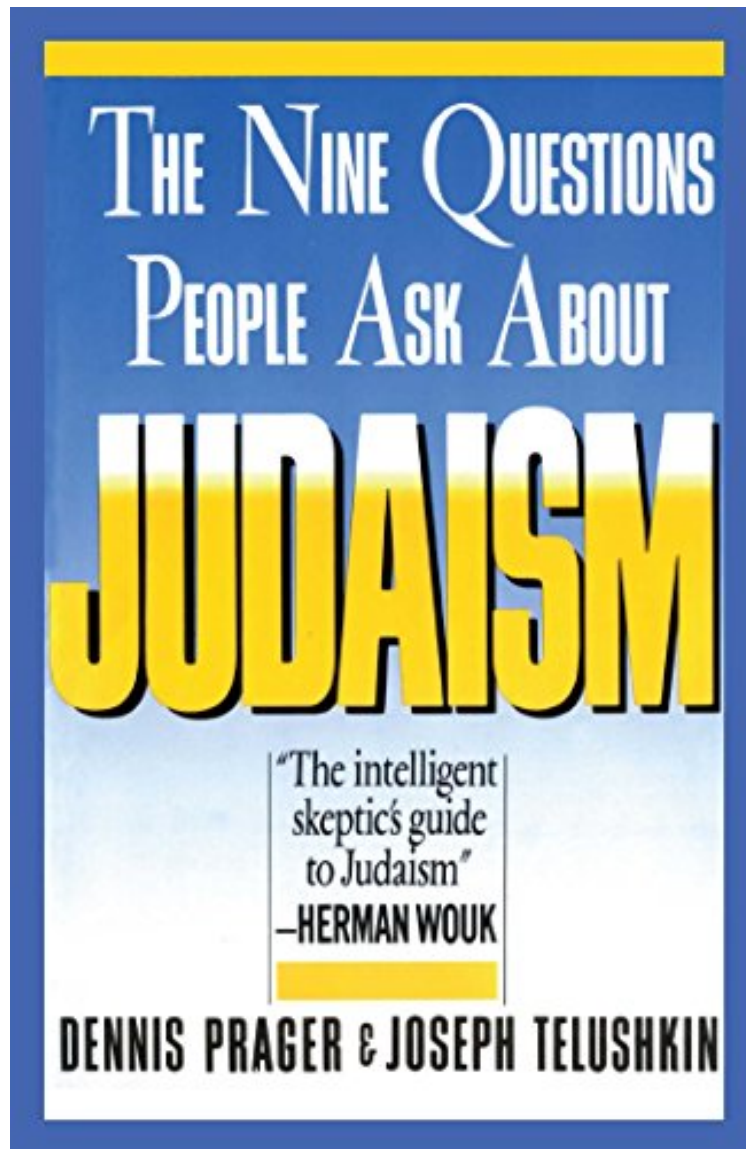


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Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism

Dennis Prager, Joseph Telushkin

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as a gift for someone ...By LeannGreat book; bought it as a gift for someone who has one parent who's Jewish and who knows very little about Judaism. The chapter on Soviet Jewry is outdated; other than that, it's a very easy to read and informative bedtime book.

The classic and essential guide for the educated, skeptical, and searching Jew, or for the non-Jew who wants to understand the meaning of Judaism. If you have ever wondered what being born Jewish should mean to you; if you want to find out more about the nature of Judaism, or explain it to a friend; if you are thinking about how Judaism can connect with the rest of your life this is the first book you should own. It poses, and thoughtfully addresses, questions like these: Can one doubt God's existence and still be a good Jew? Why do we need organized religion? Why shouldn't I intermarry? What is the reason for dietary laws? How do I start practicing Judaism? Concisely and engagingly, authors Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin present Judaism as the rational, moral alternative for contemporary man or woman.

