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June 5, 2014: Do You Have To Believe in God to Be Jewish?

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Title: Do You Have To Believe in God to Be Jewish?

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6/5/2014— I had a talk with a friend of mine yesterday, who is a member of Temple B'nai Israel in White Oak, Pennsylvania. Five years ago, Danny Schiff, who had been a Rabbi there and had also been the community scholar at the Agency for Jewish Learning in Pittsburgh left those posts in order to move to Israel. My friend remembered that Schiff used to say that one did not have to believe in God in order to be Jewish. And my friend wanted to know what I thought about that. I mention the fact that Schiff moved to Israel in order to situate the position that Judaism, or rather being a member of the Jewish people, is probably for Schiff more akin to an ethnic or civilizational identification than it is to anything like religious belief. In this way, Schiff's position is probably very close to that of Mordecai Kaplan, who inaugurated the phrase Jewish civilization. Now, since I left Judaism precisely over matters of belief, I might be expected to disagree with this position, to insist that Judaism represents a series of beliefs to which one must ascribe. But, actually, I think there is a lot to be said for the identification position. Certainly, Judaism would have died out long ago if more people had been like me and less like Schiff. Yet, if one accepts that Judaism passes by familial line, so that if a boy is circumcised and has a Jewish mother, he is Jewish, and similarly for a girl (without the circumcision), then the question must arise, what difference does being Jewish make? If we imagine a Judaism more or less uninfluenced by religious elements, then what one has is the population of a state. This is good definition for the state Israel, and in that sense the future of the Jewish people would be guaranteed, as is the future of the Polish people because of the state of Poland. But what does one then have? Judaism would survive in such a country because it would have the backing of a political entity. And the history of Judaism would be preserved for the same reason. But in the long run, would this situation guarantee anything valuable? Zionists like to point out that the center of gravity for Judaism has dramatically shifted to Israel. This is absolutely so. All other Jewish communities, with maybe an exception for the US, are now appendages to Israel. And Jewish cultural expression is now almost solely Israeli. But, may I ask for one religious advance that has come with this situation? In fact, the opposite is the case. Now Israeli politicians, men and women without any deep religious commitments that I can see, purport to speak for the Jewish people. Increasingly, the religion is taken over by what is simply a nationalism. That may be the consequence of Judaism without God as its center—even the absent God as its center.