

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Must a Jew Believe Anything?* by MENACHEM KELLNER  
(London and Portland, Oregon, 1999). 182 pp.

Reviewed by  
David Berger

As the Introduction to this stimulating book draws to a close, Menachem Kellner reiterates its provocative title and encapsulates the core of its thesis in three sentences:

Must a Jew believe anything? If belief is a matter of trust in God expressed in obedience to the Torah, my answer to the question is that a Jew must believe everything. If “belief” is the intellectual acquiescence in carefully defined statements of dogma, the answer is that there is nothing that a Jew must believe (p. 9).

The alert reader will immediately notice that the key final sentence contains a qualifying expression with an ironic effect. The term “carefully defined” blurs careful definition, so that we do not know if the author means to deny that a Jew need assent to any dogmatic proposition at all. If he does not mean to deny this, the word “anything” is, to put it mildly, rather misleading.

This ambiguity will come back to haunt us, but first we must survey Kellner’s thesis as a whole. At key junctures, this is a challenging task, because frequent backtracking and qualifications make it difficult to be certain how rigorously he maintains the position that a superficial reading of his stronger affirmations appears to suggest. Thus, we are told that the Torah does teach certain beliefs about God but does not work them out in clarity and detail; it does not provide a theological “system” (p. 18). As Buber has taught us, biblical *emuna* means “trust in,” not “belief that.” Similarly, the Sages of the Mishna and Talmud were not interested in testing for required beliefs, not even in the examination of a prospective convert, and “with one possible exception” (Mishna *Sanhedrin* 10:1) never specified correct beliefs as a criterion for entering the world to come (pp. 30-31). This does not mean that matters of belief are not important in Judaism. One who rejects mono-

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theism, for example, might be led to idolatry; still, only the act, not the thought, is the sin. While the Rabbis would presumably have rejected a convert who volunteered the information that he did not believe the Torah was revealed by God, they did not raise the question. Their attitude toward theology was not “totally uninterested” but can be characterized as *laissez-faire* (pp. 29-31).

It was only in the Middle Ages, most notably in the writings of Maimonides, that a systematic Jewish theology was constructed. The historical circumstance which generated this development was the need to define Judaism in its confrontation with Karaism, Christianity and Islam. In addition, there was the philosophical stance of Maimonides, which saw intellectual apprehension of God as the only vehicle for attaining immortality. Not only did a believer have to hold correct metaphysical positions; he had to attain a genuine understanding of what they meant and how they were demonstrated. Consequently, “Maimonides did not expect to meet many of his rabbinic contemporaries in the world to come” (p. 77). It also follows from this that inadvertence (*shegaga*), at least with respect to the first five, genuinely metaphysical principles of faith, provides no mitigation.

Since few people today would endorse the philosophical underpinnings of the Maimonidean position, which is in any event foreign to the approach of Hazal, and since aspects of his dogmatic system were challenged—or ignored—even in the Middle Ages, we should, says Kellner, reconsider the entire notion that “legitimate” or “authentic” Judaism is defined by principles of faith or, indeed, that such terms are appropriate at all. By sweeping away this criterion, we can inaugurate a new chapter in the Orthodox relationship with Conservative and Reform Jews. No longer will we speak of illegitimacy or heresy; no longer will we need to find excuses as to why such Jews are not *minim* with all the terrible consequences described in talmudic law; no longer will we have to insult them by placing them in the category of infants taken captive by Gentiles. We should concentrate not on the affirmation of doctrines but on the observance of *mitsvot*. Since no one observes all *mitsvot* perfectly, everyone will be located on a continuum; there will be “no ‘in or out’ . . . , saved or damned, orthodox or heretical” (p. 114).

Nonetheless—and here comes the final caveat in the penultimate paragraph of the main body of the book—

there are limits to what one can affirm or deny and still remain within the Jewish *community*. Denying the unity of God, for example, or that

the Torah is of divine origin in some significant sense, or affirming that the Messiah has already come, are claims which place one outside the historical community of Israel. This is not to say that such persons are technically heretics—nor is it to say that they are not; that is not the issue here—but it is to say that they have placed themselves beyond the broadest limits of historical Jewish communal consensus (pp. 125-126).

