

Is God A Fact?

Imagine you're taking a test in school. In front of you are some statements, and you have to say whether they are fact, common assertion or opinion. It seems innocuous enough and it certainly sounds like an important educational exercise to help students hone their critical thinking skills. All too often, as we know, people around the world try to pass off their opinions as facts, so there's nothing inherently wrong with an exercise like this. So, let's look at some of the statements on the test and ask if they're fact, common assertion or opinion...

Statement 1) The fastest land dwelling creature is the cheetah. That's a basic fact. A cheetah can reach somewhere around 70-75mph for short sprints.

Statement 2) America is the most free country on earth. Well, considering the mass incarceration rates in this country, that certainly isn't a fact. The degree of freedom a person experiences often relates to their socioeconomic conditions, or even to the colour of their skin. Nonetheless, compared to many other countries around the world the level of freedom is unprecedented, which is why this is an extremely commonly held belief so we'll put that under Common Assertion.

Statement 3) George Washington was the first President of the United States. Well, even I know that one! That's a historically verifiable fact, he was President from 1789 to 1797.

Statement 4) There is a God. Is that a fact, a common assertion or an opinion? Around the world, there are around 2.3 billion Christians, 1.5 billion Muslims and 900 million Hindus, accounting between them for just

over two-thirds of humanity. About a billion people are followers of differing smaller faiths, including Jews. So somewhere around 70% of people on earth follow a religion that asserts that there is a God. There are also 400 million Buddhists in the world, who openly reject the idea of God, and also about a billion people who are non-religious or atheist. So, there are clearly a sizeable number of people on earth who hold that there is no God. So, let's look at this question. Is the statement "there is a God" a fact, a common assertion or an opinion? I think that statistically speaking, looking at numbers around the world, we can at least say that it's a common assertion. Certainly in Texas, where this quiz was asked, it's a very common assertion. But is it fact?

A fact is something that is, theoretically, indisputably true. A fact is something that truly exists or that truly happens. This school quiz could not have come at a better time, in my opinion. Around the world, it's now commonplace for people to challenge facts, and to say that they are opinions. That vaccines do not cause autism, that anthropogenic climate change is real, that evolution is real, that the earth is not flat... these are all facts. The fact that very vocal individuals may challenge those facts does not render them opinions because facts are evidence-based whereas opinions are not. A fact is a thing that is **proven** to be true. A fact is an event, item of information, or state of affairs existing, observed, or known to have happened, and which is confirmed or validated to such an extent that it is considered 'reality.'¹ How do we know that it is a fact that the cheetah is the fastest land animal? Because we can observe and confirm that through measurement. How do we know that evolution is real? Because we can

¹ (<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/fact.html#ixzz49tRLpNBc>)

actually observe it through generations of short-lived animals and through the fossil record. We can prove these things to be true with experimental evidence. Now, Karl Popper's notion of falsification challenges this slightly because he essentially says that facts are not permanent - they are merely facts until more evidence comes along. That's a reminder not to be dogmatic with facts. It is a fact that the cheetah is the fastest land animal, until in some remote area we find another animal that can actually outrun the cheetah. In this example, it's unlikely, but we have to be open-minded enough to know that it's possible. Facts are eternal truths, until more evidence comes along to correct them. That's how science works. That doesn't mean that there are no facts, though. That doesn't mean that every opinion is as valid as fact. But it does mean that there are facts that can be ascertained through experimental research.

So, to return to the statement "there is a God" – can we confirm that experimentally? Well, it depends what you use as evidence. Throughout Jewish tradition, Torah itself was used as clear evidence of God's existence. Torah wasn't just a sacred text, although it was most definitely that, but it was all the evidence a person needed of God's existence. It was evidence passed down from generation to generation from Sinai. Modern author Lawrence Kelemen, came up with something he called the Incunabular Argument to prove that Torah can be used as evidence. He compares every major world religion in terms of their claims of divine revelation and demonstrates that in every case but one, the revelation was to an extremely limited number of people. The problem with such a small group of people receiving revelation is that it can never be proven. If someone came running into the Sanctuary right now shouting that God had just spoken to them,

there would be no way to prove that they were telling the truth. In fact, we would probably assume they were crazy and would also be upset that they disturbed my sermon! So, what is needed, according to Kelemen, is universal revelation, and he says that that only exists in Torah. In Torah, Kelemen claims, the entire people witness the Revelation. His assertion is that this is a unique claim and a crucial one, because it means that it proves its own veracity. How? Imagine that you're the next generation on from Sinai. Your parents hand you a text called Torah and say that this is God's word. You read through it and note that it says all the Israelites, including your parents, were at Sinai and heard God's revelation. You ask your parents, "Did that happen?" If it did, then you cherish the text. If not, you reject it. The fact that Torah was passed on from generation to generation therefore proves that the revelation at Sinai was a fact and, therefore, that there is a God. Fact.

