

Finding, doubting G-d on shores of the Charles

By Len Abram
Special to the Advocate

Does G-d exist? Is the Holy One, revealed in the Torah and by the Prophets, real or fiction? Rebecca Goldstein's novel includes a summary of 36 arguments for the existence of G-d, with a critique of each. Is any one of them convincing? Questions like these require heavy lifting. This comic novel lightens the load.

Goldstein uses satire and even farce to amuse while she instructs. Her plump targets for satire are universities and academia. Lionel Trilling noted that colleges are an odd world. A class hour is less than 60 minutes and a school year is only nine or ten months long. The academy, which thinks of itself as a temple of high culture and humane values, runs on prestige and snobbery. It exploits grad students, like Gideon Raven, who, like the central character Cass Seltzer, is a follower of the pompous Professor Jonas Klapper. Even the names Goldstein assigns her characters suggest gas and noise in academia: Seltzer and Klapper.

In the midst of comedy, Goldstein has written a book about ideas. Ideas rule the world, said

Plato; if they don't actually rule, they certainly influence. The ideas of Baruch Spinoza, Goldstein's hero in an earlier book and a presence in this one too, probably influenced the Founders' emphases on reason, tolerance and religious freedom in our Constitution. Spinoza worshipped reason, with an intellectually complete, but indifferent G-d, close to Seltzer's beliefs.

For academician Seltzer, the major conflicting ideas are faith vs. reason; his answer to the question about a deity is an emphatic no. For him, atheism is the only intellectually honest life, and religion an illusion. Seltzer, however, is no ordinary atheist; his mother was raised in a Hasidic community, the Valdener, and he himself is a descendant, one of several in the story, of the Jewish mystic Ba'al Shem Tov. For the Valdener, the answer about the existence of G-d is emphatically, ecstatically, yes. Moreover, the Ba'al Shem Tov recognized the limits of reason in experiencing G-d, and emphasized love and joy, within us from the love of G-d.

Seltzer, the Spinoza rationalist, has become an international spokesperson for atheism; "the atheist with a soul" he is called. His



PHOTO BY: STEVEN PINKER

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

new fame advances a personal crisis. He stands on a bridge over the Charles River in deep winter wondering if he should accept an offer from Harvard, academic heaven. This means leaving the orbit of his professor, the charismatic Jonas Klapper, and perhaps losing his love interest, Lucinda Mandelbaum, also a teacher at his university. Seltzer is not lucky in love. Comedies often end in the triumph of love. In the final pages, Seltzer resolves his romantic problem, although not the way he intended. Not just romantic love, but

"36 Arguments for the Existence of G-d, a Work of Fiction." Rebecca Newberger Goldstein. New York: Pantheon Books, 2010.

love of community and family also triumph over abstractions.

The novel contrasts settings in Massachusetts and New York: Cambridge, with its Harvard; and the nearby town of Weedham (read Waltham), with its Frankfurter University (read Brandeis). Seltzer, Mandelbaum and Klapper teach there. Academics at Frankfurter struggle for validity with competing institutions like Harvard, those "shmendricks up the river," as the university president calls them. The other locale is an Orthodox community near the Hudson River, home to the Valdener, remnants from the Holocaust, who raise their families, pray and study, while they await the Messiah. They are lead by their rebbe, descended from the Ba'al Shem Tov.

Next in line to be rebbe is his son Azarya, whom Seltzer and a girlfriend Roz Margolis discover among the Valdener at age 6 and

who has the potential to be one of the world's great mathematicians. Years later, Azarya has to choose between the Valdener and MIT. His decision surprises Seltzer. For a teenager, Azarya is wise beyond his years: "One has to live some way, so why not that way?"

In Azarya's gifts and values, perhaps Goldstein had in mind Baruch Spinoza, the renegade Jew who helped shape what we call the modern mind. To protect his family, the "shalom bayis," or peace in the house, Spinoza held back on his rationalist views. Compromise did not make Spinoza, who was eventually excommunicated by his community, lose his integrity. Nor does Azarya lose his.

