

Deep Questions

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

When I teach Jewish philosophy I often begin with a table. I ask them to define a table, and they learn how tricky definitions can be (it has three legs — or four; it can be to put something on, or for decoration, to eat on or to play a game on, etc.). They also learn part of the infuriating fascination of philosophy: basic questions are difficult.

At its best, Jewish thought is willing to ask the central questions about life, about God, about the commandments and customs of tradition. How do we understand our obligations to one another. Is there a God and why does God seem often to be hiding. Why is there so much evil in the world? What is the purpose and destiny of human life. These and other questions receive serious, thoughtful answers from the keenest minds of our tradition. No faith is sound that has only answers; we all need to struggle with the questions.

Sometimes, though, simple exasperation wins out.. Discussing Berkeley's idea that everything exists only in the mind, Samuel Johnson kicked a rock and said, "I refute him thus." Presumably, disciples of Berkeley were not convinced. Even better, as the essayist Joseph Epstein relates, when a student asked the philosopher Morris Cohen, "Can you prove to me I exist?" Cohen shot back in his heavily accented English, "who esking?"