

The Rational Passover Haggadah

For Discussion How Important Is God to Morality?

One reason God is so important to Judaism is that morality is so important to Judaism. Without God as the source of an objective morality and as the moral judge of every human, the world would devolve into moral chaos.

Without God there is no moral truth; there are only moral opinions.

Take murder, for example.

Is murder wrong? Is it evil? We can assume that every person at this Seder table would answer yes. But how do any of you *know* it is wrong? If you were asked, for example, “How do you know the earth is round?” you would show photographs from outer space and provide measurable data. But what photographs or measurements could you provide to prove that murder or rape or theft is wrong?

The fact is that no one can. Whether or not there is a God, there are scientific facts—because scientific facts are empirically provable. But moral facts are not empirically provable. If there is no God, there are no moral facts. Only if there is a God who says murder is wrong is it a fact that murder is wrong. (That God’s existence is a matter of faith rather than fact in no way contradicts this last statement. That is why the sentence reads, “only *if* there is a God”).

“But,” you might say, “murder is wrong because I know that I wouldn’t want to be murdered.” This “Golden Rule”-based argument is widely cited, but it in no way makes murder objectively wrong. The fact that you wouldn’t want something done to you doesn’t mean that it is wrong. It means nothing more than you wouldn’t want that thing done to you. But few murderers want to be murdered, no rapist wants to be raped, and no torturer wants to be tortured. But that fact hasn’t stopped people from committing those acts. There has been a staggering amount of murder, rape, and torture in history. Hitler, Stalin, and Mao didn’t want to be murdered, but that did not prevent them from murdering about a hundred million people.

Some might respond that people who believe in God have also committed such evils. That is certainly true, but no one is arguing that belief in God guarantees people will not commit evil. The argument is that without God, good and evil do not objectively exist.

Moreover, it was secular ideologies and secular regimes that made the twentieth century the bloodiest century in recorded history. Yes, religion has a lot to answer for, but the commonplace argument that “more people have been killed in the name of religion than in the name of anything else” was true only prior to the twentieth century—when just about everyone was religious. So, the claim doesn’t prove much. Especially when one considers this:

Nearly all the moral good of the modern age was achieved in the West, the civilization rooted in the Bible, in Judeo-Christian values. The anti-slavery movement was founded and led by religious Christians in Britain and British colonists (and, after the American Revolution, American citizens) in North America—in the name of God. The civil rights movement in America was led by a religious Christian minister, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. The country most supportive of Israel has been the United States—thanks largely to how religious a country America has been. The proof is that as America becomes less religious, its support for Israel lessens. America, the freest country in world history, was founded by Bible-centered and God-centered men who all believed that *God wants humans to be free*. This is not a defense of all Christians in the West, many of whom in North and South America defended slavery and many of whom in Europe failed when confronted with Nazi antisemitism. But the unique moral achievements of the modern world—free speech, free elections, women’s equality, the end of slavery, to cite a few—were products of the Judeo-Christian West.

*Without God, the words
“good” and “evil” are just
another way of saying
“I like” and “I don’t like.”*

One thing is certain: when Christianity died in Europe, fascism, Nazism, and communism took its place. If Christianity dies in America, what will replace it?

Two additional things need to be made clear.

First, none of this means that if you don’t believe in God, you can’t be a good person. There are kind and moral individuals who do not believe in God. But the existence of these good people is irrelevant to the question of whether good and evil objectively exist if there is no God. There have always been good individuals, in every culture. There were undoubtedly good individuals who believed in Zeus. But they were good despite their belief in Zeus, not because of it. And most important, a good and decent society cannot be made if the society believes in Zeus rather than in the God of the Bible.

Second, none of this means that everyone who believes in God is a good person; indeed, more than a few have been evil—and have even committed evil in God’s name.

The existence of God doesn't ensure people will do good. I wish it did. The existence of God only ensures that good and evil objectively exist and are not merely opinions.

Without God, we therefore end up with what is known as moral relativism—meaning that morality is not absolute, but only relative to the individual or to the society. Without God, the words “good” and “evil” are just another way of saying “I like” and “I don't like.” If there is no God, the statement “Murder is evil” is the same as the statement “I don't like murder.”

In the *New York Times*, a professor of philosophy confirmed this: “The overwhelming majority of college freshmen . . . view moral claims as mere opinions.”

In fact, it is worse than that:

What would you say if you found out that our public schools were teaching children that it is not true that it's wrong to kill people for fun. . . ? Would you be surprised?

I was. As a philosopher, I already knew that many college-aged students don't believe in moral facts. While there are no national surveys quantifying this phenomenon, philosophy professors with whom I have spoken suggest that the overwhelming majority of college freshmen in their classrooms view moral claims as mere opinions that are not true or are true only relative to a culture.⁴

In order to make moral individuals and a moral society, Judaism goes far beyond claiming that good and evil objectively exist. Judaism posits a God who commands us to be good and lays out what good is: first with the Ten Commandments, and then in an elaborate system of laws such as “Love your neighbor as yourself,” “Love the stranger,” and even “Do not muzzle an ox while it works in the field.”