

Dear Community,

Some time ago, I was driving home from a class I had given and, to pass the time, I was listening to a recording of a panel discussion about Judaism. The panel was made up of rabbis across the religious spectrum and they were discussing a wide range of theological and social issues. The conversation proceeded amicably, each rabbi presenting their perspective and sourcing their position either with halachic sources, assertions about the current reality, or anthropological interpretations of divine intent.

Soon the conversation turned to the question of conversion, and the mediator asked if the individual rabbis would convert an atheist who would fully commit to practicing the laws, but would do them as a cultural phenomenon with no spiritual purpose. The majority of the rabbis on the panel, regardless of affiliation, immediately rejected the possibility that one can convert to a religion if they don't believe that it is a religion in the first place. However, one of the rabbis was more accepting. "Judaism has no dogma, no obligations to believe, only a call to action, so why not accept him?"

This notion, that Judaism makes no demands on our intellectual faculties, no obligation of belief, was shocking to me. The very first commandment in the Ten commandment, the tagline of our faith, is "I am G-d, your Lord ...", seemingly an obligation to believe in the very assertion that this atheistic convert so roundly rejected. Maimonides codifies this obligation in a few places, and while there seems to be a discrepancy between a couple of his formulations if the obligation is to 'believe' or to 'know' the thrust is similar.

Nachmanides disagrees and states that this is not an obligation; however, this is a fundamental cornerstone of all of Jewish faith and practice. Therefore, this belief cannot be isolated into any single commandment but is rather implicit in all of them. As one goes through all the sources (Abarbanel, Malbim, Yehudai Gaon, Albo, etc.) wherever they fall on this debate, all state that belief in G-d is fundamental as a core tenet of Judaism, one that simply cannot be ignored.

Yet, for many of us, the assertion that this rabbi made would be very comforting. In our current zeitgeist talking about belief in a G-d who makes demands, who can be spoken to, who cares about what we do, is often passé. While we can talk about 'something greater' or 'I don't believe in G-d but I do believe in spirituality', verbally acknowledging the G-d described by Judaism can be uncomfortable in polite, intellectual society. Indeed, aside from our own insecurities about appearing 'irrational,' we often have a hard time feeling this truth ourselves. We feel distant from G-d; we have moved past

even being able to hate Him. For many of us, He seems to simply have withered away under the light of society's progress.

Yet, as we read the Ten Commandments in our synagogues this week, as we hear the words proclaiming G-d's existence, we need to refocus on what Judaism asks of us: that we galvanize ourselves to bring G-d back into our lives. We can't be satisfied with apathetic ambiguity; we can't shy away from the intellectual convictions that need to dictate our lives. We may feel certain, but we must strive for clarity. We must make the study of Torah, of intellectual contemplation, of experiential actualization a priority in our lives. We must be ready to proclaim for all to hear "Shema Yisroel Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad!"

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein