

From the archives of NAGEELA SHABBOS

CORE BELIEFS

5 PART STUMP-THE-RABBI SERIES

Introduction

Hi Rabbi,

I know Jews believe in God. I guess that means at least I know something, right? But what else do we believe? Is there a list of the things it's important for a Jew to know? 'Cuz I'd like to know what I should know!

Corey Brian Leif

<div>the 13 core beliefs of judaism</div> <div>brought to you by Jewnier</div>		
G-D	Torah	Consequences
<div>1. G-d created everything and still runs the show. It didn't happen by itself.</div> <div>2. There's only one G-d. No partners, demigods, trinities or split personalities.</div> <div>3. G-d does not have a body. No knees, shoulders, ears or toes. For that matter, G-d has no matter.</div> <div>4. G-d existed before anything else, and will exist after everything else.</div> <div>5. We only pray to G-d. Nobody else. We don't pray to trees, statues, prophets or Rabbis.</div>	<div>6. There were people called prophets who truly delivered messages from G-d to the Jewish people.</div> <div>7. Moses was the greatest prophet, and his word is final. Any prophets who argue with Moses aren't prophets at all.</div> <div>8. Ya' know that Torah we have? It's the same text Moses first showed us. Nothing has changed in three thousand+ years.</div> <div>9. The Torah will never be changed. G-d gave us the final edited version. Done.</div>	<div>10. G-d knows what's what. He's aware of the things we do, and even our thoughts.</div> <div>11. There's a system of reward and consequences. We will get awesome reward for doing what we should, and uncool results when we mess up.</div> <div>12. There will be an end to our long exile. A great leader (Mashiach) will come, and can come at any time.</div> <div>13. Eventually (when G-d wills it to happen) those who have passed away will live again.</div>

PART 1

Dear Core B. Leif,

This summer, in Reno, I met Ken. Camp Nageela West boys may have already heard a little bit about Ken, but here is the story:

For a couple of days before camp started, we held a staff training seminar at a hotel in Reno. It was the final day, and after an extremely long torrent of meetings, we spent dinner time BBQing and playing frisbee at a local park. Then Ken came over to chat. Ken was definitely quite drunk, and extremely bored, but he stopped by to tell us how impressed he was by our fine, well mannered group of gentlemen (he said it with different words, most of which should not be printed). Then he told us the only thing he doesn't like about Jews is that we believe in 'spreading the good word', and we try to make people believe in our religion. He even went so far as to mention the Jewish missionaries on bikes, wearing ties. I gently corrected him, and explained that Jews don't missionize, and he's probably referring to Mormon missionaries. We continued the conversation (which alternated between love, confusion, violence and incoherence), until he made another spurious claim. He wanted to know why Amish Jews don't use technology. I won't go into details of the rest of the conversation, or his arm wrestle with one of our counselors, but I won't soon forget Ken.

I'm glad you asked this question, 'cuz so many people have misconceptions about Judaism and what we believe. Alright, Ken might not be a great example, altered as he was, yet I constantly hear Jews and gentiles making huge mistakes in understanding basic Jewish beliefs. So here we go:

Jews believe a lot of things. We believe it's important to be kind, and that you should try to buy stuff on sale. But let's talk about core beliefs for a minute. A core belief is something that is really important to you and forms the base of everything else you believe in. Getting stuff on sale is obviously not a core belief. Even our belief in the importance of being kind is not considered a core belief, because it comes from another core belief (that God gave us the Torah which commands us to be kind).

History's great Jewish thinkers have created a list of "thirteen principles" or thirteen core beliefs that are vital to Jewish thought. In the coming weeks, we'll go through them, trying to clarify what they mean and why each is so important. For now, here are the three categories, and in 'Tree Stump' I've listed all thirteen and how they fit into each category:

Category 1 is understanding that there's a God who is very real, and is active.

Category 2 is understanding the God gave us clear guidance and instruction for how to live.

Category 3 is knowing that God cares about how we live and act, and there are real consequences to all of our actions.

I look forward to continuing this conversation next week. For today, make like a tree and be-leaf...

PART 2

Carl arrived home happy. “Guess what?” He asked his parents.

