I had begun to curtail activities prohibited on the Sabbath because of my increasing conviction that the Torah was given to the Jewish people by God.

“I don’t believe in God,” Jere added after a moment.

I was surprised, because Jere was notable among our friends for *chassadim*—little acts of kindness, like this ride—and for *yashrut*, behavior on the straight and narrow. Over the preceding several years, I’d come to view atheists as self-absorbed, intellectually dishonest, and/or blind to the providence I saw around me. I believed they bent rules when they interfered with their convenience or hedonistic appetites, and were primarily occupied with themselves, not others. But Jere didn’t fit that description.

I explained, “Most of the people I know who claim they don’t believe in God are actually angry with God over something awful that happened to them. Or they have invented their own god—whatever they want to do right now.”

Jere said, “Is the only way to decide something is right whether God approves? Because there are an awful lot of religions out there, and they don’t seem to agree on what He said.”

I had to concede the point. “So, how do you make decisions? Real moral choices, I mean.”

“First of all,” he said, “I have a limited time on earth. And I have no idea when my time is up. Whatever I do now counts. There’s no redo. Second, my only posterity is what I leave behind for other people. I don’t know if I’ll have kids, but someone will. What kind of world will I leave behind for them? Third, if everyone were just out for themselves, what kind of world would we be left with? Life is just more enjoyable, smoother, if we try to get along, do what’s right, help each other out. And finally, if there’s no God, no one is going to bail anyone out of trouble but other people. You can’t just pray and wait for God to take care of it. You’ve got to do something.”

Jere's points were highly persuasive. As I became more religious, they stuck with me. While I continued to build my morality on a foundation of Torah, and to believe that it represented God's will, I learned not to assume that the Orthodox way was the only way to construct a just, kind world.

Jewish sources look upon atheists with suspicion. It doesn't help that the Jewish religion is defined by its ethical monotheism: There is one God, He gave us laws on Mt. Sinai. At the end of our lives, we will receive appropriate consequences for our actions, good and bad.

Some might protest that these are only the beliefs of the Orthodox—a minority of Jews. However, most Reform services include the declaration of faith—*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only One*. And most Conservative synagogues close with one of two liturgical poems—“*Adon Olam*” or “*Yigdal*”—both of which proclaim God's Oneness, His creation of the universe, His omniscience and omnipresence.

When the Rambam lists seven “Noahide laws” that apply to non-Jews, he includes belief in God as essential for entrance into the World to Come.

As I began to read more classic books of Jewish literature, I learned that belief in God should lead a person to “fear of heaven,” a state in which a person's consciousness of God's constant supervision of their deeds prevented them from sinning, and to “love of God,” which should imbue a person with a strong desire to fulfill the commandments in order to demonstrate their affection for God. Moreover, knowing that God created every human being and loved them all should remind believers of the innate respect other people deserve.

My reading was reinforced by observations I made in college: Many students declared that there was no objective morality, and then used the absence of any rule to justify an assortment of behaviors that served nothing but their own egos. Jew or non-Jew, if you lacked a belief in God, how would you choose right, know what's right, and feel everyone deserved to be treated right? As I understood it then, morality didn't end with a belief in God—but it did begin with it.

Today, however, as an Orthodox Jew living among mostly other Orthodox Jews, I find myself regularly defending atheists, like Jere. In fact, even without having any faith in God of their own, they have the power to shore up mine when it flounders.

As I grew in my religious practice in the past 25 years, I witnessed outstanding acts of *chessed* and *yashrut* among other Orthodox Jews: Men noticed they were undercharged and returned to the store to pay the additional amount. Women drove to their housekeepers' homes to pay them on time because they hadn't been home when the housekeeper left (since unless there is a contract stating otherwise, the Torah requires workers to be paid the same day). People lent money without interest (to comply with Jewish law). Tables full of Shabbat guests discussed ideas rather than gossip.

Orthodox Jews donated hygiene kits to the homeless, fed new mothers, and visited the sick. There were donors who paid for a poor couple's wedding each time they married off one of their own kids. Still others covered rent for elderly or ill neighbors. Signs attempting to return lost objects popped up constantly around the neighborhood, on social media, and in Jewish newspapers.

These acts were motivated by a belief in God, and they uplifted quotidian life into something spiritual. Moreover, when Jews behave well, they make God look good, a concept called *kiddush Hashem*. Yes, there were non-Orthodox, non-Jewish, and even nonbelieving people who did these things—and I admired them for it. Yet, the refinement and charity in the Orthodox world seemed unparalleled to me.

