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THREAD: On Jewish Atheism. People frequently ask whether you can be a Jew and be an atheist. When speaking to Jews about atheism, Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi would famously say “I don’t believe in the same God you don’t believe in.” This is the basis of my answer. 0/

Atheism as we think of it in common popular culture in America is primarily based on a Christian worldview. Atheism in this form is in contrast to Christian views of belief, belief in Christ being the integral key point to Christianity. This is not parallel in Judaism. 1/

In order to be an atheist in Judaism, you have to actively believe something very specific: The materiality of the world as we see it is definitely all there is, without any meaning or purpose. Arch materialists like this certainly exist, but I find them exceedingly rare. 2/

Throughout Jewish history the theology has been incredibly diverse. The idea of a man in the sky pulling the strings has not been prominent for over a millennium. Even Biblically it wasn't the norm. For great Biblical theology, check out this book: https://t.co/tq6tk2OSUj 3/

Classical Rabbinic ideas varied widely. Merkabah Mystics did transcendental journeying for experience of the supernatural realm; Tzadokim denied the supernatural realm; the Mishnah (below) simply said don't go there. Jews always went There, but never settled on what "There" is.4/

understands most matters **on his own.** The mishna continues in the same vein: **Whoever looks at four matters, it would have been better for him had he never entered the world:** Anyone who reflects upon **what** is **above** the firmament and **what is below** the earth, **what was before** Creation, **and what** will be **after** the end of the world. **And anyone who has no concern for the honor of his Maker,** who inquires into and deals with matters not permitted to him, **deserves to have never come to the world.**

Since Saadia Gaon the Aristotelian (10th c) conception has been widely popular. The Kabbalists went towards something like neoplatonism. Spinoza (one of my favorites) was accused of atheism, but has a whole book of theology. Hasidim took Kabbalah to a pantheistic conclusion. 5/

Early Reformers (18th c) focused on talking about "the God idea" rather than God per se. More recently, R. Mordecai Kaplan denied God as supernatural, and defined God as the power which makes possible personal salvation, or "worthwhileness of life." https://t.co/SpDwlwRQse 6/

These examples are the tip of the iceberg. What it boils down to is that in order to be a Jewish atheist, there would be a denial of all mystery in the world. And, the Rabbis taught us that the Mystery doesn't decide our behavior. 7/

עמד רבי יהושע על רגליו ואמר (דברים ל, יב) לא בשמים היא מאי לא בשמים היא אמר רבי ירמיה שכבר נתנה תורה מהר סיני אין אנו משגיחין בבת קול שכבר כתבת בהר סיני בתורה (שמות כג, ב) אחרי רבים להטות אשכחיה רבי נתן לאליהו א"ל מאי עביד קוב"ה בההיא שעתא א"ל קא חייך ואמר נצחוני בני נצחוני בני

Rabbi Yehoshua stood on his feet and said: It is written: **"It is not in heaven"** (**Deuteronomy 30:12**). The Gemara asks: **What** is the relevance of the phrase **"It is not in heaven"** in this context? **Rabbi Yirmeya says:** Since **the Torah was already given at Mount Sinai, we do not regard a Divine Voice, as You already wrote at Mount Sinai, in the Torah: "After a majority to incline"** (**Exodus 23:2**). Since the majority of Rabbis disagreed with Rabbi Eliezer's opinion, the *halakha* is not ruled in accordance with his opinion. The Gemara relates: Years after, **Rabbi Natan encountered Elijah** the prophet and **said to him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do at that time,** when Rabbi Yehoshua issued his declaration? Elijah **said to him:** The Holy One, Blessed be He, **smiled and said: My children have triumphed over Me; My children have triumphed over Me.**

In his powerful book "Nothing Sacred," @rushkoff wrote: "By keeping God unnamable and unknowable, Jews could also keep this deity universal." I agree, and therefore, atheism (a primarily Christian frame) isn't usually the issue. The actual issue is idol worship. 8/

Rather than atheism, idol worship is the banned theology of Judaism. Idol worship requires clearcut claims of direct and exclusive knowledge of what God (or a god) is. Being b'nei Yisrael is being the people that struggle with God- it is an active, ongoing, undefined process. 9/