



The **Eilu V'Eilu program**, under the auspices of the Union for Reform Judaism, invites two scholars to address a particular question over a four-week program. In the first week, each respondent offers a position paper. In the second week, he or she responds to the other. In the third, they take up questions from the 5000 or so on-line subscribers to this program. And in the final week, the commentators offer a summary statement. Rabbi Schweitzer was honored to be invited to participate in one of these dialogues in March 2008.

**Can a person consider her/himself to be a good Jew
and not believe in God?**

Rabbi Peter Schweitzer's Closing Statement

As we bring this dialogue to a close I want to express my appreciation for the opportunity to participate in this forum. This has been a good exchange. Despite the fact that there may be a difference of opinion, this discussion seems to be raising other questions about core definitions, boundaries, and freedom of choice within those boundaries. For some, the range of possibilities can be positive, exciting and creative. Others find too many choices to be anxiety-provoking. They fear that the foundation of Judaism as they understand it, or of Reform Judaism in particular, is being threatened or eroded, and they are unclear how to balance all these options under one roof.

If history is any teacher and comfort, there has never been one form of Judaism and there never will be. Multiple Judaisms have co-existed throughout the centuries. From the Pharisees, Saducees and Essenes, to Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and Humanistic, from Zionists and Yiddishists and other secularists, to black hat Hasidim and post-denominationalists, we have a long history of competing definitions and identifications. Paradoxical as it may sound, our longest-standing tradition is to embrace change and innovation. Stagnation is the worst thing that can happen to us and we will continue to re-invent and re-define ourselves if we want to flourish.

The question that some get stuck on is how can one still be Jewish if one no longer embraces a historically-held belief in God, not to mention a God who has singled out the Jewish people for a particular mission? Why, if these are one's views, not give into universal humanism?

For some, opting out is or has been the answer, and they may have chosen Ethical Culture in one generation or secular humanism in another. However, for the vast majority of the rest of us, we embrace our Jewish identity because of the values and principles that Jewish experience has taught us. For us, the Jewish family is our family and we know no other. Likewise, as idealistic as some of us may be to strip away national boundaries, they are here to stay, but are not grounds for divinely-determined superiority or chosen status. Politicians may invoke "God bless America" at the end of their speeches, but the last I knew, God (or Jesus) doesn't have a nation-state favorite, or a preferred team in a football game, especially when, or if, Notre Dame ever plays Holy Cross.

By the same token, we can be committed secular or cultural Jews not only without that divine calling but without a ritual life. One does not require the other. Gefilte fish does not need to be brought to the Passover table to be identified as Jewish. Homemade or not, it links us to the generations without having to leave the kitchen. And ritual need not take place in the temple either. For many, the local delicatessen is a holier place than the synagogue and weekly Sunday dinner at the local Chinese restaurant was the glue that held many families together, not attendance at Shabbat.

As members of this Jewish family, whose history stretches back thousands of years, we have a rich legacy. We are heirs to stories and legends and volumes of literature, to accomplishments and travails, to internal disputes and disruptions. This is a remarkable inheritance. From it we derive lessons for life, for coping with adversity, for championing noble causes.

When it is time for the bar or bat mitzvah students in our congregation to start their work, their first assignment is to research their family history and values, including any non-Jewish roots as well. What were the teachings and experiences of their grandparents? How were their parents shaped? What values were passed down, in turn, to them?

When we gather for our Seder we will recall the historical journey of our people according to the legends of the Exodus. We will also remind ourselves of the stories of our own family members, like my own 87-year old father who left Germany at age sixteen, whose journey brought them to our own shores.

These are the stories we need to tell and re-tell. These are our cherished texts, no less than Torah and Talmud before them.

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