It appears, then, that there are after all things that a Jew must believe even in the sense of “intellectual acquiescence.” There are even beliefs that may make a Jew a heretic. At this point, having left us in limbo, Kellner proceeds with a final paragraph proposing that such classifications be determined ad hoc without categories that would force us to regard all members of the class as “either heretics or babes captured by heathens.”

While significant elements of Kellner’s argument are convincing, others, I think, are flawed to the point where they render the historical thesis misleading and the contemporary message, for all its good intentions, confusing and unworkable.

Let us begin at the beginning. It is perfectly evident that Hazal did not present us with a Maimonidean-style creed. At the same time, it is also evident that they did regard the denial of specific theological propositions as grounds for exclusion from the world to come. When Kellner has completed his discussion of the “one possible exception” to his rule, he has shown that Mishna *Sanhedrin* 10:1 is not a work of systematic theology but has done nothing to undermine the obvious and unavoidable reality, to wit, that it excludes from the world to come people who deny resurrection and the belief that the Torah is from Heaven. Even if we were to endorse the debatable assertion that only people who advertise their denial forfeit eternal felicity, the fateful action would remain nothing more than a statement of disbelief in a dogmatic proposition.

Now, it may well be that the Rabbis were impelled to single out these doctrines in the wake of attacks by Sadducees and other sectarians (p. 36), but this position does little to salvage Kellner’s overall argument. It means that the Rabbis did believe that membership in good standing in the community of Israel rested on certain articles of faith. Since they were indeed not interested in systematic theology, they did not articulate these principles until they were challenged, but once challenged, they fleshed out a position that they had always taken for granted.

In a puzzling footnote, Kellner suggests that even the case of Elisha ben Avuya supports his claim about the irrelevance of theology since

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one scholar has argued that Elisha's real transgression was hubris; even this scholar, however, "admits that the *amoraim*...all understand Elisha's sin as a theological deviation" (p. 30, n. 6). This last concession, which Kellner appears to regard as a minor irritant, is in fact extremely damaging to his thesis, since the *amoraim* belong to the pre-theological era in his periodization. This is a particularly striking point in light of his reliance on the amoraic interpretation of *apikoros* in Mishna *Sanhedrin* 10:1 to show that the term bears no theological meaning. He goes on to make the nearly inexplicable assertion that "the question of whether or not this amoraic understanding . . . properly reflects the way it was used by the *tanna'im* . . . is irrelevant for our purposes here" (p. 34, n. 12). Apparently the *amoraim* can be marginalized when they cast doubt on the author's thesis, but their interpretations are decisive when they support it.

Thus, while it is historically true that Hazal did not compose systematic theologies, it is not true that they considered theological deviation insufficient to exclude someone from the community of the faithful.<sup>1</sup> Even if their beliefs were not "carefully defined" by the standards of later philosophers, what matters is the fundamental principle that false belief is a criterion for *minut* and exclusion from the world to come. To take Kellner's own example of idolatry, his assertion that Hazal saw only action as sinful is incorrect. They explicitly tell us that thoughts of heresy or idolatry are biblically forbidden (*Sifrei* to *Numbers* 15:39; *Berakhot* 12b); Maimonides did not create this prohibition out of whole cloth (*Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 2:2-3).<sup>2</sup> Once we recognize that beliefs can be of such central importance, it is difficult to express fundamental reservations about the process by which they are more carefully defined. Indeed, there are contexts in which even the behavioral halakhic benchmarks championed by Kellner require a careful delineation of theological principles. Here then is one example where both the prohibition of idolatrous thoughts and the exigencies of routine *pesak* require serious theological analysis.

