Must a Jew believe in God?
Daniel Anderson – Limmud Festival December 2019

Is belief in God a necessary pre-requisite for being a Jew?

All of the elements of conversion - whether informing him of the mitzvot in order to receive them, i.e. bris milah, immersion in a mikveh - they need to be done before three who are kosher to judge [i.e. a Beth Din], and during the day. However, this is only necessary initially. *Post facto,* if he were circumcised or ritually immersed before two judges or at night and even if the immersion were not for the sake of conversion (but, for example, had been because of ritual purity) the individual is a convert and may marry an Israelite. (This is with the) exception of the acceptance of commandments which prevents conversion if it does not take place in the presence of three (qualified judges) and by day.

Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488-1575), Shulchan Aruch, 'Yoreh Deah' 268:3
A Halakhic Analysis' Tradition, Volume 11, No. 4, Spring 1971, pp. 16-42

...By definition, conversion entails a commitment to a fully observant and practising Jewish life style...Conversion by definition involves a commitment to observe all Mitzvot. It also includes matters of Jewish belief and practice...The Beth Din looks for four criteria to be in place before they will finalise the conversion:-

1. Knowledge of Jewish laws and customs relating to daily life and festivals.
2. Consistent, practical observance of Jewish law and principles in daily life.
3. Direct, lived experience of Jewish community.
4. An inward readiness to take on responsibilities of being a Jew or Jewess.

The London Beth Din's Attitude to Conversion
https://www.theus.org.uk/article/conversion-2

...But don't imagine that beliefs are irrelevant. It's only through acceptance of all the beliefs, practices and ideology that a person becomes Jewish. But that's not enough. A person who was not born Jewish and has not converted according to Jewish law may hold all the beliefs and keep all the laws and practices of Judaism and still not be a Jew...

Zalman Nelson, 'Is a Jew Who Converts Still Jewish?' Chabad.org
https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1269075/jewish/Is-a-Jew-Who-Converts-Still-Jewish.htm#footnote3a1269075

...Once [a convert] has immersed and emerged he is a Jew in every sense. The Gemara asks: With regard to what *halacha* is this said? It is that if he reverts back to behaving as a gentile, he nevertheless remains Jewish, and so if he betroths a Jewish woman, although he is considered to be an apostate Jew, his betrothal is a valid betrothal. **Yevamot 47b**

A statement of faith

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Exodus 20:2/Deuteronomy 5:6

We have a duty to believe

[Within the Shema] there is the command to believe in the Creator, when it says "*Hear O Israel the Lord*". His intent was not for hearing of the ear, but rather for belief and acceptance of the heart...

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After He placed us under obligation to believe in the reality of His existence, we are then called upon to believe that He is our God, as indicated in the word *"our God"*, and afterwards He commanded us to believe that He [alone] is truly one, in saying: *"God is one"*...

Bachya ibn Pekuda (11th C), 'Duties of the Heart'

I believe by complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is the Creator and Guide for all created beings. He alone made, makes, and will make all that is created.

Maimonides/The Rambam (1138-1204), 'First of the 13 Principles of Faith'

The basic principle of all basic principles and the pillar of all sciences is to realise that there is a First Being who brought every existing thing into being. If it could be supposed that He did not exist, it would follow that nothing else could possibly exist. If however it were supposed that all other beings were non-existent, He alone would still exist... To acknowledge this truth is a positive command, as it is said: *"I am the Lord your God"* [Exodus 20:2, Deuteronomy 5:7]. **Maimonides/The Rambam (1138-1204), 'Yesodei ha-Torah 1:1-5'**

Err, no we don't

My view is that the holy Torah does not contain any main principles since all of it is essential and fundamental. It is not like other religions and cultures that require foundation principles. Even the stories in the Torah, which appear as secondary in importance, contain profound secrets, which are beyond the grasp of human intellect to grasp or the tongue to describe. **David ben Solomon Ibn Abi Zimra/The Radvaz (1479-1573)**

'Metzudot Dovid' #107

Three Jewish philosophers walk into a room...

One of the most profound disagreements in Judaism is that between Moses Maimonides and Judah Halevi on the meaning of the first of the Ten Commandments.

For Maimonides (1138-1204), the first command is to believe in God, creator of heaven and earth [cited in his First Principle of Faith]... Judah Halevi (c.1080-c.1145) disagreed...[he emphasises] that God's opening words in the revelation at Mount Sinai were not, *"I am the Lord your God, creator of heaven and earth"* but "*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."* [*Kuzari* I: 25]...

Nachmanides (1194-1270) [also] disagreed with Maimonides' interpretation of the opening verse of the Ten Commandments. [T]he verse, *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery"* is not a command, but a *preliminary* to the commands. It explains *why* the Israelites should be bound by the will of God. He had rescued them, liberated them, and brought them to safety. The first verse of the Decalogue is not a law but a statement of fact, a reason why the Israelites should accept God's sovereignty.

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

'Interpreting the First Commandment: Philosophy or Prophecy" (2013)

https://www.algemeiner.com/2013/07/16/interpreting-the-first-commandment-philosophy-or-prophecy/

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…I have always thought it strange that there is no command in the Torah that says, *"You must believe in the Lord your God."* And from a philosophical point of view this makes sense. You can command someone to do something. But how can you command someone to believe anything? How can you check if they really do?

