

Apprehension in Jewish Belief and in the Study of Torah

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Introduction

As Jews, we are committed to Rambam's Thirteen Principles of Faith and to the performance of the 613 *mizvot*. Within these principles there is a disproportionate emphasis on two pillars of Judaism: the belief in G-d¹ and the primacy of the Torah.² When R. Yehudah ha-Nasi codified the *Mishnah*, he placed the *mizvah* of Talmud Torah in the first *mishnah* of *Pe'ab*, in which he states unequivocally, "*ve-talmud Torah keneged kulam*," that the study of Torah is equal in importance to all other commandments combined. About a thousand years later, when Rambam wrote his *Mishneh Torah*, he began the first ruling of his *magnum opus* with the *mizvah*, to know of the existence of G-d.

In this essay, I would like to examine the necessity and significance of "apprehension" in both the belief in G-d and in the *mizvah* of *talmud Torah*. By the term "apprehension," I am referring to the importance that the basis for one's belief in G-d and one's involvement in the study of Torah should be knowledge that is acquired in a direct, first-hand way, as opposed to a commitment only based upon reliance upon our forefathers' traditions (although certainly not to the exclusion of such a belief system, as will be discussed later).

¹ Principles one through five, as well as Principles ten and eleven, deal with the essence of G-d.

² Principles six and seven deal with belief in the authenticity of the prophets, of which Moshe was the epitome. This segues into Principle eight, that Moshe was the vehicle for the transmission of the Torah, and finally Principle nine, that the Torah is immutable.

Apprehension in the Founding of Judaism

The need for “apprehension” constitutes one of the core elements of Judaism. Rambam eloquently captures how Avraham came to an understanding of the Almighty. He then used apprehension to influence the world with teachings of monotheism and to establish the roots of the Jewish people.³ According to Rambam, this knowledge is so crucial to our religion that he goes on to describe the Jewish people, the outgrowth of Avraham’s teaching, as “a nation which *knows* the Lord.”⁴

The Rambam makes clear (*ibid.*) that Avraham was able to pass on to future generations this “apprehension” that he had attained through his own reasoning. The Etz Yosef, in commenting on the *Amidah*, states that the reason why we say “G-d of Avraham, G-d of Yizhak, and G-d of Yaakov” is that Yizhak and Yaakov did not merely passively accept Avraham’s monotheistic ideas, but that they also understood and internalized these ideas. It is for this reason, says the Etz Yosef, that we attribute in our prayers the origins of monotheism to all three forefathers.⁵ The message for us is that we should, following our forefathers’ example, attempt to base our beliefs on our own direct knowledge, rather than being satisfied solely with reliance upon tradition. Additionally, Rambam states (Pines translation), “The Torah has made it clear that this last worship ... [for man to center his thoughts around G-d] can only be engaged in after apprehension has been achieved” (*Guide to the Perplexed* 3:51). According to Rambam, apprehension, i.e. knowledge of G-d through man’s own understanding, is a prerequisite for human perfection. (See for example, introduction to *Perush ha-*

³ See *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Idol Worship,” 1:3, that Avraham had no one to teach him about monotheism and he was able to deduce this on his own. See also *Midrash ha-Gadol parashat Lekh Lekha*, which elaborates on how Avraham *Avinu* utilized deductive reasoning to arrive at monotheism.

⁴ *Ibid.* See also *Guide to the Perplexed* 3:51 which quotes the verse in Psalms 100:3, “Know that G-d is the Lord.”

⁵ Etz Yosef found in the book *Ozar ha-Tefilot*, pp. 308-309. See also the commentary of *Dover Shalom* ad loc. and *Or ha-Hayyim Shemot* 13:2 S.V. *Zeh Keli*.

Mishnah.⁶) Further, the Rashba learns from the first sentence of *Shema* the precept that every person must establish his faith out of personal inquiry. According to the Rashba, the word *Shema* has a triple semantic: a) listening of the ear, b) understanding of the heart, and c) acceptance of the fact and belief in it. Therefore, the fulfillment of the words *Shema Yisrael*, according to the Rashba, is meant to be not the mere physical act of hearing the words, but rather deriving a much fuller first-hand knowledge of G-d's unity in the world through understanding and acceptance.⁷