A *sofer* has just written a Torah scroll. You discover that although otherwise observant, he writes divine names with the conviction that a particular human being embodies the unitary Creator God whom *Tosafot* (*Sanhedrin* 63b) calls *Ose shamayim* in this very theological context. To determine both whether this Torah may be used and whether these are forbidden idolatrous thoughts we require "carefully defined statements of dogma."<sup>3</sup> Hazal consider the denial of *avoda zara* as an affirmation of the entire Torah, and a habitual violator of this prohibi-

tion and as one who rejects the Torah as a whole (*Hullin* 5a and partial parallels; cf. *Mishne Torah, Hilkhhot Avoda Zara* 2:4). Since they also tell us that one who denies that the Torah is from heaven forfeits his place in the world to come, it follows inexorably that careful theological definitions can be indispensable both for limning the parameters of Judaism and determining eligibility for personal salvation.

Kellner's useful exposition of the Rambam's views and the medieval response to them falls under the purview of his scholarly expertise and is presented with clarity, erudition, and verve. I do not believe, however, that Maimonides, elitist though he was, excluded every non-philosopher from the world to come. Though this understanding of his position is widely held in the scholarly community and rests on weighty evidence, it makes nonsense of his vigorous efforts to disseminate belief in the incorporeality of God even to the masses with the apparent purpose of making them eligible for eternal life. A minimum grasp of metaphysical truths, even if held only by relying on authority, is sufficient to establish such eligibility.<sup>4</sup>

The author is surely correct in asserting that the philosophical foundation buttressing Maimonides' dogmas was largely rejected and that not all the principles commanded universal assent in all their particulars.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, he goes much too far in arguing that "by not including matters of dogma in their statements of *halakhah*, Maimonides' successors [explicitly exemplified by R. Joseph Karo] were, consciously or unconsciously, rejecting his claim that Judaism had commandments relating to belief" (p. 68). I do not deny that in rare instances silence can constitute dissent, and it is evident that the emphasis on theology diminished markedly from the *Mishne Torah* to the *Shulhan Arukh*, but it is out of the question that R. Joseph Karo, whose *Kesef Mishne* endorses Maimonides' ruling in *Hilkhhot Avoda Zara* 2:3 as entirely perspicuous ("*devarav mevo'arim*") and who is reliably reported to have urged a ban on Azariah de' Rossi's *Meor Einayim*, maintained (consciously or unconsciously) that Judaism has no commandments relating to belief.

In light of all these reservations, I cannot endorse a proposal to rethink our assessment of Conservative and Reform Judaism through a prism which denies the existence of dogmatic benchmarks for authentic Judaism. Even from Kellner's own perspective it is very difficult to understand how he arrives at his conclusion. If I follow the book's argument correctly, we are meant to leapfrog medieval, Maimonidean approaches which examined required beliefs and go back to the Rabbinic wellsprings of Judaism where such standards were not spelled out. What then were

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Hazal's criteria for defining *minim*, *mumarim*, *apikorsim* and similar categories which cannot be erased from Rabbinic sources? It is apparently Kellner's position that they were essentially behavioral. In a quest for specifics we would presumably come upon references not just to idolatry but to variants in the dating of *Shavuot*, to differences regarding Temple ritual, perhaps—if one is allowed to inject an element of belief into an analysis of law—to the principled rejection of the authority of the Oral Law across the board.

Compare this arbitrary but, I think, perfectly fair little list with a similar one appropriate to Reform Judaism: violation of the Sabbath, eating forbidden foods, and rejecting the absolute authority of both the Written and Oral Law. To sharpen an already sharp formulation, we may want to ponder a Rabbinic characterization of the despiser of the Lord's word who is to be cut off in both this world and the next. This refers, we are told, even to "one who says that the entire Torah is from heaven except for this point of detail, except for this *kal va-homer*, except for this *gezeira shava*" (*Sanhedrin* 99a). While this very strong statement (which includes a principle of legal reasoning that one is permitted to apply even without a specific tradition) may require some explication, it can serve to illustrate why Kellner does not return to Hazal in his final chapter and why no Rabbinic passage other than *tannur shel Akhnai* plays any role in his discussion there. By any criterion, theological or behavioral, Kellner's approach to Reform Judaism is inconsistent not only with the views of Maimonides but also with the pronouncements of the talmudic Sages.

