

Dear Rabbi Fried,

We were given an assignment over the summer break from religious school to define our understanding of God. We haven't found anything that clearly defines what Jews believe, and hope you can help us.

Chelsea K. & Taylor W.

Dear Chelsea and Taylor,

This is truly an important assignment. Most people go through life without ever stopping to think who G-d is, even if they believe in Him. In fact, you can have a room full of people that will all raise their hands when you ask who believes in G-d, but when you ask them to define what they mean by that, everyone in the room will have very different or even contradictory ideas.

In many religions G-d is a philosophical concept, Someone that they believe in by looking around at the world and seeing there must be a creator. Although Judaism has that as part of our belief, the source of our belief in G-d is different. We don't "believe" in G-d, rather we "know" G-d exists by him revealing Himself openly to our entire people through the miracles He performed for us in Egypt, in the desert, and by speaking directly to us when He uttered the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai. That's why G-d introduces Himself to us in the first of the Commandments as "I am the Lord your G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt..." (Shemos/Exodus 20:2). He didn't say "...who created the heavens and the earth", because we didn't see those things, and G-d wanted our belief to be based upon facts we experienced personally, and to extrapolate what we *know* to other things we *believe*.

Another thing we learn from Egypt is that G-d didn't just create the world and leave it alone. He knows what is happening, cares about the world, and interreacts with it. He speaks to people through prophecy, as He spoke to Moses, and makes changes in the world when necessary for those He loves.

Maimonides, the classical 13th century Jewish philosopher, encoded 13 core principals of Jewish belief, the first 5 of which deal with our belief in G-d. These principal include that G-d is the source of all existence, doesn't *need* anything else outside of Himself to exist, but everything else needs Him. Secondly, G-d is an absolute oneness; not only to say that no other gods exist, but that His oneness includes all the exists in the universe. Thirdly, G-d has no physical characteristics whatsoever, no front or back, arms or legs. The 4th point is that G-d is infinite, and always existed and always will, as He is above time. Lastly, only G-d is to be worshipped and prayed to and nothing else. This, at one level, means not to worship idols. More deeply it means that we have a loving relationship with G-d, in which serving Him is our opportunity to express our love and appreciation for all the love and blessings He showers upon us through the gift He gave us called Life.

All these points are discussed by Maimonides and other great Jewish philosophers at great length, but this is, in a nutshell, the key points of our belief. I wish you the best of luck in discussing and internalizing them, and please feel free to contact me for more explanation.