“What?” They asked, obligingly.

“I got a job! Isn’t that great?”

Carl’s family was thrilled. He had graduated a couple of months prior and had been looking for work ever since. Now it seemed he had finally found one.

“What is your job?” they asked.

“Just doing stuff. You know. This and that.”

That’s vague. “Well, who are you working for?”

“Umm, actually, I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? “

“I just kind of walk around and do stuff. Try to help. You know?”

“But how can you have any clue what’s helpful if you don’t know who your boss is, or what he wants?”

Carl’s family recognized that if you want to do any job effectively, the first thing we need to know is the identity of the boss, and only after that can you learn what they want.

The first five core beliefs deal with this. They are how we define Who God is, and how we understand him. Spoiler alert: One God, all powerful. Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, let’s go through them with more detail:

1. G-d created everything and still runs the show. It didn’t happen by itself.

The way I look at it, there are pretty much three options. Either (a) the universe is a giant accident (yeah right), or (b) God created everything and then took a vacation (really, why?), or (c) God created the universe and continues to run it (hey, that makes sense).

Continuing to borrow from the Carl story, everything we do only has meaning if the boss who owns the company is still involved with the company, and cares about your success.

2. There's only one G-d. No partners, demigods, trinities or split personalities.

Ancient religions (and some newer ones) had trouble understanding how a complicated world could be run by a single divine entity. They believed in separate gods of war, love, thunder and pickles, among other things. We understand that there’s only one power in the universe, and everything, even evil, comes from Him. If a company has multiple bosses who don’t always agree on what they want, it’s impossible to do your job properly, or develop a good working relationship. We need to know there’s only ONE boss.

3. G-d does not have a body. No knees, shoulders, ears or toes. For that matter, G-d has no matter.

This one matters (get it?). Things that are physical have weakness. It’s important that we know that God isn’t physical and has no needs. He doesn’t get tired, hungry, hot or cold. Aside from knowing that his boss exists, Carl needs to know that his boss is a good, effective boss, able to help guide, support and encourage his workers. It wouldn’t be very helpful to find out his boss was a criminal, made poor decisions, or had chronic illness that would prevent him from supporting his employees.

Well, I know we only got through three of them so far, but unlike God, you ARE physical, and you DO get tired, so I'll pause here and continue with numbers 4 and 5 next week.

PART 3

Dear Rabbi,

Who made God? He had to have come from somewhere, right?

Thanks,
Aura Jensen

Dear Aura Jen,

OK, let's have some fun with this question (that will most definitely get me into trouble). What if I told you that God was made by a being named Bob?

Yes you heard me. God was made by Bob (calm down, please put the pitchforks away, take a few deep breaths and give me a minute). What's your obvious followup question?

Who made Bob?

Oh, that was Sam. Sam made Bob. Any more questions?

Who made Sam?

Sam was made by Jennifer, who was made by Agnes, who was, in turn made by Mark. Mark was created by Susan, and Susan was designed by Antonio. Have I answered all your questions?

If you've finished tearing out your hair in frustration, I'll get to my point. If you take the position (as your question did) that EVERY BEING HAD TO BE MADE BY ANOTHER BEING, then you've got a really big problem, because you'll always be able to ask, "Well, who made THAT being? And who made THAT being? And..." The only logical solution is that there is ONE BEING who has always existed and was not made by anyone or anything. I'll repeat that. There is one being who has always existed and was not made by anyone or anything. That's a little bit hard for us humans to really understand, and that's OK. We don't need to understand everything, as long as we can determine that it's true.

That brings us to number 4 on the core beliefs list:

4. G-d existed before anything else, and will exist after everything else.

Believing that God had a 'launch date' would mean He was made or created by someone or something else. As we just explained, that's not logical, and untrue. Having an or an 'expiration date' would mean God has a weakness and a time limit. Also untrue. God is ETERNAL, which means God's existence isn't measured in time.