This certainly does not, Heaven forbid, preclude the importance of tradition in Judaism. After all, the Jewish people accepted the Torah by saying, "We will do and we will listen" (Exodus 24:7). This demands of us, as Jews, that we obey all of the commandments, and accept all components of the Jewish faith, regardless of how deeply we understand them. Yet, ultimately, one should attain more profound inferential first-hand knowledge of Judaism and its commandments on a personal level. The Me'iri, in his introduction to his commentary on the Talmud, makes reference to the phrase from the Sabbath *Mussaf* prayer, "*me'angeha kavod yinhalu, to'ameha haim zakhu*." He explains this to mean that those that simply perform the commandments (*me'angeha*) certainly receive reward, but those who additionally gain a personal appreciation for all of the *mizvot* (*to'ameha*) will merit the ultimate dividends in the world to come.⁸

Apprehension in the Revelation at Sinai

Apprehension is not only essential with regard to the goals of Judaism—understanding the concepts of the existence and unity of G-d—but it is also the foundation upon which our *mesorah* is based. In stark contrast to the beginnings of other religions, which base

⁶ כי לא נבדל האדם משאר בעלי חיים אלא בהגיון, שהוא חי בעל הגיון, רצוני במלת הגיון השגת המושכלות, וגדול שבמושכלות השגת אחדות הבורא יתעלה וישתבח (מהדורת יוסף קאפה עמוד כב).

⁷ Rashba, found in the Mossad Rav Kook edition *Hidushei ha-Rashba Perushei ha-Haggadot*, p. 143. See also *Chovot ha-Levavot, Sha'ar ha-Yibud*, chapter 3.

⁸ Me'iri, *Makhoron ha-Talmud ha-Yisraeli* edition, vol. 1, p. 7.

themselves on the vision of a select few individuals, the revelation at Sinai took place in front of the entire nation. The entire Jewish people acquired this direct knowledge by participating in and experiencing the Divine Presence at Sinai. Rambam explains that the revelation at Sinai is believed because it was witnessed by the entire nation (*Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of the Foundations of the Torah” 8:1). Each and every Jew at Sinai acquired a direct apprehension. Just as historical events are accepted as fact,⁹ Rambam invokes Exodus 19:9 to show that this event exclusively established the authenticity of Moshe as the true prophet of the Jews (*Mishneh Torah*, *ibid.*).

The revelation at Sinai should be viewed as the epitome of apprehension. As we are a nation that “knows the Lord,” the Torah, the foundation of our religion, must be something to which we have a *direct* connection, a way of life that was transmitted to us directly. Also, the Ran explains that since the Torah knowledge and its acceptance by the Jewish people is of paramount importance to mankind, it was imperative that it be conveyed in a way in which its authenticity was unquestionable.¹⁰ Therefore, even subsequent generations that did not actually witness the revelation are compelled to accept the veracity of the Torah, since it was revealed in such a clear manner. In this vein, perhaps we can understand the *Hazal* that says that this relationship was established not only with the Jews of that generation, but with all future generations. Just as the original *Avot* (Avraham, Yizhak and Yaakov) received revelation, and hence were able to transmit what they understood so clearly to subsequent generations, so, too, our *Avot* who stood at Sinai, so clearly experienced revelation that they were able to transmit its teachings to future generations. The mechanism for this transmission is Talmud Torah.

Apprehension in the Study of Torah

In the study of the Torah, understanding is required. When stating the obligation to engage in Torah study, the Bible uses the formulation “*ve-shinantam*,” teach them diligently. This requires of us

⁹ See the introduction to the *Sefer ha-Hinukh* which elaborates on this point.

¹⁰ See *Derashot ha-Ran*, 1977 Feldman edition, p. 65.

more than a cursory awareness of the Torah; it requires a full comprehension of the detailed and intricate Torah laws.¹¹ When Rambam defines Talmud, he refers to it as *yavin ve-yaskil aharit davar mi-reishito*, understanding and contemplating the practical law from its original source (*Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Learning Torah” 2:11). This calls for one not merely to know the laws, but also to know their source and how they were derived, to achieve complete first-hand knowledge of them.

Ultimately, however, the Torah derives from G-d. Consequently, the study of Torah should lead to a greater appreciation of G-d, as it is the expression of the Divine. This is perhaps expressed most pointedly by the Sifrei¹² in defining the *mizvah* of love of G-d. By understanding G-d’s Torah and appreciating it, one will derive such pleasure that he will come to love G-d.¹³ As explained above (“Apprehension in the Founding of Judaism”), the goal of Judaism is to perfect ourselves and to understand as much about the Almighty as is humanly attainable. In order for this objective to be achieved, the study of Torah should be done in a way where direct knowledge is sought.¹⁴ It was the absence of this aspect of attaining knowledge of G-d through the learning of Torah, which prompted the prophet Jeremiah to proclaim, "ותפשי" "התורה לא ידעוני" (Jeremiah 2:8, see also 9:22-23), those that are attached to the Torah and familiar with it, nonetheless were lacking in their knowledge of G-d. The Malbim explains that those who are engaged in Torah study should deepen their knowledge of the Lord, because this is the objective of the study of Torah.¹⁵

¹¹ Deuteronomy 6:7. See Rashi, quoting the Sifrei, as well as the Rashbam and Sforno.

