

# How Atheism Can Open the Door to God

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Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, affectionately known as Rav Kook, stood as one of the most visionary figures of the early 20th century. As the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel during the British Mandate, he lived at a time when the very foundation of the modern Jewish state was being laid—ironically, primarily by secular Zionists, many of whom rejected traditional religion and embraced atheism. For some in the religious community, this presented a significant challenge. How could a Jewish state emerge, seemingly built by those who dismissed the centrality of God? Rav Kook's response was revolutionary. He didn't recoil from these secular builders; rather, he saw them as pivotal participants in a divine plan that was unfolding. His radical view on atheism not as a rejection of the Divine, but as a necessary component in the spiritual evolution of humanity, provided a remarkable bridge between disbelief and profound faith.

## Understanding Rav Kook's Vision

Rav Kook viewed the secular Zionists as crucial actors in the unfolding Jewish destiny. Atheism, in his mind, was not an outright rejection of God but a significant step in a greater process of spiritual purification and renewal.

Rav Kook recognised that atheism emerges when religion becomes too entrenched in its outward forms. When the living, breathing experience of God is reduced to rigid structures, ritual devoid of meaning, or overly simplistic images of the Divine, atheism rises as a cry for authenticity. In his seminal essay, *The Pangs of Cleansing* in his *Sefer Orot*, he writes:

*“Atheism comes like a painful cry to redeem mankind from this narrow, alien pit, and to raise it from the darkness of text and speech to the light of thoughts and emotions, and eventually, to place its main focus on morality. Therefore, atheism has a temporary function and worth. It comes to purify the dirt that has stuck to a faith that lacks any comprehension. A person who recognizes the good within atheism and tastes its sweetness can draw it back to its holy source... When a person understands the profound criticism of faith that atheism offers, one is able to transform its destructive force into a drive for return to the true God.”*

Atheism, therefore, is not a denial of God's existence, but a protest against how God has been misrepresented by organised religion. It seeks to cleanse away the falsehoods that have accumulated around faith.

For Rav Kook, this rejection of flawed images of God was not the end of the road but a vital stage in spiritual renewal. The atheists of his time, those who rejected the stifling religious structures, were paving the way for a clearer, purer understanding of the Divine. He explained that,

*“The violence of atheism will cleanse away the dross which accumulated in the lower levels of religious faith, and thereby will the heavens be cleared, and the shining light of the higher faith will become visible.”*

In this sense, Rav Kook understood atheism not as a final destination but as part of a dialectical process. Just as misrepresentations of God needed to be torn down, a truer, more profound vision of God would emerge. This vision, according to Rav Kook, reflects the way in which all existence, including atheism, is an expression of the Divine. Even developments that appear antagonistic to faith are part of the broader unfolding of divine truth, bringing humanity closer to spiritual clarity.

## **HaRambam's Approach: A Parallel Journey**

While Rav Kook engaged directly with the phenomenon of atheism, Maimonides (HaRambam) offers a parallel journey through his philosophy. HaRambam's approach, particularly in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, deals not with atheism per se but with the limitations of human language and intellect in grasping the Divine. He taught that God can only be understood through *negative theology* — by understanding what God is not. To attempt to define God with human terms, to reduce the Infinite to our finite conceptions, is inherently flawed.

This notion intersects with Rav Kook's rejection of limited conceptions of God. Where Rav Kook saw atheism as a rejection of distorted images of God, HaRambam saw the need for humility and intellectual restraint in speaking of the Divine. For HaRambam, anthropomorphic depictions of God—imagining Him with human traits—must be rejected. This humility in the face of the unknowable aligns with Rav Kook's belief that false gods, whether through idolatry, superstition, misguided piety, or flawed religious imagery, must be torn down to make way for a deeper truth.

Both Rav Kook and HaRambam ultimately share a vision in which the tearing down of falsehood, whether through atheism or intellectual inquiry, paves the way for a more authentic relationship with God. It is in the rejection of anthropomorphism, and the humbling of human conceptions of the Divine, that a truer understanding of God emerges.

## **A Path Towards Faith**

Rav Kook's belief in the evolutionary nature of faith provides us with a profound insight: that even those who declare themselves atheists are on a journey towards God. Their rejection of distorted religious forms is not a denial of the Divine but a clearing of the path towards a purer faith. In a world where religion can become entangled in dogma and outdated representations, atheism, for Rav Kook, serves as a necessary corrective.

HaRambam's insistence on intellectual humility complements this idea. Both thinkers understood that to approach God, one must first let go of the misconceptions that hinder the way. Whether through the violence of atheism or the silence of intellectual humility, the road to God is cleared, allowing for the emergence of a deeper, more truthful vision of the Divine.

This shared wisdom reminds us that even in moments of doubt, rejection, and disbelief, we may be closer to God than we think. For in the tearing down of the old, Rav Kook and HaRambam teach, the light of a higher faith is waiting to emerge.