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Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin are also coauthors of Why the Jews? The Reason for Antisemitism. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Question 1 Can One Doubt God's Existence and Still Be a Good Jew? God may have His own reasons for denying us certainty with regard to His existence and nature. One reason apparent to us is that man's certainty with regard to anything is poison to his soul. Who knows this better than moderns who have had to cope with dogmatic Fascists, Communists, and even scientists? Emanuel Rackman, in The Condition of Jewish Belief If the believer has his troubles with evil, the atheist has more and graver difficulties to contend with. Reality stumps him altogether, leaving him baffled not by one consideration but by many, from the existence of natural law through the instinctual cunning of the insect to the brain of the genius and heart of the prophet. This then is the intellectual reason for believing in God: That, though this belief is not free from difficulties, it stands out, head and shoulders, as the best answer to the fiddle of the universe. Milton Steinberg, Anatomy of Faith DOUBT Does God exist? This is life's most crucial question. The implications of the conclusion have the most significant consequences for the meaning of human existence. Yet, despite its overwhelming importance, serious discussion of God is usually confined to theologians and philosophers. The rest of us form simple opinions of belief, agnosticism, or atheism at a relatively early age and are content to retain them without questioning for the rest of our lives. We must therefore begin our presentation of Judaism with a discussion about God. First, let us briefly note Judaism's attitude toward a most common contemporary sentiment about God: doubt. Can you doubt God's existence and still be a good Jew? Yes. Belief in God is often difficult. Crises of faith are to be expected, and acknowledging such crises is not an irreligious act for a Jew. There are four significant reasons why doubts about God's existence should not be an obstacle to your being a good Jew. 1. Judaism emphasizes deed over creed. Judaism stresses action far more than faith. The Talmud attributes to God a declaration which is probably unique among religious writings: "Better that they [the Jews] abandon Me, but follow My laws" (for, the Talmud adds, by practicing Judaism's laws, the Jews will return to God, Jerusalem Talmud Haggigah 1:7). According to Judaism, one can be a good Jew while doubting God's existence, so long as one acts in accordance with Jewish law. But the converse does not hold true, for a Jew who believes in God but acts contrary to Jewish law cannot be considered a good Jew. It is not, of course, our intention to deny the centrality of God in Judaism, but merely to emphasize that Judaism can be appreciated and practiced independently of one's present level of belief in God. You can incorporate Judaism into your daily life through study and practice even while doubting God's existence, because Jewish study and practice in and of themselves are extraordinarily valuable to the individual and society. Moreover, our experience has confirmed that once you begin to study and live Judaism, you will find belief in God much more feasible. As the Talmud notes, whereas a man or woman may begin to practice Judaism for reasons unrelated to God (such as rational and ethical conviction), he or she will eventually do so because of God (Pesachim 50b). 2. Absolute certainty in faith leads to fanaticism. In the words of Emanuel Rackman, one of the foremost Orthodox rabbis of our time: "Judaism encourages doubt even as it enjoins faith and commitment. A Jew dare not live with absolute certainty, because certainty is the hallmark of the fanatic and Judaism abhors fanaticism, [and] because doubt is good for the human soul, its humility.... God may have had His own reasons for denying us certainty. with regard to His existence and nature. One apparent reason is that man's certainty with regard to anything is poison to his soul. Who knows this better than