¹² As understood by Rambam, *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, *mizvah* 3.

¹³ Additionally, Rambam defines *mizvah* 6, the *mizvah* of associating oneself with scholars with the purpose of imitating their ways and believing their teachings, as the *mizvah* of cleaving to G-d. Here also the study and understanding of the words of the scholars leads one to a greater relationship with G-d.

¹⁴ As we say in the *berakhot* of *Birkhat ha-Torah*, “*Kulanu yod’ei sbemecha...*”

¹⁵ Commentary of the Malbim, *ibid*. See also the commentary of the Radak.

The Way of Attaining Apprehension¹⁶

There are two basic approaches that can be used in attaining knowledge of Jewish law, i.e. in “learning.” One method is to study that which has been accepted and passed down from generation to generation, focusing not on the process of the derivation of the law, but rather on mastering the content of the *halakhic* conclusions. The other method is one that emphasizes a more open-ended process of logical deductions, which will eventually lead to a correct conclusion. It is this distinction, according to the Neziv, R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, that highlights the difference between the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud.¹⁷ Whereas the Babylonian Talmud relies heavily on reaching *halakhic* conclusions based on logical deduction (what is referred to in Aramaic as *shakla ve-tarya*),¹⁸ the Jerusalem Talmud is based much more on the transmission of law, avoiding much of the give-and-take of discussion.

Since there are two different methods for attaining apprehension, we need to look at their relationship and examine the positive and negative aspects of each. The way of the Jerusalem Talmud, passing down accepted truths, has an advantage in that the conclusions are known. Thus, assuming that the transmissions are

¹⁶ This analysis is limited to the study of the *halakhic* part of the Oral Law. Study of *hashkafah*, Jewish thought and philosophy, is based on the *miqvaḥ* of *Yediat Hashem* for Rambam and R. Beḥaye ibn Pekuda in *Hovot ha-Levavot*. Additionally, according to Rambam, study of philosophy is included in his definition of Talmud Torah.

¹⁷ *Kadmat ha-Emek*, introduction to his commentary on *She'iltot de-Rav Aḥai Gaon*, vol. 1. Perhaps the two popular terms that are used to refer to the Oral law highlight this distinction, namely Talmud and *Gemara*. Based on Rambam's definition cited above, the term Talmud refers to the process of logical deduction; whereas the term *Gemara* means tradition, and is used in many contexts to mean that the source of a particular fact is a tradition that has been passed down through the generations. For example, see Rashi in *Ta'anit*, 28b, s.v. *Gemara*, “Such is what we received from our Forefathers.” See also *Barukh she-Amar* on *Pirkei Avot* by R. Baruch Epstein (p. 135) who writes that the term *Gemara* implies a tradition passed down from teachers to their students.

¹⁸ See *Back to the Sources*, edited by Barry W. Holtz, p. 136, for a description.

accurate, the knowledge will be preserved. However, the disadvantage of this method is that if certain facts are lost in the transmission then we are left helpless, not knowing how to proceed (*Kadmat ha-Emek*, *ibid.*) The technique of the Babylonian Talmud, reaching conclusions through analysis, has its advantage in just the area where the other method falls short. Since this method relies on analysis, it can arrive at conclusions even when all the facts are not present (*ibid.*). However, the disadvantage of this method is that since the analysis is an open-ended process by its very nature, if utilized improperly, it can lead to inaccurate conclusions.

Given that each method has its pros and cons, which method should we take? The Neziv explains that the best path to take is that which allows one to integrate both of the positive aspects of each method into his approach of learning (*ibid.*). This is how he explains a *gemara* which states that a Babylonian scholar that emigrated to Israel is equivalent to two scholars from the Land of Israel (*Ketubbot* 75a).¹⁹ Since the emigrated scholar, by virtue of his previous Babylonian training, is skilled in analysis techniques, he can combine the analytical approach with the accepted facts that are known by the

¹⁹ Rava's statement, 'that a Babylonian scholar who emigrates to the Land of Israel is equivalent to two scholars of the Land of Israel,' needs to be read in context:

אמר אביי וחד מינייהו עדיף כתרי מינן אמר רבא וחד מינן כי סליק להתם עדיף כתרי מינייהו דהא רבי ירמיה דכי הוה הכא לא הוה ידע מאי קאמרי רבנן כי סליק להתם קרי לן בבלאי טפשאי (כתובות עה א)

