

# Agnostic

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have always thought it important to read opinions that conflict with mine, either to confirm my position or perhaps to reconsider it. A thinking person should always be prepared to examine his or her received opinions. So it was with eager anticipation that I read Lesley Hazleton's [\*Agnostic: A spirited manifesto\*](#).

I have known Lesley for a very long time as a very talented writer who has always held strong, contrary opinions, honestly and fearlessly expressed. I was not entirely surprised, therefore, to discover that I agreed with almost everything she writes.

In general, I approve of Voltaire's, "Doubt is not a pleasant condition but certainty is an absurd one." I am sure that is true of intellectual ideas. Less so about emotions, of course. Although they, too, can often be just as misleading.

One of the things I like least about Orthodoxy as currently practiced is this absurd certainty that so many profess, about issues that often the greatest of Jews were not so certain of themselves. Great minds like Maimonides, Nachmanides, Yehuda Halevy, and Abarbanel, to mention only a few, were prepared to say that there were things they did not understand within the corpus of Jewish ideas and that even the prophets did not know the details of some of the ideas they preached. And that was precisely why there were so many different interpretations on such nonrational issues as the afterlife and resurrection.

Many theological issues that carry important messages in their abstractions are simply beyond us in rational terms. Yet children and adults are taught in religious schools or evangelical centers that they have to accept literal explanations and are often dissuaded from asking questions. This can lead to one of two possibilities: blind, unconsidered acceptance or rejection. Sadly, it is often the brightest who reject, and who can blame them? It is not surprising that such certainties have put people off organized religion.

As a recent Pew paper shows, for all the many that claim a belief in God, the different versions of what that actually means are often contradictory. Doubt is exciting and necessary when it accompanies an open mind. The Torah encourages children to ask why. The Seder revolves around asking questions. The Talmud in Sucot gives four quite contradictory interpretations of why we sit in a Suca. Is only one of them "the truth"? No one should be asked to believe in anything that doesn't make sense to them on some level. But if the answer is, "Shut up and accept what I say without challenge," a lively mind will just switch off.

It has become fashionable to try to use modern techniques to discover the religious gene or the way the brain reacts to prayer or meditation. Clearly

some activities have a calming effect on the human brain. Praying for people can give those praying a sense of doing something to help. And people who receive blessings and charms can feel better even if it is psychosomatic or due to autosuggestion. One always hears about the few cases of success, rarely of the failures. Does this invalidate religion? Not necessarily. But it does raise questions that any thinking, religious person will want to find answers to. And it is of course perfectly legitimate sometimes to say, "I just don't know." The common response of religion to matters of faith is that they are beyond scientific verification. Even so, too much energy and effort is wasted trying to undermine scientific theories instead of focusing on the positive elements in religion.

But challenge popular myths and you will not be thanked. I have noticed that if I ask people to explain to me what it is they believe, they become uneasy and defensive. If I am critical of religious shortcomings, I often get the response, "Don't we have enough enemies without you undermining religious faith?" As Ms. Hazleton points out, those who claim to possess certainty often hate to be challenged. She quotes Samuel Johnson, "Every man who attacks my belief diminishes in some degree my confidence in it, and therefore makes me uneasy; and I am angry with him who makes me uneasy." And that's why religious rationalists get attacked so fiercely too, not just by fundamentalists but by ordinary people who want to feel secure in their belief that they are absolutely right.

Questioning does not necessarily undermine. It can help clarify. Finding gaps or problems with evolution does not necessarily prove that it was God who created the world. Antony Flew, the most famous atheist of my youth, now says he cannot believe the universe came about by accident. Neither can I! But that still doesn't tell us who or what designed it.

I do find the agnostic position compelling. It contrasts to the absurdity of the atheist certainty "that not" and the fundamentalist certainty "that is." Both exhibit the same absolutism. "I know for certain" always rings danger bells. What is wrong with saying "I honestly do not know"? So long as one is living an ethical and considered life.

Ms. Hazleton explores such feelings as being connected to the universe, in awe of nature, and similar attempts to describe what others call a religious experience. But none of these satisfactorily explain the persistence, even amongst rationalists, of a commitment to a religious way of life. Precisely because of the range of different experiences they engender and excite. In the end, the existentialism of experience wins over abstractions. I like to distinguish between rationalism and mysticism. Ms. Hazleton uses the word romanticism. She is indeed a romantic, as well as an honest doubter, and in my view that is an ideal position. It opens one up to a whole range of different experiences.

There are some minor cavils. For example, to say that the great Kabbalist Isaac Luria is the father of Kabbalah is rather like saying Martin Luther is the father of Christianity. It gives the impression of undervaluing all that went on before. Nevertheless, her book draws on Jewish and other sources from religion, philosophy, psychology and literature to create an entertaining and

stimulating flow of ideas. It is a beautifully written, serendipitous exploration of doubting and questioning and allowing for the possibility of surprise.

And in our hectic life, having a row of festivals, each one standing in contrast to the prevailing society, it's a perfect time to wonder why and to what end.