moderns who have had to cope with dogmatic Fascists, Communists, and even scientists?"³ If God were known, moral choice would end. If we knew God existed and would punish us for evil acts, then good acts would be much less freely chosen. An element of unknowability about God is necessary so as to allow us to choose good. In order to choose good, we must feel free to do bad, and we would not feel this way if we had definite knowledge that God was present and recording our every action. (How much choice do we have to speed when we know a police car is present?)⁴ Since God's existence is unprovable, doubt is natural. God cannot be known to exist in the sense that we know a table or a cat exists. Their existences can be physically demonstrated and verified through our senses. But God's existence cannot, since God possesses no physical qualities. One can prove the existence of the natural, the physical, the finite; God, however, is supernatural, metaphysical, infinite. The inability to prove God's existence reflects, then, only on the fact that God has no physical qualities, a position that Judaism has always maintained. To have doubts about God is, then, normal, permissible, and consistent with being a good Jew. But a good Jew may not deny God's existence. Indeed, the primary task of the Jewish people since its inception has been to bring the idea of a universal God and morality, or ethical monotheism, to mankind. As we shall see below, the most important values of life are dependent upon positing the existence of God: morality, or good and evil as objective realities that transcend personal and national opinions, and ultimate purpose and meaning to human existence. To put it another way, if there is no God, then there can be no objective good and evil, and no ultimate purpose to our existence. For these reasons, among many others, a committed Jew (a) may not deny God's existence, (b) must struggle with his doubts about God (the name of the Jewish people, Israel, means "struggle with God"), and (c) must advocate ethical monotheism, the ideal of a universal God as the basis of a universal standard of ethical behavior. As Elie Wiesel stated it: "The Jew may love God, or he may fight with God, but he may not ignore God." **THE NEED TO POSIT GOD'S**

EXISTENCE MORALITY The first value whose existence is dependent upon positing God's existence is morality. If there is no God, there are no rights and wrongs that transcend personal preference. Gases and molecules, the laws of nature, are not "good" or "evil," "right" or "wrong." If the natural world is the one objective reality, and there is no moral source beyond nature, good and evil possess no objective reality. Moral judgments then become purely subjective. They are popular or personal opinions which are objectively meaningless and represent no reality. It is self-evident and acknowledged by the foremost atheist philosophers that if a moral God does not exist, neither does a universal morality. Without God, all we can have are opinions about morality, but our opinions about "good" and "evil" behavior are no more valid or binding than our opinions about "good" and "bad" ice cream. This is why in secular societies morality is generally considered to be a matter of opinion. Moral relativism is the only possible consequence of the denial of God's existence; morality becomes a euphemism for personal opinion. As this century's most eloquent atheist philosopher, Bertrand Russell, wrote: "I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values but," Russell conceded, "I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don't like it." Russell's second point is our whole point. All that can possibly be wrong with wanton cruelty according to atheism and its moral relativism, is that we may personally not like it. Amoralism is inherent to atheism. To illustrate this point, assume there is no God and attempt to explain why Hitler was morally wrong. For the atheist and moral relativist, the only thing wrong with Nazi atrocities, as Russell said, "is that I don't like it." One may answer that we know "deep down" that Hitler's mass murder and torture were wrong. But from where does this "deep down" feeling of right and wrong come? If there is no God, such feelings are just feelings, and objective morality must transcend subjective feelings. And if in fact we do possess "deep down" knowledge of good and evil, what source of morality put it within us? Or, one may answer that Nazi-type murder is wrong for pragmatic reasons -- citing the argument that "if we kill them, they'll start to kill us and society will fall apart." This is not a moral argument, but merely a pragmatic one, and it is in any event invalid, since committing evil can be regarded as highly practical. In fact, pragmatic arguments usually favor committing the crime. The Nazis, for example, would have correctly dismissed the argument that "if we kill them, then they will kill us" by noting that "they" will not be able to kill "us." As in the rest of nature, only the weak will be destroyed. The pragmatic argument against committing evil is naive. If you can get away with a crime, there is no pragmatic argument against committing it -- only a moral argument, which is often quite impractical. Take, for example, the relatively minor crime of tax evasion. The pragmatic argument again argues for, not against, committing the crime. The argument that "if everyone cheated on their tax returns, we would all suffer," understandably dissuades almost no one from cheating. On the contrary, tax evaders are quite certain that nearly everyone else is cheating, and it is precisely this fact that serves as their justification for doing the same. Precisely because one believes nearly everyone else is cheating, he, too, should cheat. Otherwise he loses. Pragmatism dictates immoral behavior at least as often as it dictates moral behavior. Or, one may answer that reason tells us that Hitler was wrong, and, that in general, evil is wrong. Reason, according to this common attitude, suffices to lead us to moral behavior without the necessity of positing the existence of God. But is this so? Reason often suggests evil behavior. Reason rarely argues for moral behavior. In fact, reason can nearly always be used to justify immoral behavior -- from supporting Nazism to petty cheating in everyday life. The use of reason to justify what is wrong is so common that we have a special word for it -- rationalization. Adolph Eichmann and other Nazi murderers acted "reasonably" when they obeyed orders to murder people and thereby furthered their careers. When the average