...and in light of R. Yirmiyah's attack on Abaya:

אמר בבלאי טפשאי, כי סליק רבין אמרה לשמעתא (דאביי - עיין רש"י) קמיה דרבי ירמיה אמטול דיתבי בארעא חשוכא אמרי שמעתא דמחשכא (זבחים ס ב)

...and in light of R. Yirmiyah's attack on Rava:

נתערבו לו דמים בדמים אמר רבא נותן אחת למעלה ושבע למטה ועולה לו לכאן ולכאן אמרוה קמיה דרבי ירמיה אמר בבלאי טפשאי משום דדיירי בארעא דחשוכא אמרי שמעתא דמחשכא (יומא נו א)

When Rava says that one of ours is better, *כתרי מינייהו*, does he mean literally as 'two of theirs' or does he really mean (somewhat bitterly), 'than [the] two of us'?

See also the Maharsha on *Sanbedrin* 24a.

וכי סליק להתם אמר בבלאי טפשאי דאוריא דא"י מחכים ליה דהוי כחד מבני א"י דהוי כתרי מינן...נמצא אגן דהוינן כתרי דידיה כי הוה הכא כי סלקינן להתם יגרום לנו אוריא דא"י דהוינן כתרי מינייהו.

Israeli rabbis, and thus become a superior rabbi (*Kadmat ha-Emek*, *ibid*).

The Limits of Apprehension

We have presented a path, based upon the Neziv, through which apprehension can be achieved, namely by first understanding the accepted principles of the Jewish faith, and developing one's analytical skills to more fully appreciate the basis of Jewish law. However, it should be noted that such an ambitious approach is very difficult, and is restricted by human limitations. Rambam, when describing the prohibition of being led astray by one's heart (*lo taturu*), warns against unlimited intellectual pursuit, asserting that man's mind is limited (*Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Idol Worship," 2:3.)²⁰ The *Netivot* writes that man, by the very fact that his intellect is contained within a physical body, will be unable to achieve total apprehension of the Torah (Introduction to *Netivot ha-Mishpat*.) Absolute truth, claims the *Netivot*, can only be ascribed to the Almighty, whose seal is truth (*hotmo emet*).

However, even though the fulfillment of apprehension is a formidable task, we are nevertheless obliged to make a concerted effort towards reaching it. This point is highlighted in a *Mishnah* which states, "לא עליך המלאכה לגמור ולא אתה בן חורין ליבטל ממנה".²¹

This *Mishnah* teaches us that we need not expect to finish all achievable endeavors. Rather, we should concern ourselves with engaging ourselves in the pursuit of apprehension to the best of our individual abilities.²³

Although each individual may be unable to reach the highest level of knowledge of G-d, collectively the people of Israel can achieve more than the sum of its individual members. According to

²⁰ For additional insight see the article in *The Torah u-Madda Journal*, Volume Two (1990), by Drs. Lawrence Kaplan and David Berger, "On Freedom of Inquiry in the Rambam and Today," pp. 37-51.

²¹ *Ethics of the Fathers*, 2:16 in the Vilna edition.

²³ See also *Berakhot* 5b, אי משום תורה דלא אפשר - שנינו: אחד המרבה ואחד הממעט, ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים.

R. Abba Mari of Lunel, the revelation of Sinai was perceived by the people of Israel as a group, on the same level as Moshe (whose level of prophecy was of a higher order than all the other prophets).²⁴

Conclusion

The importance of apprehension is reflected in the weekday *Amidah*. The first of the supplication blessings is for the bestowing of knowledge to man who has been graced with intellect. Only *after* we acknowledge the fact that G-d has granted us an intellect is it realistic for G-d to expect his people to act properly and avoid sinning. Therefore, the next blessings, which revolve around themes of repentance, are predicated on the fact that man has the ability to attain knowledge and perfect his actions. Ultimately, it is apprehension, derived both from man's physical senses and through his personal logical understanding, that will raise man to achieve his potential in this world and earn his place in the World to Come (*Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Repentance" 8:2). It is through attaining apprehension that we as Jews can imbue the world with the realization of G-d's existence and His supremacy over the world. It is through apprehension by each of us within the people of Israel that we can truly become, "a nation which knows the Lord" (*Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Idol Worship" 1:3.) ❧

²⁴ *Minḥat Kena'ot*, chapter 8. Also *Derashot ha-Ran*, p. 81. However, according to Rambam, *Moreh Nevukhim* 2:33, the Jewish people did not receive prophecy at Sinai for the first two commandments; rather, they received a clear intellectual comprehension of them.