Regrettably, even mainstream Conservative Judaism today runs afoul of explicit Rabbinic criteria defining sectarianism in matters of both belief and practice. Much of the intellectual leadership of the Conservative movement affirms the validity of the documentary hypothesis, which maintains that the Torah contains genuine contradictions, that is, genuine errors based on the differing views of different authors. Many of these leaders also affirm that certain laws of the Torah—such as *mamzerut*—are to be done away with not through reinterpretation but through the recognition that they are morally wrong. The intellectual arguments which generate the first position and the moral intuitions which produce the second command respect, but there is no way to reconcile them with the parameters of authentic Judaism set by Hazal.

Despite all this, there are important aspects of Kellner's argument with which I feel deep sympathy. I would very much like to believe that the assertion that so-and-so has no portion in the world to come is not

meant to deny God any leeway to consider other merits in making a final determination.<sup>6</sup> I believe that we should deal with non-Orthodox movements, including their leadership, with respect and civility.<sup>7</sup> And I agree that the “limits of historical Jewish consensus” are sometimes no less important than “heresy” as a criterion of acceptability; such a standard enables us to exclude a particular position from the community without declaring that its adherents are prime candidates for perdition.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Kellner, however, I use, even insist upon, terms like “legitimate” and “authentic.” We have an obligation to maintain the boundaries of the faith bequeathed us by our ancestors, and we cannot do this by describing even fundamental deviations as points on a continuum. Let me illustrate this point in a very personal way. In my mid-teens, I experienced periods of perplexity and inner struggle while reading works of biblical criticism. While I generally resisted arguments for the documentary hypothesis with a comfortable margin of safety, there were moments of deep turmoil. I have a vivid recollection of standing at an outdoor *kabbalat Shabbat* in camp overwhelmed with doubts and hoping that God would give me the strength to remain an Orthodox Jew. What saved me was a combination of two factors: works that provided reasoned arguments in favor of traditional belief and the knowledge that to embrace the position that the Torah consists of discrete, often contradictory documents was to embrace not merely error but *apikorsut*. If I had been told by a credible authority that there is nothing a Jew really *must* believe and that the only danger was that I would move to a different point on a continuum, I am afraid to face the question of what might have happened.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, an unanticipated consequence of the refusal to draw red lines may well be the fostering of intolerance within Orthodoxy itself. Since every orthodoxy—indeed, every coherent movement—must have boundaries, setting them in a reasonable place encourages respect for differences within those boundaries. Refusing to set them at all may well lead to the blurring of the central and the peripheral, the *ikkar* and the *tafel*, and lead to the position that virtually all deviations delegitimize. It hardly needs to be said that this danger is very much with us.

This book has much to recommend it. Both scholarly and accessible, it is marked by a humane vision and a passionate commitment to a vibrant, outward looking Orthodox Judaism. Nonetheless, its central thesis is deeply flawed, misrepresenting Judaism’s past and providing a prescription that could jeopardize its future.