German citizen remained silent while his Jewish neighbors were shipped to concentration camps, he was acting entirely according to reason. Reason suggested preserving one's life and not endangering it by aiding a Jew. It may in fact be argued that among the only people in Nazi Germany who acted against reason were those who acted morally. To cite a more mundane example, according to the New York Times, one out of every three hotel guests steals something from his room. Since it is probable that most of these people consider stealing immoral, are we to assume that millions of Americans consider themselves thieves? No. Undoubtedly most will deny that what they have done is thievery; they rationalize their actions by claiming that the hotel overcharges, or that "everyone else" also takes "souvenirs," or that the towel (or ashtray, or painting) will not be missed. In sum, reason is amoral. It is a human tool that can be used as easily for evil as for good. Reason cannot demand good behavior (even when it suggests it). The preceding examples should make it obvious that if reason often does not even suggest good behavior, it cannot possibly be relied upon to demand good behavior. And even when reason does argue for moral behavior, it is not reason that compels a person to act morally. Reason may very well have suggested to many Germans during World War II that they actively oppose Nazism and to many Americans that they not steal from their hotel rooms, but it in no way would compel them to act accordingly. And for the few Germans who did actively oppose Nazism, it was not reason that dictated their moral behavior. It was a recognition of something higher than reason that compelled them to act morally. Thus, given these two facts, that reason can suggest evil, and that it cannot compel good behavior even when it suggests it, we can accurately characterize the notion that reason alone can or will produce moral behavior as a dangerous myth. To return to our original question: If there is no God whose moral will transcends personal opinion, then we cannot say that Hitler was morally wrong. All we can say is "I don't like it." The source of morality must itself be moral, and since reason is amoral, it cannot be the source of morality. That source must be something higher than reason. From the time the Jews stood at Mount Sinai to this day, that higher source has been called God.

ULTIMATE PURPOSE

Morality is not the only value whose existence is dependent upon positing the existence of God. If the physical world is the only reality, i.e., if there is no metaphysical source to life, then life is ultimately purposeless. Life is then nothing more than the chance result of innumerable coincidences, and human beings are nothing more than self-aware molecules. We differ from all other molecular combinations only in that we want to believe that our particular combination has some ultimate meaning and purpose. But this desire is mere delusion. We simply cannot bear to awaken each morning and look in the mirror at a molecular coincidence, so we make up a meaning to our lives. The purposelessness of life if there is no God is not some argument created by theologians. It is a fact, and it underlies all secular existentialist thought. The argument of secular existentialism develops as follows: Given that God does not exist, life is mere physical coincidence with no meaning. Hence, we must endow our "being and nothingness," to use the well-chosen words of Jean-Paul Sartre, with some arbitrary meaning, or we cannot survive the pain of life. For the Jew, the physical world is very real. But it is not the only reality. There is a metaphysical reality as well. The source of this metaphysical reality, God, has created the physical reality and has endowed the human being with a touch of the divine. This element can be called spirituality, or soul, or the image of God, or sanctity. By any name, it means the same: We are not purposeless physical creations of a cruel and apathetic universe, but purposeful spiritual creations of a loving and just God. In order, then, to spread a universal standard of good and evil in the world, and because the death of belief in God must lead to moral chaos and a pervasive sense of meaninglessness, the Jew must posit and advance ethical monotheism even when he is in doubt about God. God's existence is demonstrably necessary for a moral world and for ultimate meaning to life. Nevertheless, one may conclude that while God's existence is clearly necessary, belief in God's existence is irrational and even perhaps impossible. Let us therefore address ourselves to the question of the probability of God's existence.