5. We only pray to G-d. Nobody else. We don't pray to trees, statues, prophets or Rabbis.

Prayer assumes power. Let me explain what I mean: If you're at school and you want extra credit on your science grade, whom do you ask? Not the school cook, nor the history teacher. They have NO POWER over your science grades (although some school food might qualify as scientific research, and some students are the guinea pigs). You ask the science teacher, or, better yet, the principal. They have power over your science grades. Praying to someone or something is saying, "You have the ability to help me, so I'm asking you for your help." This core belief confirms that there are no other beings with power, besides God. The sun and moon do their thing only with God's control. Even the angels have no power of their own, and are simply reflections of God's will.

How about Rabbis? We don't pray to Rabbis, period. Some people might ask a Rabbi to pray to God for them. That's OK. Some people will visit the grave of a great tzadik to pray, but even then, it's not the Rabbi being prayed to. The prayers are directed to God, in the merit of the great person. The bottom line is there is only one being in all of the universe who has power, and it is that being (God, NOT Bob) to whom we pray.

PART 4

Hi Rabbi,

How do we know God didn't change his mind? I understand God gave us the Torah on Mount Sinai, but what if over thousands of years, He decided to switch it up a little? How do we know we're still doing the right thing?

Thanks,
Philip Phlopp,

Dear Phillip,

Let me answer with a story:

It was well past midnight, and Carly was exhausted, but she had finally finished her research paper. Dr. Kelvin was a very strict chemistry teacher, and he had told the class that 50% of their final grade was based on this major research paper. Carly and her friends had spent several weeks now working out all the details, but it had taken her all the way to the last minute to get her final draft ready. She would hand it in to the teacher in the morning, and hopefully ace the semester.

At 8:59am, a smiling Carly placed her thick binder, complete with the typed paper and research materials, on Dr. Kelvin's cluttered desk. He looked at her, puzzled. "What is this?" He asked.

"It's the paper, you asked for." The one you announced in front of the whole class, on the first day of school."

“Oh that...” mumbled the teacher. “I changed my mind a couple of days ago. I don’t want a research paper anymore. You were supposed to do a field trip to the chemical plant instead. I can’t give you any points for this paper.”

Carly could not believe her ears. “How was I supposed to know about the field trip? I only knew about the research paper, which, apparently, is useless now!” She wanted to scream, and nearly did.

“Well... I did mention it to Fred, and he was supposed to tell the whole class.” Didn’t he mention anything to you? That’s his bad.”

Carly scratched her head. “Fred might have said something about a field trip, but he’s just a student! I would never discard the direct instructions of a teacher based on the words of a student! I emailed you about it, and I never heard back, so I went with your original instructions!”

There’s a problem with sending messages. You never know which one to believe. In the story above, Carly was right not to trust Fred. The teacher had made a public statement, with his own mouth. Any contradictory statement would need to have that same strength to be believable. Had Dr. Kelvin singled out Fred publicly and told the class to trust him, then Fred would be the person of trust, and the class should take his word over, say, Lilly’s. God wanted to make sure that nobody could contradict the Torah, so He publicly spoke to Moses in front of the entire Jewish nation. He told the people that no prophet would ever be able to contradict Moses, and his word was final. He also empowered other prophets to spread the word of God, as long as they would not directly contradict Moses. This procedure ensured that people would always know the accurate word of God, and not be swayed by false prophets. In fact, the Torah specifically tells us that if a prophet comes, performs miracles, but tells us something that contradicts the Torah of Moses, not to believe this new prophet. The truth and accuracy of the Torah of Moses is absolutely critical to all of Judaism. Otherwise, people could make up (and have) completely new religions and call them Judaism! By the way, it’s simply silly to assume God would change His mind anyway. Little kids change their minds often. Changing your mind comes from making poor decisions that you come to regret. That just doesn’t work with God’s supreme wisdom. Go doesn’t make bad or impulsive decisions.

With this in mind, let’s examine the middle section of Judaism/s core beliefs: The existence, and accuracy of God’s instructions to us, in the form of the Torah:

6. There were people called prophets who truly delivered messages from G-d to the Jewish people.

This is, of course, important, because it’s how we know ANYTHING. God doesn’t pop in to the local coffee shop to give us instructions. Judaism is based on the understanding that God communicated what He wants with humans, who then communicated that information with the rest of us. These people are called prophets.

7. Moses was the greatest prophet, and his word is final. Any prophets who argue with Moses aren't prophets at all.

As we discussed above, God established Moses as the last word, because otherwise, someone claiming to be a prophet could create a whole new religion. So nobody messes with Moses. Nobody.

8. Ya' know that Torah we have? It's the same text Moses first showed us. Nothing has changed in three thousand+ years.

Every Torah written has been copied from an existing Torah, which has been copied from an existing Torah. This guarantees a high level of accuracy. Torah scrolls from generations ago have no important differences from today's Torahs.

9. The Torah will never be changed. G-d gave us the final edited version. Done.

We can be safe in the knowledge that God is not like Dr. Kelvin. God doesn't change the expectations He has set for us. God is consistent and steady.

PART 5

Dear Rabbi,

You've explained in the past why we need the Torah to tell us what is right and what is wrong, because we would not necessarily know on our own. I think that's enough! Why is God looking over our shoulders waiting to punish us for doing bad stuff? Is He that angry?

Thanks,
Cameran Huron

Dear Huron Camera(n),

What would you do if there was one day when you could do whatever you wanted?

I mean complete immunity. No consequences, nobody could get hurt, you were unable to get arrested, bullied, criticized, detained, expelled, fined, grounded, held accountable, implicated, jailed, killed, lambasted, misunderstood, nagged, ostracized, policed, questioned, rebuked, shouted at, told- off, undermined, vilified, whipped, Xhorted, yelled at or made to feel like a zero... for anything you do. How would you act? If you knew that God's cameras and microphones were all shut off for 24 hours. How would you act? If police, parents and school faculty would not and could not bother you or get you into trouble for anything you did. Hey, you're getting way too excited. Calm down! This is hypothetical, Okay?

You might not go all crazy and start robbing banks, but let's be honest. If there was no accountability, and no consequences, we would act different. We would be less careful with other people's feelings and property. We wouldn't concern ourselves quite as much with doing

the right thing, caring, time management, honesty, hard work and all the other good values we believe in. Why? If we know something is wrong, we'd stop ourselves, right?

No. We wouldn't.

People need accountability. In every school, every office and workplace, every family, there are certain rules and consequences. The reason for this is that even if we know something is right, we still act in a totally different way if we know someone is watching. Ask any adult who drives. When you see a cop while driving, you suddenly drive more safely, slowly and responsibly.

DON'T YOU BELIEVE IN BEING SAFE AND RESPONSIBLE? Even without the police nearby? Of course! Yet having someone pay attention makes us want to work harder to succeed.

An uncaring god would NOT bother with punishing or rewarding us. We would be ignored. The reason God pays close attention and REACTS to our actions is because God loves and cares about us.

This explains the final 4 cores in our 13 core beliefs of Judaism:

10. God knows what's what. He's aware of the things we do, and even our thoughts.

As we mentioned above, it's important for us to know that "this call may be monitored for quality purposes." Knowing that God is aware of every action we do, that the cameras are NEVER off, will help us focus on doing what's right.

11. There's a system of reward and consequences. We will get awesome reward for doing what we should, and uncool results when we mess up.

Aside from knowing that our deeds are put in the database, we need to know that crime doesn't pay. We need to understand that if we do the right things, blessing will follow, and if we aren't careful, we might cause ourselves harm.

12. There will be an end to our long exile. A great leader (Mashiach) will come, and can come at any time.

It's not enough to know that there are rewards for our good deeds (Here, have a candy). This core reminds us that if we earn it, there will be a time period of incredible perfection and joy in the world. The dream and promise of Mashiach has kept Jews going through tough times for thousands of years.

13. Eventually (when G-d wills it to happen) those who have passed away will live again

Along the same lines as Mashiach, this is an even great promise. There will eventually be a time when all the normal rules and limitations of our physical world are shattered. Where the dead will come back and live wonderful lives beyond the normal lifespan of a human. This idea is a supreme motivation for us to become the very best and holiest people we can.

This concludes our 5 week miniseries on the 13 core beliefs of Judaism. I've included the Core beliefs infographic below, and you can find the entire discussion at this link: