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Comments on "The Rational Defensibility of Being a Traditional Religious Jew"

Joshua Golding's objective is admirably ambitious in "The Rational Defensibility of Being a Traditional Religious Jew." His clear and developed arguments cogently support his thesis, however, for the sake of brevity, he does not deal with some important details which instead he relegates to "beyond the scope of the paper." Additionally, his definitions of terms are admittedly loose (and open to objection). For example, his description of a traditional religious Jew is ambiguous, as is his criteria for such a Jew's conception of God. Traditional Jews may share commitment to the observance of God's commandments, however, they do not necessarily share a clear theology. Some may be rationalists, while others mystics, and yet others may obey God's laws simply because they love the ancient tradition and find the lifestyle to be meaningful and spiritually enriching. (The traditional religious Jew may emulate Judah Halevi's *haver* who is committed to the ancient covenant with the God of History. Such a Jew is not concerned with a philosophical conception of God, but rather bases his religious identity on the historical relationship between the People of Israel and God.)

While I appreciate Dr Golding's efforts to identify the qualitative uniqueness of God and His attributes, it is unclear to me if the qualities and character traits that Golding identifies as "Personhood" ("God's rational free agency") and "Personality" ("God's character traits- for example, benevolence, compassion, holiness, and righteousness") are all that one must believe in to achieve a traditional religious conception of God. Are all of these attributes necessary conditions? (Maimonides, for example, explicitly denies compassion to God. God, according to him, has no attributes whatsoever.) Dr Golding neglects to discuss whether or not he believes that a uniform conception of God is necessary among traditional religious Jews. While Dr Golding affirms that God is benevolent, intelligent and willful- is it necessary for a traditional religious Jew to believe that God is omnibenevolent, omniscient and omnipotent or are there situations in which God cannot or chooses not to express such qualities? Is it rationally defensible to believe in such attributes? (It is difficult to imagine telling a Holocaust survivor that one cannot be a traditional religious Jew unless one believes that God is benevolent, let alone omnibenevolent.) Golding does not address such issues, but rather states, "precisely what these traits amount to, and in what way God has these traits in a qualitatively superior way, is a matter of interpretation which we need not enter here," but is rather left as the task of Jewish philosophical theology. Such a debate over dogma is not new; in the medieval era Maimonides, RaBaD, Duran, Crescas, Albo and Abravanel, among others, argued over the delineation and status of such beliefs. In contemporary times, the debate has continued between Kellner and numerous critics of his position in *Must A Jew Believe Anything?*.

Dr Golding offers compelling defenses of each of the conditions that he views must be met by a traditional religious Jew, as he *assumes* (n. 6) that it is beneficial to work out a rationale for being a traditional religious Jew. However, there is a good deal of philosophical support to limit such philosophical argumentation. (Peter van Inwagen, "Is it Wrong, Always, Everywhere and for Anyone to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence?" *Faith, Freedom and Rationality*, Ed. J. Jordan, D. Howard-

Snyder. (MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); Robert Merrihew Adams, "The Virtue of Faith." *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984): pp:3-15; Stephen T. David, *Faith, Skepticism and Evidence*. (PA:Bucknell University Press, 1978)). Hume recognized the disparity between philosophy and practical life and argued that it is a vice to be too rational, to seek rational arguments in every realm. He appreciated that much of what is taken for granted in life lacks adequate grounds, yet such recognition did not detract from his belief system. William James asserts that "our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds." In "An Overexamined Life is Not Worth Living," David Shatz writes, "My commitment is not rooted in the (naïve) notion that reason vindicates my beliefs. It is rooted rather in what Judaism provides me with: intellectual excitement, feeling, caring for others, inspiration and a total perspective that is evocative and affecting." However, as Golding notes in his refutation to the objection that real people do not decide whether to be religious based on the Expected Value Principle, the "fact that many ordinary persons are not likely to follow the argument is not a cogent objection to its validity."