DOES GOD EXIST?

There are strong arguments on both sides of this question, but in our view the case for the existence of God is stronger than the atheist argument. To paraphrase an argument of Milton Steinberg, the believer in God must account for one thing, the existence of evil; the atheist, however, must account for the existence of everything else. The problem of evil is the most difficult and troubling challenge to religious faith, and any advocate of a religious world view must constantly agonize over it. Before responding to this, however, let us counter with Steinberg's challenge to the nonbeliever: If there is no God, how do you account for the existence of all the good in the world? For consciousness and conscience? Intelligence? Emotions? Love? The laws of nature? For our sense of purpose to the world? For all creation? For the very notion of a universal good and evil? Those of us who affirm God's existence regard such nonphysical realities as emanating from a higher nonphysical source, God. How does the atheist account for all these phenomena? Generally, the atheist will explain that they have developed through coincidences such as the random couplings of gases and molecules. In fact, everything, according to the atheist, developed by chance. Now we do admit that beauty, love, art, intelligence, consciousness, conscience, natural laws, complex cellular activity, the pervasive sense of purpose, the notions of universal justice and morality, and all creation could emanate from inanimate coincidences. But while this is a possibility, logic and reason (not to mention our religious natures) compel us to reject it as a probability. Design suggests to us a Designer, law a Lawgiver, creation a Creator, intelligence a Source of intelligence, conscience a God. There are two possible explanations for creation: that everything comes from chance and coincidence, or from design and purpose. The choice is between nonsense and sense. If there is no God, one cannot speak of sense in life, or

of good and evil, or of ultimate purpose. These things would be, as we have noted, mere delusions created by our minds to deny that all is anarchic and meaningless. But the moment you affirm that these nonphysical aspects of life possess an objective reality, you are implicitly affirming the existence of God. From where else do these nonphysical realities derive? Gases and amino acids do not possess truth, purpose, good, or evil. As Milton Steinberg wrote: "This then is the intellectual reason for believing in God: that though this belief is not free from difficulties, it stands out, head and shoulders, as the best answer to the riddle of the universe." There is, however, one other riddle that is best explained by positing the existence of God; the existence and impact of the Jews. The history, survival, and most mysterious of all, the overwhelming impact upon history, of the Jews cannot be explained by the criteria applied to any other nation's fate. First, there are the unparalleled facts of Jewish survival as a distinct people. In all the world, only the Jews have survived for nearly four thousand years with their culture intact. Only the Jews have had their homeland destroyed (twice), been dispersed throughout the world and homeless for two thousand years, endured hatred wherever they have lived, survived the most systematic attempt in history (aside from that on the Gypsies) to destroy an entire people, and been expelled from nearly every nation among whom they have lived. Yet the Jews still live, studying about their ancestors who lived about 1600 B.C.E., having the same homeland as in 1000 B.C.E., speaking there the same language as their ancestors did over three thousand years ago, and worshiping the same God. The enigma of Jewish survival has perplexed nearly all world historians and social philosophers. Among the latter, perhaps Mark Twain expressed it most succinctly: "The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dreamstuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew: all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?" For the Jew, of course, "the secret of his immortality" is the divine element in Jewish history. But there is something far more perplexing and impressive than the survival of the Jews, and that is the influence which this people has had upon humanity. A tiny group of uncultured and homeless slaves gave the world God, ethical monotheism, the concept of universal moral responsibility, the notion of human sanctity (human creation in "the image of God"), the idea of progress (linear as opposed to cyclical history), messianism, the Prophets, the Bible, and the Ten Commandments. If not for the Jews, there would be no Christianity, no Islam, no Marxism, no socialism, no humanism. It is no wonder that Jew-haters have so constantly spoken of a world Jewish conspiracy. The greatest powers in the world have always seemed to be obsessed with this numerically insignificant people. The Romans, the Church, the Nazis, the Communist world, the Muslim world, and the United Nations have each, for long periods of time, been preoccupied with the Jews. To this day, this people, which numbers less than 14 million in a world of over 4.5 billion people, or fewer than three out of every thousand people, is at the center of human events. To the Jew himself, the reason for the Jewish impact upon mankind has always been clear. The Jew is inherently no different from any other human being, and any other human being can become a Jew. Hence, the explanation for the Jewish impact is not to be found in the Jews themselves but in Judaism. Something else must be at play in Jewish history and in the Jewish impact upon world history: something beyond history -- perhaps God. When one begins to appreciate fully the uniqueness of the monotheist ideal, its seemingly spontaneous generation in the minds of human beings at only one time among only one people, and the utterly unique impact of Judaism upon the world, one concludes that either superhuman beings or God was the initiator of Judaism and ethical monotheism. God seems more plausible.

ATHEISM To set forth certain arguments for the existence of God is not in itself sufficient, because it does not take into account the nature of many atheists and some of their reasons for atheism. Atheists may be classified under one or more of five categories.

1. Atheists who deny God because God was presented to them in a childish or distorted manner. It is unfortunate but undeniable that God is often perceived and presented in a foolish or distorted manner. A typical example is the anthropomorphic conception of God which portrays Him as, for example, a grand old man sitting up in heaven. Such a straw-man God is a convenient target for atheists' jibes at believers: it was this caricature that Soviet cosmonauts mocked when they boasted that up in space they saw no God. A second common distortion is the portrayal of God as little more than a cosmic butler, someone to call on to grant our requests, someone whose reason for being is to serve us rather than we Him. The third and worst distortion of God takes place when evil is committed in His name. This is a favorite theme of atheists who cite Church atrocities as examples of the moral irrelevance of God. This argument, however, poses little problem to Judaism, since it does not claim that faith in God by itself produces good people or a good world. God is the basis of morality, but in order to become a moral person and make a more moral world, two other commitments must accompany a commitment to God: commitments to the supremacy of morality and the use of reason. Moreover, if we are to negate God because certain individuals or groups have committed evil in God's name, then we must likewise negate laws, science, sex, and any other none goal or fact of life. Laws can put criminals in prison, but they can also, as in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, put criminals in power. Science can cure millions, but it can also destroy millions. Sex can be beautiful, but there are rapists. The fact that men can pervert the name of God, or corrupt laws, science, and sex, only bears witness to the human potential to