Naturally this doesn't take anything away from the fact that God underpins everything in Jewish life. Without Divine presence, Divine history, Divine Law there would be nothing to set ourselves apart from most other religions and cultures. But the question remains, if there is no command to believe in God. What is there?

God simply says *"I am."* That means there is something there that we need to relate to. But, how do we? Some of us are rational, some mystical, some brilliant, others average. There are so many different ways of relating to life and reality. It is up to each one of us. We are challenged to find our way to encounter God, within the only parameter the Torah gives, that there is only one God. That remains unmovable and immutable throughout life on earth. The rest is up to us.

Jeremy Rosen, 'Belief in God' (2017)
http://jeremyrosen.com/2017/08/belief-in-god.html

<u>But can there be Judaism without God?</u>

As an atheist who identifies with my Jewishness, I believe this is a very important question. From a purely philosophical point of view, it might seem like a contradiction; Judaism is a religion that at the very least presupposes, as all religions do, a belief in God. But many of us make a distinction between Judaism as a religion and Judaism as a cultural and ethical outlook. Many Jewish secularists have strong emotional ties to Judaism; they are moved by Jewish history and identify with the ethics of its civilization. And although they don't believe in any supernatural premises, they recognize that they are informed by Jewish values.

> …[However], If an open-minded look at the world makes her conclude that this is a godless universe, does she have to renounce the culture she grew up with, that has done so much to develop a moral outlook and human values? The answer, for me and many others, is no.

Professor Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, Moment (Nov 2011)
https://www.momentmag.com/can-there-be-judaism-without-belief-in-god/4/

…There is Judaism without belief in God. Statistics show that a majority of Jews define themselves as secular. I am not a believer, but I never say that I am an atheist, because it is just as impossible to prove the non-existence of God as it is to prove His existence. Judaism is a culture, and that includes religion, of course, since it started as religion, as did all cultures 2,000 to 3,000 years ago without exception. Judaism is an immensely rich subject, particularly in literature.

Felix Posen, Founder of the Posen Foundation, Moment (Nov 2011)
https://www.momentmag.com/can-there-be-judaism-without-belief-in-god/4/

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…When one speaks about Judaism as an idea or a culture, it becomes quite ridiculous; it is like an attempt to write literature by using only three or four letters of the alphabet. It can be done as a gimmick, but the result will be neither important nor impressive. It is true, however, that in many parts of the world, Jews subconsciously define themselves as the void that remained after God had left - namely, empty shells, hollow puppets that continue to talk and preach despite having lost their contents long ago.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, Moment (Nov 2011)
https://www.momentmag.com/can-there-be-judaism-without-belief-in-god/4/

Yes, there can be Judaism without God, but only briefly, as it cannot reproduce itself. Judaism without God is running on the momentum of past generations. It can last a generation or two, but will disappear without the roots that gave it nourishment. I don't believe that people will continue to light Shabbat candles because it's a cultural practice, but they will do it because it's a mitzvah. Absent a connection to God, Judaism cannot sustain itself. For many people, it's difficult to believe in God, and yet they feel deeply attached to their Judaism. Transmitting it, however, will be an insurmountable challenge. Judaism without God eliminates large and important sections of our tradition, like prayer. You start out with a lessened tradition and without a compelling reason to continue it. That's a poor prescription for longevity.

Rabbi David Wolpe, Sinai Temple, Moment (Nov 2011)
https://www.momentmag.com/can-there-be-judaism-without-belief-in-god/4/

There can be Jews who are good people without belief in God, but ultimately Judaism cannot continue to exist without belief in God because the Jewish historical narrative depends on it. I was raised in a traditional setting, to believe that we're judged - and this comes from the prophetic writings - by our behaviour, not whether we observe this or that ritual, though we should observe those rituals. Judaism without God, in my opinion, will not remain Judaism and will ultimately vanish. My somewhat circular logic is that I accept the truth of the promise that God made to our forefathers and foremothers: that the Jewish people will be eternal. But I also believe that the promise was conditioned on a continuing belief in God.

Senator Joe Lieberman, Moment (Nov 2011)
https://www.momentmag.com/can-there-be-judaism-without-belief-in-god/4/

<u>Belief has too many cultural and theological nuances</u>

…The term "belief" is open to too many cultural and theological nuances. The Torah uses belief much less theologically than practically…Part of the genius of Torah is that it does not try to specify any credo. It was not until medieval times that there was any such formulation in Judaism. The Torah, by not specifying the commands about God in detail thereby acknowledges that the human mind can be led, but it cannot be constrained. The Torah tells little about the nature of God other than that God is unique, the Creator and cannot be "seen" by a living being…Instead, each one of us must find the specific way we can relate to God and make sense of God's world and God's Torah. The Torah, in other words is a pre-philosophical text.

Rabbi Jeremy Rosen
'Torah MiSinai and Biblical Criticism: Rising to the Full Challenge.' (2013)
https://thetorah.com/torah-misinai-and-biblical-criticism/