Except..... this argument assumes that Torah was actually passed from generation to generation by empowered, educated individuals, whereas it was almost certainly in the hands of the literate priests who guarded, and possibly co-authored, a tradition for the illiterate masses. It is entirely circular because it requires Torah to be true to prove the claim within Torah, and circular arguments are not proof. Kelemen gives more than one reason to show that Torah is true, for example, by comparing it with contemporaneous texts. He talks of a Bar Yusuf, Joseph's canal, in Egypt and says that this proves the Torah narrative of Joseph. He reads an Egyptian papyrus called The Admitions of Ipu-Wer which talks of the Nile turning to blood and Egypt being plunged into darkness, and says that this proves the narrative of the Ten Commandments. He even mentions Egyptian texts

talking of the Habiru, and how this must be a reference to the Hebrews in Egypt. And all this at first seems convincing, but a basic exploration of the archaeology of the region shows that none of these are convincing at all. Yes, there may have been an individual who lived in Egypt called Joseph who had a canal named after him, but that doesn't mean it's the Bible's Joseph. Yes, the Nile may have turned blood red and there may have been some days of darkness for whatever reason, but that doesn't make it evidence of God exacting the Ten Plagues on Egypt. And yes, Habiru does sound like Hebrew, but it's rather clear from context that the Habiru were a social class or brigands, not a unique ethnic group.

Kelemen isn't the first to try to prove the veracity of Torah. In 1140, Judah Halevi finished the *Kuzari*, a dialogue that purports to show the arguments that the king of the Khazars found convincing before he converted to Judaism. One of his arguments is that it is the only history that goes back to the beginning of the world and therefore must be the only real history. Of course, Halevi could only write this because he wasn't aware of ancient myths from other cultures all around the world, some of which were still buried in the ground when he wrote his text. The book was an important one because of the Disputations that occurred at that time. Indeed, the book was given the subtitle "The book of refutation and proof on behalf of the most despised religion." But while it may have been convincing at the time, none of the *Kuzari*'s arguments hold up in contemporary thought. So, try as Jewish writers might, we cannot summon proof of Torah and thus proof of God.

12th century philosopher and Torah commentator, Moses Maimonides took a different approach. In laying out his understanding of the *taryag mitzvot*, the 613 commandments, Maimonides notably placed one mitzvah above all others – to know God. He bases this on the very beginning of the Ten Commandments – “I am The Eternal your God,” (Ex. 20:1) which he understands as a commandment to know God. The foundation of Jewish faith, according to Maimonides, was the knowledge, not the belief but the knowledge, of God. Maimonides also offered his own proofs of the existence of God, all of which were variants of what is known as the cosmological argument, which is that something cannot come from nothing. Everything in the universe has a cause and therefore the universe itself must also have a cause. This cause must be something external to the universe and therefore has to be something infinite, which means God. Again, at first this seems like a convincing argument but, on reflection, is not. We have no experience of universes. As far as we know, while this universe may be regulated by cause and effect, maybe universes pop into and out of being like bubbles in a soda.

And this isn't the only common argument for God that is even quoted today. In 1802, English Christian clergyman William Paley wrote about what became known as the teleological argument. He wrote “In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there; I might possibly answer, that, for anything I knew to the contrary, it had lain there forever: nor would it perhaps be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place; I should hardly think of the answer I had before given, that for

anything I knew, the watch might have always been there. ... There must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers, who formed [the watch] for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use. ... Every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature; with the difference, on the side of nature, of being greater or more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation.” The teleological argument for God looks at the order in the universe and says that it cannot have happened accidentally – that organisms as complex as the eye don’t just spring up out of random evolution. There is evidence of design, and therefore evidence of a designer, which means a proof of God. In fact, the argument is self-defeating quite simply because the watch itself is clearly outside of nature, which is why its design was so interesting in the first place. Moreover, as Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, even if there were evidence of supernatural design, that in itself isn’t proof of God. It could, indeed, be proof of the Devil, considering that so many things in this world are evil, such as cancer in children. Most designers, as Hume notes, aren’t bound to their designs. A ship-builder, for example, will build a ship and then set it sail. Even if God did design and create this world, who’s to say that God is still involved with it?

Although their authors were adamant that they were convincing proofs, then, it seems apparent that none of the so-called proofs of God constituted actual proof. For every argument, there exists a very valid counter-argument. That in itself refutes the notion of proof of God. But what about personal proof?

One person can say that they know without question that there is a God because they have seen God work in their lives. They experienced God's hand and so they know the proof. God, they would say, is not subject to experimental evidence in the same way as everything else because God does not work like that. God's proof is personal, individual. God is not a thing to be tested because God is not of this universe, therefore God cannot be tested in the same way as things of this universe. Therefore, the proof one needs of God is in one's heart. I actually have much sympathy for this viewpoint, until I think of Yigal Amir, who assassinated Yitzchak Rabin because God told him to. The point is that there are so many competing personal claims of God that they cannot be taken as proof. If one Jew tells me that they have seen proof of God in their lives and one Muslim tells me the same, I could pretend that they're basically talking about proof of the same thing, but they're really not. Proof of a personal God means proof of that God's Word, and when the Word differs from religion to religion, who's to say what is real and what is delusional? And how is the personal proof of a religious individual more valid than the proof of an atheist whose child was struck down by natural causes? Subjectivism isn't proof. We cannot unequivocally say that there is a God based on untestable personal testimony. Try as we might from logic or from personal experience, we cannot say that "there is a God" is a statement of fact. We can only say that it is a common assertion.

I applaud the teacher who put this question in a test in a school in Texas. Some of the students were apparently visibly upset when they were told that they were mistaken and that this is not a fact. Granted, I don't know how the rest of the lesson proceeded and whether the teacher took the time to explain why this was the case, which is certainly something that younger children

would have needed. The mother of the child who challenged the teacher said “The majority of kids in the school believe in God and they’re being told by their teacher that there’s no God.” That wasn’t true. The teacher and the test in no way says that there is no God. It just says that the claim that there is a God is a common observation, not a fact. That sounds like totally acceptable education to me, to help people critically assess all statements.

So, “there is a God” is not a fact, not an external fact, in the same way that “the fastest land animal is the cheetah” is a fact. It can be a fact that someone experiences God as being as real to them as the cheetah is the fastest land animal. That is a totally fair statement. But that is a statement of fact about the self, not about God, and the two are profoundly different. That is not a statement that God does not exist, it is simply a statement that God is real to that person only and that that does not make God real to others.

In all this, we have assumed a uniform conception of God, whereas even in Jewish theology throughout the millennia, the very notion of God’s being has been very widely interpreted. God to a Jew is not necessarily the same as God to a Christian and is not necessarily the same as God to a Muslim.

Indeed, God to one Jew is not even the same as God to another Jew. So, in assessing whether the statement “there is a God” is fact or not, we should probably stop and ask what God even means in the question. A supernatural Deity who creates the world? Who designs the world? Who redeems the world through a particular prophet? Who is intimately connected with the world? Who answers prayer? These are all very different understandings of God. When someone tells me that they don’t believe in God and then we reveal on further examination that they’re talking about God as portrayed in

the Bible, I agree with them. And yet I still believe in God. Can I say that God is a fact? No, not at all.

This is where I turn to the narrative of Jacob wrestling in the Book of Genesis (Gen. 32). I wrestle with God, with concepts of God, with the existence of God. I appreciate that in the past God-wrestling did not necessarily include wrestling with notions of God's existence and merely included wrestling with notions of God. But I believe that wrestling with the notion of God's existence is a key element of being a Reform Jew. In fact, I would say that it is a defining difference between Reform and Orthodox Judaism, whereby an Orthodox Jew wrestles with God's essence and revelation while we as Reform Jews wrestle with God's being, essence and revelation.

Today, we are God-wrestlers in a different way to the past, and I don't believe that is a bad thing. I think that part of the openness that makes Reform Judaism so wonderful is that we are not dogmatic, we are not adamant, we do not make statements of theological fact, we do not claim knowledge of the truth. We are, indeed, open to the possibility of the existence of multiple truths. We are therefore more open to dialogue and discussion, to learning from others. We allow others their own truths while acknowledging that we may have differing truths, and we learn and grow by exploring the truths of others without dogmatically imposing our own. We celebrate the truths of others as part of the wondrous diversity of humanity. And we wrestle. We are Yisrael – God-wrestlers (Gen. 32:28) – not despite theological questions but because of them.

At the end of the day, the religious life is not determined by whether there is a God or not. Instead, the religious life is determined by one thing and one thing only – given an individual’s belief or otherwise in the existence of God, what kind of life will they lead? To be religious is not to believe – at least, not in a Jewish understanding of religion. It is to act based on belief. It is to lead a religious life, a life where our actions are based on our understanding of God. To be religious is to be Godly, to act in a Godly way. The fact of life is not whether there is a God, but whether religious people act as though there is a God. That, to me, is more important. Shakespeare wrote, “To be or not to be, that is the question.” Judaism believes, “To be Godly or not to be Godly, that is the question.” That is the question that faces all of us today, tomorrow, and every day of our lives. May it be the question that occupies us when we sit in our homes and when we walk in the streets, when we lie down and when we rise up (Deut. 6:7). To be Godly or not to be Godly, that is the question. May that be our question this Shabbat and from here forwards, and let us say, Amen.