Oct. 15, 2014, was Hoshanah Rabbah, the final day of Sukkot, a time when the Jewish people are meant to experience joy. I was waiting for my husband to return from synagogue with willow branches for me to beat, part of an ancient custom that symbolizes the defeat of the evil inclination.

I checked the news and learned that Barry Freundel, the rabbi of Keshet Israel, an Orthodox synagogue in Washington, D.C., had been arrested the

previous day on suspicion of voyeurism. Stunned, I sagged against my chair, speechless till my husband arrived. Even then, I couldn't bring myself to tell him what I'd learned, hoping that maybe it would turn out to be a giant mistake. Keshet Israel was my first synagogue, and Freundel was the first rabbi I'd selected for myself. He was someone I'd respected and learned from, the first rabbi I'd asked a religious ruling from. I'd worked as his secretary for a year. I'd babysat his kids!

In just two days, we would celebrate Simchat Torah, the day we complete our yearly reading of the Torah. I had fond memories of Simchat Torah in Georgetown, of getting permits for a street closure, of separate circles for the men and the women, dancing right on N Street for everyone to see our jubilation. How was I going to celebrate this Simchat Torah?

"I won't tell my husband," I told myself. "I'll wait till after Simchat Torah. Maybe Rabbi Freundel will be cleared. Maybe there is some kind of misunderstanding."

But after Simchat Torah, I checked the news and more of the story had come out. The accusations were dreadful: spying on women in the mikvah, the ritual bath, and abuse of women approaching him for conversion.

I felt betrayed, misled, naïve. I had been taught Torah by someone who violated it. The very person I had relied on for guidance had broken the community's trust—and mine. Moreover, he had relied on his "holy" exterior to access victims, make them comfortable, and groom them for abuse.

How am I to trust a rabbi again? I asked myself.

Over the years, there would be more horrors of this kind: a Hasidic rabbi who was convicted of multiple rapes, then welcomed back by a significant percentage of his followers; the principal of a girls' school who abused children, fled to Israel, and now fights extradition; and teachers who seduced and molested their students. This list doesn't include a host of less violent but still disturbing offenses, like welfare fraud, racism, sexism.

Some Orthodox Jews will ignore these infractions or say they are unfortunate but rare. They may call for others to forgive offenders who haven't done *teshuvah* or may actively cover up crimes.

Others say, "Don't judge Judaism by the Jews." But how else are we supposed to judge it? If we tell the world, *This is the one truth, the only set of rules, the best there is*, and members of the Orthodox community behave no better—and sometimes worse—than those outside of it, what does that say about the community, its leaders, its foundation?

I spoke with Jere recently about that conversation we had 25 years ago and how demoralized I feel when supposedly pious people fail so spectacularly. He said, "Honestly, that's the stuff that convinces me a lot of religious people are pretty sh*tty. What does that say about the God they want me to believe in?"

The reverse of *kiddush Hashem* is *chillul Hashem*—when believers act immorally, they not only sully their own reputations, but those of the Jewish community as a whole and God Himself. *Chillul* relates to the word for "hollow." By acting immorally, the sinner sucks some of the Godliness out of the world.

How do we inject the Godliness back in?

According to Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto, in *The Way of God*, goodness and Godliness are the same thing. He wrote: "True good exists only in God. ... By clinging to the elements of perfection, this unique creature (humankind) would make itself resemble its Creator, at least to the degree possible to it. As a consequence, it becomes worthy of being drawn close to God ..."

When a person acts like God, they channel His goodness into the world, and develop a relationship with Him. Believing in God doesn't do it—only *acting* like Him: offering hospitality, feeding the hungry, comforting mourners, being faithful and reliable.

Although believing in God isn't enough to guarantee sound moral choices, it can lead some people to them. Every day, I see Jews who

aspire to be better human beings and who use the teachings of the Torah to realize this goal. I see that *I'm* a better person since I began to study Torah and implement Jewish tools for living into my life.

But I also see people like Jere. He doesn't just do people favors when it's convenient; he actively seeks it out, a quality called *ahavat chesed*. He is not alone. My friend Sara, another atheist, took care of her ex-brother-in-law in his final months of life, advocates for immigrant rights, and supports women who've suffered abuse when they appear in court to obtain restraining orders.

I have learned not to look at a person's exterior appearance or religiosity as an indicator of their trustworthiness or righteousness, but to observe their behavior instead.

Maybe atheists don't believe in God or feel His closeness. But when they behave in a Godly manner, they fill the hollow spaces of our world with goodness. They become the agents of God, transmitting His essence to all of us ... and that makes *me* feel closer to Him. When the world God created is filled with kindness, safety, and love, it is easier to believe He is there, watching over me and providing for me.

I'd like to think that at the end of their days, God will give atheists credit for that—and we should, too.