

Is It Possible to Keep the Mitzvot Without Believing?

With all the talk about “Orthopraxy” lately, I thought I’d just add something interesting I found. For those of you who don’t know, ‘orthodoxy’ refers to believing as everyone else does, in our case the Orthodox Jewish beliefs, and ‘orthopraxy’ refers to acting as everyone else does, which in our case refers to keeping the mitzvot. Orthoprax people have their own reasons for keeping the mitzvot, but oftentimes they do not actually believe in what they are doing.

I found a letter in “I Wanted to Ask You Prof. Leibowitz: Letters to and from Yeshayahu Leibowitz” where he addresses this exact issue, so I thought I would post a translated version of the exchange. The translation will be my own, and I apologize for any errorsⁱ. I also want to note that Leibowitz is not considered a mainstream Orthodox Jewish thinker, which may become obvious from this letter. None the less, I think the exchange is very interesting and worth looking at.

To the honorable Prof R’ Yeshayahu Leibowitz,

The revered and distinguished!

9 Shvat 5750

For quite some time a question has raged in me in regards to matters of faith that I don’t have an answer to, and although I know that his honor is extraordinarily busy from many things that he deals with, and at his age and that he’s also endlessly busy with people like me who turn to him for some guidance, I haven’t found anyone else who can answer me except for him and I ask forgiveness for the nuisance.

My question- it’s a personal one. And I would be very happy to receive a personal answer. The environment I grew up and lived in my entire life, the Jezreel Valley, I see where its educational style has led to: the second and third generations of us are already completely cut off from anything that minimally has to do with Judaism- anyone who isn’t in this environment will have a hard time believing how much, it is my feeling, that only the ways of our grandfathers and their forebears will preserve the future of the Jewish people and not necessarily the Jewish state, etc. But it’s hard for me to believe in Reward and Punishment and (I don’t believe at all)^v in the World to Come. For example, I’m convinced that a Mezuzah must be on every door in a Jewish home, but I can’t believe in the

charms that it brings with it, or God forbid, that terrible things happen in the case where there is not one.

I accept upon myself the obligation to keep the Mitzvot and the prohibitions for the sake of preserving Judaism...in the same way that I have to pay income tax, for example, but how can I convince others, some of whom claim “why all the seclusion and the troubles when there’s no reward for it in this world or the next?” and some of them don’t even know what’s been lost and where the future generations will end up?! And there are some who hold onto the smaller beliefs while they belittle Shabbat and Yom Kippur and every other holy thing, and they think what kind of way is this for a man to choose in our time and place (ie:to keep the mitzvot)? I’ll be boundlessly grateful if his honor would set aside some time for me, the small one, from his time and give me an answer or some guidance for my doubts or direct me to an answer written somewhere that I haven’t found yet.

With wishes for long days and years for his honor and with thanks,

S

To S’ Shalom U’Brakha

16 Shvat 5750, 11.2.1990

I really valued your letter, which completely reflected the honesty with which you’re thinking about the matter of faith, and the way to faith and observing the commandments. I’m including for you a paper I wrote that deals with this great issue, and possibly you’ll find something of value in it.

I want to note a few things on the main points of your letter. The Torah- in which faith and mitzvot are fastened one to the other- is not a means for the preserving of (the nation of) Israel. For the faithful- one who accepts the yoke of the mitzvot- it is the goal itself and not an aid to something, and the goal the service of God: The acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. From the perspective of religious faith, we should not see religion as a helpful-means to human interests, nor to the national interests of the nation of Israel. Religion as fulfillment of needs and interests has no value at all.

The Mezuzah is a commandment from the mitzvot of the Torah, and the Mezuzah on the door of a house testifies that the people who live in it recognize the meaning of performing the mitzvot. One who sees the Mezuzah as a means for defense of a house and on its inhabitants belittles religion and has been ensnared in idolatry, which is completely rejected from the perspective of faith in God and

His Torah. Faith in God is not dependent on the belief in reward and punishment, and a truly faithful person recognizes that faith itself is the reward.

As to the World to Come- I refer you to Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, which give expression to the highest form of religious consciousness, the consciousness that is highest on Musaf of Rosh HaShana and the Neila prayer on Yom Kippur- And Behold, there is no mention or hint of the World to Come! Yom Kippur does not deal with matters that pertain to after death, but instead proposes a question: Are you, the man who lives in Olam HaZe (this world), aware of your position before God in your life, and why this status obligates you in your life?

The acceptance of the yoke of heaven and the yoke of the Torah and Mitzvot is the great moral decision for man, and it cannot be rationalized by outside rationales. And know, that this is the rule for any decision in regards to values. If a man will ask: Why should I be fair and upstanding, when I can be despicable and benefit from it? There is no answer for this other than the proposition that fairness is a value in it of itself. If a man will ask: Why should I cling to my people and its land, if by leaving Israel I can improve my situation?- There too, there is no other answer other than to propose that clinging to the nation and the land is a value, for which a price must be paid. And so there are those who see the yoke of heaven and the yoke of the Torah and the Mitzvot as the highest value, even if it is a yoke and not a promise of wellbeing.

With Sincere Wishes,

Yeshayahu Leibowitz

Discussion Questions

- ❖ Did you identify with the letter posing the question? Which part?
- ❖ Which mitzvos do you keep and why?
- ❖ Do you think it is a problem to have outside rationales if that's what makes sense for you?