

BELIEVING IN GOD

Do you believe in god? For some people this can be easily answered, with a short and quick yes or no. For others it is as difficult as anything they will ever be asked. For very many people the two words, “believe” and “god” are unclearly defined concepts that require further discussion. Belief in god is not an easy question for me either and what follows are some personal thoughts on this topic.

Most basically, what is a god? I will discuss later in much greater detail the characteristics of the Jews’ God but a minimal western definition, to start with, could be: an entity, with will and the power to act without resistance. He is desirous of certain outcomes. Here I differ from some who say god is nature, god is love, god is life or some other impersonal aspect of the universe.

So, what does it mean to believe in a god? Believing means affirming the existence of this entity, regarding him as separate from us and incomparably more wise and powerful than we are. Our bible and prayers suggest certain characteristics that will be described below.

Why do some believe and some not? We all have unique collections of experiences and other information. The latter is gained from observation and from the study of present and historical reading material. All of these together determine whether the existence of God, as I defined Him above and as presented by our religion, seems reasonable. Each person judges whether his/her life experiences and other gained knowledge make the existence of a god likely.

Believing in God is not within our control (in the same way that love or other complicated emotions are not subject to our will either)! Faith is caused completely by what we have learned from living. Do our experiences and other learning so far suggest the existence of God or make such an entity less likely? We cannot force ourselves or anybody else to come to a conclusion that disagrees with other life lessons. These have and will continue to shape our beliefs.

Fortunately, and intentionally I’m sure, Judaism does not depend as much on belief as do other religions. For us actions that follow the commandments are much more important. Our beliefs don’t save us in this life; our actions can. Our beliefs don’t guarantee a life after death; they are supposed to encourage actions that benefit us in this life. So if a person tells me he has trouble believing in God, I respond that he can still appreciate the wisdom of the commandments and obey themfor the improvement of his life and of his community’s.

The first commandment is to affirm the existence of God. The next few are interesting also in that they require, for example, that we don’t worship lesser things than God. Another commandment says we should not take the god concept lightly or even foolishly. If we aren’t at least serious about the idea that there is more to life than meets the eye, then we might very badly go astray, ascribing undue importance to mundane things and thereby lowering our human potential. Making images of God necessarily lowers Him by ascribing ordinary physical characteristics.

The Five Books of Moses is our first source of information about God and there we see what He wants us to know about Him. The two other sources are our experiences and what we hear and read about others' experiences, in other places and other times. So what do these Books tell us about God?

- a) He is interested in human affairs and intervenes in history to achieve His goals.
Example: cultivating (selecting and supporting) early the Jewish people, giving them his recommendations for achieving a utopian society, along with a land in which to demonstrate the wisdom/benefits of the laws on a large scale.
- b) He is a jealous god. This just means that He doesn't want us to lower ourselves worshiping silly things. Even if we don't worship Him, we shouldn't give ourselves to very ordinary idols. Idols are not to be understood as merely stone or wood but any other object, physical or abstract, that is part of nature but not above nature.
- c) He is a stern god. He is serious about His projects and will not tolerate any diversion or lightheartedness.
- d) He is not our buddy, our very own advisor, our guardian, and so on. There is no small-talk or personal conversations with Moses or our forefathers. The God of the Five Books is not a personal god, it seems.
- e) He is responsive to a certain extent, as when Moses or the forefathers make certain requests or seek to alter the most severe decrees. Of course those passages are also teaching us to assert ourselves for the benefit of humanity.
- f) He does not want to be known physically at all, contrary to Moses' or all of humanity's wishes.
- g) He is willing to act on a cataclysmic scale with regard to human life. Large groups of people, cities, countries, and all of the natural world can be eliminated.
- h) Is He all-knowing and all-powerful? He doesn't say that He is. These are only characteristics that we think a god should have.
- i) Is He just and merciful? We'd like Him to be; but we see these characteristics more evident in the Five Books than since.
- j) He lets us make choices, i.e. mistakes, especially with regard to following His advice. We are free to not follow the laws and make our lives miserable.
- k) His expectations are not cruel or even excessive.

I have listed above eleven characteristics of God, as I find them in the Five Books of Moses. This is what God wants us to know about Him and nothing else. There are religions that differ from Judaism in what they believe about their gods. Some want their god to be more personable, some expect him to be more jealous, some

have no problem with demands for greater sacrifices, and so on. Not all religions and not even the major religions see, to be worshipping the same god. This is an important fact. Ultimately the characteristics of a worshiped god determine the characteristics of the individual and his community, with the results being goodness or evil.

So do I believe there is a God? Sometimes.....and sometimes I see chaos everywhere which leads me to the opposite conclusion.

Postscript: Some years ago a couple asked my opinion on what they should tell their children about God. I recommended telling children nothing about God for some years but discussing instead the ethics of various encountered situations. In the teen years some discussion of a higher power or of a greater reality can commence. Young children and even many adults see God as an elderly, bearded, wise, human-like figure. There is no need to start children with this simple-minded figure and then have to reeducate them later to more realistic expectations.

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