In one scene, the messianic Klapper, dressed in the fur hat and britches of the very Orthodox, is smacking his lips over a Big Mac at a highway rest stop. In another, courses at Frankfurter push alliteration to the limit: "The Manic, the Mantic, and the Mimetic." Is Goldstein's playfulness at odds with her profound subject? Goldstein's satire and gags may remind us of an old saying, to be added to the 36 arguments: To laugh is to believe in G-d.

Q&A with Rebecca Goldstein

Rebecca Goldstein, local philosopher and writer, has earned a dozen awards, including a National Book Award, a Guggenheim and a MacArthur Fellowship. Her stories and studies often deal with Jewish ideas and culture. She discussed her views and background with the Advocate:

Q: In your novel, the sounds (Hasidic melodies) and aromas (lukshen kugel) of a traditional Jewish, Eastern European background are evident. What was your upbringing? Are you related to the Ba'al Shem Tov like your major character Cass Seltzer?

A: My family was Orthodox, though we didn't live in an Orthodox community. My sisters and I, in fact, were sent to public school, because my parents couldn't afford the tuition for the local day school. However, I went to a very Orthodox yeshiva for high school. I write about it in the beginning of "Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity." We girls were not encouraged to go onto college. I despised that school and ended up playing hooky more often than I went, working out effective strategies for not getting caught. Well, sometimes I got caught. And no, I'm not related to the Ba'al Shem Tov. Our esteemed ancestor (and every Jewish family has one) is the Maharal, the Cabbalist reputed to have created the Prague golem.

Q: Spinoza's argument for the existence of G-d also appears with the 36 in the appendix. Is this the most compelling?

A: Spinoza's argument is compelling, when you understand it. It's also inconsistent with the traditional notions of G-d. His G-d is more like a string theorist's con-

ception of the Final Theory of Everything than the G-d of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. His G-d, for example, doesn't intervene in the course of history. His G-d doesn't perform miracles. His G-d doesn't even love us. His notion of nature is also not nature as we normally conceive it. Sometimes Spinoza is called a pantheist, and this leads to misconceptions. All terms are defined by Spinoza in the context of his system, and their conventional meanings get warped. Spinoza's nature is no more like what that term normally calls up in people's minds than his G-d is like the one that people pray to in their churches, mosques and synagogues.

Q: What is the difference between writing about philosophy and writing fiction?

A: When I want to argue a philosophical position, then I write non-fiction. When I want to explore how philosophical problems play out in our lives, how intertwined they are with not only our cognitive but our emotional lives, then I write fiction.

Q: Two sets of believers in the story are the Amazon aborigines, studied by Cass' friend Roz, and the Valdener Hasidim, introduced to Cass by Professor Jonas Klapper. Are they in same category of believers?

A: Every religion has its mythical narrative, blending cosmological and normative claims, a narrative that manages to intimate a sense of profound mystery. A successful mythical narrative gives believers a sense of the world at large, as well as their place within it. The really successful ones introduce sufficient ambiguity to allow new meanings to be discovered. But to re-

duce Judaism to just that core, to the sort of mythical narrative that it shares with Amazonian hunter-gatherers, is absurd.

Judaism developed into a uniquely sophisticated civilization, one that sacralizes learning. Judaism has, accordingly, produced a body of profound scholarship, not to speak of a refined ethical sensibility. Both the rebbe and the rebbe's son Azarya in my fictional Valdener sect display a heightened ethical sensibility. Compare what the Hasid Azarya thinks he owes his community to what Professor Klapper thinks he owes his.

Q: Did the recent defenses of atheism by Christopher Hitchens influenced the writing of this book?

A: After "Betraying Spinoza," I got drawn into the faith/reason debate. Spinoza is a hero to free-thinkers, and I got invited to proselytize, pro-reason organizations to speak about him. As a philosopher, I was fascinated by the way in which the philosophical issue regarding G-d's existence had suddenly been thrust out of philosophy halls and into the public square. The books not only of Hitchens, but of Richard Dawkins, Dan Dennett and Sam Harris, form the backdrop of the novel.

Q: What did you tell your children when they asked about religious belief?

A: When my kids asked about G-d, then we spoke, in age-appropriate terms, about the question itself, and why some people believe and others don't. They knew that they were free to wrestle with the question for themselves – in fact, that I expected them to.

– LEN ABRAM

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