

## So What *Can* We Believe?

Judaism has never had an authorized, systematic theology. The closest we've come are the "Thirteen Principles of Faith" written by Maimonides in his 13<sup>th</sup> C. commentary on the *Mishnah* (Sanhedrin 10). Maimonides viewed the following as the thirteen required beliefs of Judaism:

The existence and unique unity of God, and God's infinite, incorporeal presence. That God alone must be the object of worship. That God's message was revealed through the Biblical prophets, with Moses the preeminent prophet. That God's law, Torah, was given on Mount Sinai and is immutable. That God has foreknowledge of human actions, rewards the good and punishes evil. And finally that the certain coming of the Messiah will bring the resurrection of the righteous dead.

Though these principles were controversial when first proposed, and were effectively ignored by much of the Jewish community for the next few centuries, they have come to be widely held and generally accepted by Orthodox Judaism today. They are familiar to us in the song *Yigdal* found in the *siddur*, and as our closing song on Kol Nidre evening. *Yigdal* is based on Maimonides' 13 Principles.

As formative as these principles of faith or belief have become, Maimonides was quick to distinguish what people "needed" to believe, from what was "really true." In his *Guide for the Perplexed* [Book III, Chapter 28] Maimonides explicitly draws a distinction between "true beliefs"-- namely "beliefs about God that produced intellectual perfection", and "necessary beliefs"-- which were "conducive to improving social order."

In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides is writing for the intellectual elite, as he calls them, those who know that God does not reach down into our world, that God does not directly change or alter our finite reality, and that because God exists as an "Infinite Presence," there is necessarily an unbridgable separation between our finite world and God's infinite reality.

Judaism has never developed a dogma, a set of certain and sure beliefs that define Jewish faith. And though Maimonides' Principles are regarded by many as just such a statement, even Maimonides' knew (and wrote) that these were not "true" beliefs, but rather "necessary beliefs to improve social order."

And even before Maimonides in the 13<sup>th</sup> C.-- in the 3<sup>rd</sup> C BCE we read in the book of Ecclesiastes/*Kohelet* that the religious promise that God will bless and protect the good, and will punish evil is just not true! *Kohelet* writes: *I have seen everything in my ephemeral life: A virtuous person, perishing in his virtue And a wicked person, living long in his evil* (7:15). And later in the book we read: *Again I saw in the world that the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the understanding, nor favor to the learned, but time and death happen to them all.* (9:11)

From Ecclesiastes/*Kohelet* to today we've continued to be challenged by a traditional theology that seems self-evidently wrong. In 1983 Rabbi Harold Kushner published his first book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. A Conservative rabbi, Kushner declared that God does not, because God cannot, interfere with natural process of day-to-day living. His book was not "**Why** bad things happen..." but rather "**When** bad things happen..." And he says that prayers to God to change reality are childlike, wishful, and have no effect. But, he writes, prayers for courage and strength, for patience and understanding—those prayers God does answer. God's Presence, he says is indeed real, but only becomes manifest in God's transformative effect on the human spirit.

Rabbi Kushner in the 20<sup>th</sup> C, echoed Maimonides in the 13<sup>th</sup>, saying that the Biblical stories of God "reaching down" and directing events could not have been. They are stories to inspire and encourage, stories that were written to express the people's awe and wonder of God's majestic presence. But God did not, could not, split the sea because God knows that once a single innocent person is saved by the Divine Hand, then every single innocent individual for all time must be so rescued by a just and righteous God. And that would end the rules of natural law, of cause and effect, and life would become chaos. Kushner and Maimonides and *Kohelet* wrote that the Creator God set the universe in order according to natural rules, and if God were ever to interfere, even once, the system collapses.

So what *can* we believe? We have to start from the single most important theological truth: which is that we can never “know” God! Our mortal, finite minds cannot, by definition, grasp the Infinite. So anything we say or believe, or “know” about God is only a best guess. In his 1995 book *What Do Jews Believe?* David Ariel wrote: “Every time we talk about God or what we believe about God, we are creating Him in our own image. It is impossible to avoid committing an act of idolatry if we are to say anything about God. Jewish belief must always be critical of itself and constantly attempt to challenge itself.”

If we can never “know” the Divine, if God’s Infinite Presence is always beyond our ability to comprehend or apprehend—then every religious system, its rituals and ceremonies, its theologies and beliefs are, at their best, only finite, human-made constructs that give value and meaning to our sense of covenant with God. These constructs we fashion work well within our own community, confirming to its members value and meaning and truth. Constructs that don’t work well, for one reason or another, are discarded—for example Sabbath labor prohibitions in our Reform community. Every religious community does, and should, create its own connecting construct that properly responds to its members’ need to “touch” and understand, and be together with, God.

We inherit these relational religious systems of rites and rituals, customs and ceremonies as they have been passed down to us from generations past. And, speaking now for us, even though our rational world view has changed what we believe, even though the construct created in the past does not express where we theologically are in the present, we are often hesitant to let elements of it go. And so each generation re-defines, so to speak, the construct of its systematic religious expression—the rites and rituals with which it expresses itself. Some, like the Sabbath prohibitions, we let go—but some we keep even though they represent a theology that we’ve moved beyond. A good example is our candlelighting blessing.

We praise *Adonai Elohaynu*, Adonai our God who “has commanded us to kindle these lights.” If I don’t believe that God, personally and in direct communication, commanded my ancestors (to say nothing of speaking to me!) to light these lights—can I, with intellectual honesty, recite that blessing? And my answer is certainly ‘yes’. In repeating these words on Friday night, I remember my grandmother and my parents saying the blessing. I remember my mother passing on to my brothers and me that responsibility. I remember teaching our children to sing the blessing, and I now I hear my grandchildren sing them, and I know they will teach their children. The words and the melody of the prayer have value and meaning and “truth” far beyond the literal content of the text. Without the melody and words those connecting moments to grandparents and parents would be lost. And because when I sing those words on Friday evening, knowing that they are echoed around the world, in millions of Jewish homes, I am also immediately connected to Jews and Jewish families everywhere, with an additional awareness that all of us and each of us are also connected to more millions of Jewish families from generations past. There is a power and a “truth” to the religious moment of *l’hadlik ner shel Shabbat* that simultaneously connects me to the Infinite Presence of God, to my family and to my Heritage and History, past, present and future.

When I taught in the synagogue I would regularly speak with our students about the inherent challenge of belief in God. If God’s Infinite Reality is beyond the reach and scope of my finite world, then any meaningful answer in our struggle to find God is as good as any other. And even a rejection of God’s reality must then be equally acceptable. After all, I would say to my Confirmation students, how can I tell you that God is real, that you should believe God is real, if there is no objective evidence of that truth? If, in my own way, I am aware of the Presence of God, regularly or occasionally, how can I possibly convey the meaning and value of that “awareness” to others? I can only say “it’s there”. And saying “it’s there” for me, at this moment or a remembered moment, is hardly in any way a convincing argument.

There is no proof for the existence of God, or for that matter-- God’s goodness or God’s love. But if there are moments in your life when you are aware of the Presence of something bigger than you, more important than you, to which you are connected in a transcendent moment of spiritual awareness—then that, for you, is the beginning of “faith,” and becomes “evidence” for you with which you may affirm “God.” But it’s not the kind of experience that can become evidence for others.

When I would go into the younger grades of our Religious School and talk about “God”, I would explain how difficult it is know something that we cannot know! The world we live in is measured by weight and length and color. And the tools with which we measure the world simply will not work when we turn from the finite to the Infinite. I would tell our children that questions like “how big is God?” “what color is God?” or “where is God?” are all questions we can’t answer because God doesn’t have weight or length or color or place. And our children understand that. So I would tell them the real question is not “where is God?” but rather “when is God?” And that, they understood because they can and do know “when is love?” and “when is friendship?”—because like God, love and friendship are real, despite not having weight and length and color.

I join the teachers that came before me: *Kohelet* over 2000 years ago, and Maimonides 800 years ago, and Kushner over 30 years ago, and so many others past and present, who all recognized that God cannot interfere in any tangible way in our world, in my life or in my future, despite what our Scriptures and prayerbook say. But just because God cannot reach down into our world, does not mean that God’s Infinite Presence does not occasionally touch me with an intangible connective warmth that comes as quickly as it goes—but which is as real as anything can be. And it is in those moments that we know we are not alone, that our covenant with God is real and “true”.

**Rabbi Joe Klein**  
***www.rabbiklein.com***  
***rabbi@rabbiklein.com***