corrupt. Because we can pervert God, morality, and reason, does not mean we can do without them. Therefore, we invite atheists who identify themselves in this category to examine the conception of God held in Jewish sources. Judaism brought the one-God concept into the world. Atheists will discover that the anthropomorphic or cosmic butler conceptions of God are utterly foreign to Judaism. When Moses confronted God, he asked Him His name. "I am what I am," God replied. The Jew cannot know what God is, only that God is and what God wants.² Atheists who deny God in rebellion against their home, background, parents, or external authority in general The rejection of a parent's religion or God is a common feature of the assertion of independence from parental influence. This rejection of God is not limited to the children of authoritarian homes; it is equally prevalent in children from overly permissive homes. The children of very lenient parents are also likely to revolt against external authority. The children to whom parents gave "everything" came to see themselves as the ultimate being, thus rejecting all need for any higher authority -- be it a parent, a school, a government, or God.³ Atheists who deny God because they were raised in and/or live in a secular environment Though few atheists may admit it, many of them learned their views concerning God and religion in their homes as they grew up, and they have rarely, if ever, questioned them. Atheists rightly dismiss the beliefs of many religious individuals as little more than ingrained attitudes derived from the home or social environment. But atheists who have not sought to confront intelligent believers and their arguments, and who have not tested their denials of God in living situations among sophisticated religious people, are subject to the same dismissal. Therefore, the atheist who seeks truth, a better self, and a better world is obligated to seek out religious people and religious literature before locking himself into atheist dogma. Intellectual honesty and moral concern demand this approach.⁴ Atheists who deny God because of personal suffering or human suffering in general There is not much we can say to someone who denies the existence of God because of personal tragedy such as the death or suffering of loved ones. To these people we must offer an extended hand, not arguments. Nevertheless, the denial of God's existence after personal tragedy constitutes more of an emotional than a rational response to the question of God. Our periods of suffering do not disprove God's existence any more than our moments of joy prove it. Moreover, we must be specific when speaking of human suffering. We must distinguish between two causes, human and natural, for only the second directly questions God's existence. Man-made evil. Let us take a most terrible problem for Jews today, faith after Auschwitz. How can we believe in God after He allowed six million Jews, including over a million children, to be gassed, burned, experimented on, frozen, and transformed into soap bars and lampshades? There is virtually no Jew who has not asked this question. Before offering some thoughts on this question, a personal note is in order. Though we (the authors) were both born in the United States after the Holocaust, and though neither of us lost any immediate family in the Holocaust, the Holocaust has had the most profound impact on our thinking. Part of each one of us died with the six million. Nevertheless, the Holocaust does not constitute an insurmountable obstacle to our belief in God. First, and foremost, God did not build Auschwitz and its crematoria. Men did. Man, not God, is responsible for the Holocaust. Judaism posits that people have freedom of choice. Perhaps we would prefer that people had been created as robots who could do only good rather than as human beings who can also choose evil. But this is impossible; only where there exists the possibility of evil does there exist the possibility of good. Secondly, while the Holocaust may suggest to us Jews denial of God, to what do we attribute the survival of the Jewish people, its massive impact on the world, and the rise of Israel? Thirdly, the Holocaust may make faith in God difficult; but it makes faith in man impossible. Along with the six million Jews, and tens of millions of others murdered by the Nazis and Communists, we must bury the doctrine which enabled Communism and Nazism to rise: the belief that man is the highest being. After Auschwitz and the Gulag Archipelago, we have two choices: belief in man under God or belief in nothing. The question to be posed after Auschwitz, Gulag Archipelago, and other such barbarities is not "Where was God?" but "Where is man?" Natural suffering. With natural suffering (disease, earthquakes, etc.) we face a far more difficult problem than with man-made suffering. True, man does have the capacity, to greatly limit natural suffering, and in some cases, even to eliminate it, and man must therefore share part of the responsibility for the prevalence of natural suffering. Nevertheless, we readily admit that the issue of natural suffering is the most difficult one confronting the believer in God. We do not know why God allows (or perhaps even creates) natural suffering. This does not mean, however, that Judaism is silent on the issue of natural suffering. On the contrary, an entire book of the Bible, Job, is devoted to the subject. Job recounts the terrible sufferings endured by a man whom the Bible emphasizes was a particularly good and righteous man (thereby making the question of his suffering even sharper), and it details the questions and explanations offered by Job and his friends concerning human suffering and God. The Book of Job asks: If God is good, why do good people suffer? Job's friends are of the opinion that the suffering of Job (as a symbol of all people) is punishment for his sins. But the Bible, i.e., Judaism, categorically rejects this notion. Why, then, do good people suffer? After thirty-seven tense chapters of questioning and challenging, of bitterness and tears, God gives Job, and us, His answer: Then God answered Job...and said: "Who is this that complicates ideas with words without knowledge? Get prepared like a man, I will ask you and you tell me. Where were you when I established the world? Tell me, if you know so much. Who drafted its dimensions? Do you know?... Did you ever command forth a morning?... Have death's gates been revealed to you? Have you examined earth's expanse? Tell me, if you know. Can you... guide the bear with her cubs?... Does the hawk soar by your wisdom? Does the eagle mount at your command, and make his nest on high?..." God answered Job and said: "Will the

contender with God yield? He who reproves God, let him answer for it." Job answered God and said: "Lo, I am small, how can I answer you? My hand I lay on my mouth. I have spoken once, I will not reply... I talked of things I did not know, Wonders beyond my ken..." (Job 38:1-4, 12, 17-18, 32; 40:1-5) God's answer? God is God, and who are we to assume that we can understand everything? As an ancient Hebrew phrase put it: "If I knew Him [God], I'd be Him." Who "established the world," we or God? Admittedly, this may not be the answer we hoped for, but what answer would we desire? If God is God and man is man, is there any other possible answer than the one given to Job? Certainly, Judaism could have presented a more "popular" image of God, or denied the reality of suffering (as was done often in Eastern philosophies), or theologically explained human suffering as divinely ordained punishment, but it does not do this. To the rational and thinking person, this very honesty of Judaism, its unwillingness to compromise on the nature of God despite its desire to gain adherents, is very reassuring. In Judaism, we can affirm the existence of God without suspending either our reason or our questioning. Indeed, for the Jew, reason and questioning should ultimately be a source of affirmation that there is a God, and that ultimately there is meaning to my life -- and yes, even to my suffering.

5. Atheists who deny God because they have explored both sides of the issue There remains a very small minority of atheists who do not fall into the first four categories. These individuals have come to the conclusion that there is no God neither out of blind acceptance of an atheistic doctrine handed down to them, nor out of rebellion 'against home and environment, nor because God has been presented to them foolishly, nor out of an emotional reaction to tragedy, but after efforts to believe and lead a religious life, after reading intelligent presentations of the concept of God, and after sustained dialogue with sophisticated believers. Frankly, we have never met such people, though through their writings we are aware of the existence of such individuals. Yet even these few extraordinary atheists still ascribe the existence of everything to chance; and most important, they still confront the greatest challenge to atheism' It renders morality subjective. As Dostoevsky wrote in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "where there is no God, all is permitted." Atheism denies God, but what does it affirm? The answer is, of course, that atheism affirms nothing -- though this does not mean that atheists affirm nothing. On the contrary, atheists replace God with gods of their own choosing: humanity, art, reason, the state, secular ideologies, science, progress, revolution, culture, education, happiness, the self.... The issue is not belief or nonbelief, but belief in God or belief in other gods. At great cost in human life and suffering, however, we have learned that all these other gods have failed; that without God each of these substitute values is meaningless and ultimately terribly dangerous because they become ends in themselves, beyond good and evil.

CONCLUSION Atheism, then, is rationally no more (and apparently a good deal less) convincing an answer to the mysteries of human existence and the universe than is belief in God. On this issue, Voltaire, himself an unrelenting antagonist of organized religion, said: "In the opinion that there is a God, there are difficulties; but in the contrary opinion there are absurdities." Atheism not only suffers from a lack of answers and from amorality; it is for most of its adherents an intellectually lazy doctrine as well. Despite the fact that to many people atheism is usually associated with intellect, the majority of atheists have no more questioned their beliefs than most simple believers have questioned theirs. Many Jews today have doubts about God's existence, but they live as if God does not exist. They are agnostics, but live as atheists. But there are compelling intellectual, moral, and existential reasons to live as if God does exist -- to live a Jewish life -- even when you have doubts. You may be an agnostic in theory, but in practice you live either a Jewish life or a secular life. Of course the primary concern of this book, as we see in the next chapter, is with living a Jewish life. It is through living a Jewish life, even while struggling with one's doubts, that one becomes a good Jew. Copyright 1975, 1981 by Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin