



WHAT
ATHEISM
HAS LEARNED FROM RELIGION



Setting the Stage

Atheism 2.0

by Alain de Botton

“*I don't think we have to make that choice. I think there is an alternative. I think there are ways of stealing from religions. If you don't believe in a religion, there's nothing wrong with picking and mixing, with taking out the best sides of religion. And for me, atheism 2.0 is about both, as I say, a respectful and impious way of going through religions and saying, "What here could we use?" The secular world is full of holes. We have secularized badly, I would argue. And a thorough study of religion could give us all sorts of insights into areas of life that are not going too well.*”

*Alain de Botton (b. 1969) is a Swiss writer, philosopher, television presenter and entrepreneur, residing in the United Kingdom. His books and television programs discuss various contemporary subjects and themes, emphasizing philosophy's relevance to everyday life. At 23, he published *Essays In Love* (1993), which went on to sell two million copies. Other best-sellers include *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (1997), *Status Anxiety* (2004) and *The Architecture of Happiness* (2006).*

ATHEISM REVISITED

Introduction

This session aims to explore the benefits of religion from those who are opposed to it. Here we will read comments from world-renowned atheists that confirm the idea that without religion, a secular life is left lacking in several aspects. Sometimes it is helpful to hear the perspective of an outsider to help us appreciate what it is that we have.

The layout of this session is such that each element includes a Torah source followed by a direct quote from world-renowned atheists, echoing the statements made in the Torah source.

? Questions to Consider

- ▶ What do you think atheism can learn from religion?
- ▶ Do you think there would be a way to separate the doctrine aspect of religion (all the rules and regulations) from the moral aspect (of being a “good” person)?

פרקי אבות ב:א

הסתכל בשלשה דברים ואי אתה בא לידי עבירה:
דע מה למעלה ממך - עין רואה, ואוזן שומעת, וכל מעשיך בספר נכתבין.

Ethics of Our Fathers 2:1

Consider three things, and they will prevent you from becoming involved in sin:
Know what is above you - A seeing Eye, a listening Ear, and all of your deeds are
written in a book.

נפש החיים א:ד

כי אינך רואה בעיניך הענינים הנוראים הנעשים ממעשיך - אבל תדע נאמנה, כי כל מה
שנעשה למעלה בעולמות העליונים גבוהי גבוהות - הכל ממך הוא על פי מעשיך.

Nefesh HaChaim 1:4

Even if you do not necessarily see the great things that are created through your
actions, know this clearly: All that transpires in the Higher worlds - everything is
from you, based on your actions.

The Nefesh HaChaim is telling us that the statement from Ethics of Our Fathers - “know what is above you” - does not only refer to knowing that G-d is above you; it can also be interpreted to mean: know how your actions affect the higher worlds above you. Know yourself; know what you are capable of, know how high your actions reach. Religion is supposed to make man more aware and in touch with his potential. It does this by stressing the importance of every individual’s actions.

Let’s now take a look at what an atheist has to say about religion helping man reach his potential....

Alain De Botton: Atheism 2.0

If you went to a top university - let’s say you went to Harvard or Oxford or Cambridge - and you said, “I’ve come here because I’m in search of morality, guidance and consolation; I want to know how to live,” they would show you the way to the insane asylum... Why? They don’t think we need it. They don’t think we are in an urgent need of assistance. They see us as rational adults. What we need is information. We need data, we don’t need help.

Now religions start from a very different place. All major religions, at various points call us children. And like children, they believe that we are in severe need of assistance.

What’s the difference between a sermon and our modern, secular mode of delivery, the lecture? Well a sermon wants to change your life and a lecture wants to give you a bit of information. And I think we need to get back to that sermon tradition. The tradition of sermonizing is hugely valuable, because we are in need of guidance, morality and consolation - and religions know that.

? Questions to Consider

- ▶ How does religion impress upon us the ideas of reaching our potential?
- ▶ Does reaching our potential as human beings mean more than doing well in school, getting a good job, and living a happy life?
- ▶ How does religion empower man? (*Hint: Does the fact that G-d cares about my every move say something about how important I am to Him?*)

ASPECT #2

The Significance of Time

? Questions to Consider

- Who is more free, and who would you rather be?
- ▶ The individual who lives in his mother's basement and has food and shelter provided for him... he can relax all day without the concern and stress of family and job –
 - ▶ Or the highly accomplished business executive with the fancy office, cool car, wife, children, and constant demands on his time?

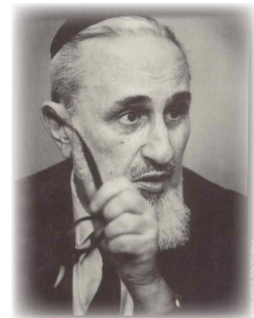
In Judaism, significant attention is given to the calendar, the cycle of the seasons, and even the daily transition from morning to night. We have several commandments that are time-bound and it seems that we are always meant to be aware of time. What is the reason for our obsession with time?

In the following quote, Rabbi Soloveichik sheds light on Judaism's appreciation of time through an explanation of the deeper understanding behind the mitzvah of the counting the Omer.

Rav Soloveitchik

The basic element that distinguishes freeman from slave is the kind of relationship each has with time. Bondage is identical with passive reception of an empty, formal time stream. A slave is not in control of his time.

When the Jews were delivered from Egypt and Moshe rose to undertake the almost impossible task of transitioning a tribe of slaves into a "nation of priests," he was told by G-d that the path leading from the holiday of Pesach to Shavu'oth, from initial liberation to absolute freedom must go through the medium of time. The commandment of



sefirat ha'omer was given to the Jews. These forty-nine days must be whole. If one day is missed, the act of counting is invalidated.

A slave who is capable of appreciating each day, of grasping its meaning and worth, of weaving every thread of time into a glorious fabric, quantitatively stretching over a period of seven weeks but qualitatively forming a bond with centuries both in the past and the future, is eligible for Torah. He has achieved freedom.

We may say then that a qualitative appreciation of time is comprised of two elements: First, the appreciation of the enormous implications inherent in every fleeting moment. Secondly, the vicarious experience, while in the present, of the past and future.

The excerpt from this essay emphasizes the importance of time and how we as Jews use time as a way of appreciating each moment and understanding how a moment in our life today is connected with moments far in the past and well into the future.

Alain de Botton: Atheism 2.0

All the major religions give us calendars. What is a calendar? A calendar is a way of making sure that across the year you will bump into certain very important ideas. You won't do that by accident; you will do that because you are guided to do that. Now we (the secular world) don't think that way. In the secular world we think, "If an idea is important, I'll bump into it. I'll just come across it." Nonsense, says the religious world view. Religious view says we need calendars, we need to structure time, we need to synchronize encounters.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ How is control over time a prerequisite to freedom?
- ▶ How can we say that we are in control of our own time if it seems that every moment of life is dictated by Judaism?
- ▶ Wouldn't you be more "free" if you could just do what you want, when you want?

ASPECT #3

The Value of Community

שו"ת האלף לך שלמה חלק או"ח סימן לד

שא' בא' שמברך ברכת השחר "שלא עשני עכו"ם" ואין רצונו לברך "שלא עשני גוי"
דגם ישראל נקראו גוים.

הנה נוסחא זו ודאי הוי צד אפיקורסת, דהרי עכו"ם הוי ר"ת של "עובדי כוכבים ומזלות"
ואם אומר כן, משמע דנכרים דאינן עובדים כו"מ עליהם אינו מברך, והוא צד
אפיקורסת... ועל ההערה גופה דישראל נמי נקראו כן, הוא טעות,
דהנה ישראל בכלל נקראים "גוי" כמ"ש "גוי וקהל גוים יהי ממך" וכן "הוי גוי חוטא."

אבל כל אחד מישראל בפ"ע אינו נקרא גוי, אבל בנכרים כל יחיד מהם נקרא גוי ולכך א"ש דבנכרי כיון דכל אחד הוי דבר בפ"ע נקרא כ"א מהם גוי אבל בישראל, כ"א ביחוד הוי רק משהו וחלק קטן מן הכלל לכך לא נקרא יחיד בפ"ע בכלל גוי... ולכך שפיר מברך כ"א שלא עשני גוי דאם הייתי נכרי הייתי אני לבדי נקרא גוי לא כן עתה לא נקראתי בפ"ע גוי...

Responsa of Rav Shlomo Kluger

D. 1869. Published over 100 works and served as a Dayan (judge) in Broyde, Galicia.

The question addressed in this passage is about changing the morning blessing from “*Shelo Asani Goy*” (thanking G-d for not making us gentiles) to “*Shelo Asani Akum*” (thanking G-d for not making us idol worshippers).

The response given explains that we are not highlighting the difference between Jews and idol worshippers, but rather the difference between Jews and everyone else in the world. Jews as a whole are referred to as a Goy but an individual Jew can never be called a Goy. An individual Jew is always seen as part of a larger group. A Jew never stands alone.

How does the atheist see the value of community as it is displayed in the religious community?

Learning to Respect Religion

by Nicholas D. Kristof - Published in the NY Times, April 7, 2012

Jonathan Haidt, a University of Virginia psychology professor, also focuses on the unifying power of faith in his new book, “The Righteous Mind.” Haidt, an atheist since his teens, argues that scientists often misunderstand religion because they home in on individuals rather than on the way faith can bind a community.

Haidt cites research showing that a fear of God may make a society more ethical and harmonious. For example, one study found that people were less likely to cheat if they were first given a puzzle that prompted thoughts of God.

Another study cited by Haidt found that of 200 communes founded in the 19th century, only 6 percent of the secular communes survived two decades, compared with 39 percent of the religious ones. Those that survived longest were those that demanded sacrifices of members, like fasting, daily prayer, abstaining from alcohol or tobacco, or adopting new forms of clothing or hairstyle.

“The very ritual practices that the New Atheists dismiss as costly, inefficient and irrational turn out to be a solution to one of the hardest problems humans face: cooperation without kinship,” Haidt writes.



- ▶ How does being Jewish make you feel part of a community?
- ▶ What actions do we do to foster this sense of community?
- ▶ What are the advantages and disadvantages of being part of the broader community of Jews?

LET'S WRAP THIS UP

Summary

In this session, we have examined three elements of life that stem from religion. Even an atheist agrees that these elements come from religion and should be incorporated into a path to achieve a meaningful life. The three elements are: (1) the significance of man and his ability to reach a greater potential, (2) the appreciation of time as a connector of past, present, and future, and (3) the central idea and benefits of community.

G-d made the world and placed us in it to live a full and meaningful life. He obviously placed a guide map for how to achieve that level of meaning and that map can be understood and implemented through the guidance of religion.