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### NOTES

1. It may be relevant to note the reaction of some medieval Jews who, like Hazal, evinced no interest in systematic theology, to the issue of doctrinal error. Although Northern European rabbis at the dawn of the thirteenth century appear to have been insensitive to the full theological ramifications of Ramah's critique of Maimonides on resurrection, some of their compatriots thirty years later were probably prepared to burn the *Guide* and surely willing to excommunicate its readers for theological sins. In twelfth-century Languedoc, Rabad disagreed with Maimonides' characterization of anthropomorphists as heretics but took it for granted that some theological errors make their proponents *minim*.
2. See the exchange on this passage of the *Mishne Torah* in *The Torah U-Madda Journal*: Rabbi Yehudah Parnes, "Torah u-Madda and Freedom of Inquiry," 1 (1989): 68-71; Lawrence Kaplan and David Berger, "On Freedom of Inquiry in the Rambam—and Today," 2 (1990): 37-50; and Rabbi Parnes's rejoinder, 3 (1991-1992): 155-156. See also Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, "Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict", in Gerald J. Blidstein, David Berger, Shnayer Z. Leiman and Aharon Lichtenstein, *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?*, ed. by Jacob J. Schacter (Northvale, New Jersey and Jerusalem, 1997), pp. 279-281.  
For the argument that the prohibition against *believing* in idolatry is rooted in the first sentence of the second commandment, see Nahmanides' commentary to *Exodus* 20:3.
3. Some readers will no doubt guess that this illustration was not plucked out of thin air. I recently stopped attending a convenient weekday morning *minyán* on Mondays and Thursdays because I did not receive a response to an inquiry about the theology of a suspect *sofer*.
4. See the important observations by Arthur Hyman, "Maimonides' Thirteen Principles," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. by Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 141-142.
5. On the last point, see especially Marc B. Shapiro, "Maimonides' Thirteen Principles: The Last Word in Jewish Theology?," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 4 (1993): 187-242.
6. Kellner (p. 37, n. 16) cites a passage in which R. Shimon b. Tsemah Duran speaks of instances in which Rabbinic assertions about exclusion from the world to come are exaggerations. Many Jews probably shared this view with respect to what intuitively appear to be sins of only moderate magnitude. See, however, *Tiferet Yisrael* ad loc., who compiles a list of such offenses, taking for granted that the few examples in the Mishna are simply a small sampling of a much larger class of transgressions.
7. For what I hope is a carefully calibrated formulation of this position, see my contribution to the symposium on "The Sea Change in American Orthodox Judaism," *Tradition* 32:4 (Summer, 1998), 27-31. Despite its surface import, the phrase "infant captured by Gentiles" does not have to be intended—or understood—as contemptuous condescension. Orthodox Jews must utilize categories provided by tradition, but in contemporary



terms this means, or should mean, an individual raised in the skeptical environment of Western culture who will not subject his or her intellectual or behavioral autonomy to the rigorous discipline of traditionalist faith. (I made this point even more briefly in an earlier essay; see “On Marriageability, Jewish Identity, and the Unity of American Jewry,” in *Conflict or Cooperation: Papers on Jewish Unity* (American Jewish Committee and Clal, New York, 1989), p. 76, n.11.

8. It is for this reason that I have avoided the use of the term “heresy” in my campaign to delegitimize Lubavitch messianism and to treat its adherents as non-Orthodox Jews. It may well be that the abolition of the classic criteria for the identification of the Messiah so distorts one of the *ikkarei ha-emunah* that the term is appropriate, and I do not quarrel with those who use it. If the only alternative were legitimation, I would use it myself. Still, we should be able to recognize that this belief is a profound and intolerable betrayal of our faith without resorting to a category that carries all the terrible consequences of *minut*. The idolatrous component of the movement is another matter.
9. The development of recent literary approaches to the Bible has, I believe, provided us with important new arguments for the unity of the Torah that would have made my life easier had they been fully available in 1960. See my brief observations at the end of “On the Morality of the Patriarchs in Jewish Polemic and Exegesis,” in *Understanding Scripture: Explorations of Jewish and Christian Traditions of Interpretation*, ed. by Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod, New York, 1987, pp. 49-62, reprinted in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. by Shalom Carmy (Northvale, New Jersey and London, 1996), pp. 131-146.

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*The Fighting Rabbis: Jewish Military Chaplains and American History*, by ALBERT I. SLOMOVITZ (NYU Press, New York), 170 pp.

Reviewed by  
Victor Geller

Despite its title, *The Fighting Rabbis* is an invitation to a love affair. The author, a career navy chaplain, urges us to share his proud embrace of his calling and his flag. His well-documented book supports his claim. The story of the significant contribution of the rabbi/chaplain to the United States was largely untold. Slomovitz succeeds in correcting this.

The many moving anecdotal descriptions of courage and terror, devotion and despair provide an informative overview of the rabbis—and by extension, of the Jewish servicemen and women—in the American military. From the earliest colonial days to Desert Storm, the