

Personal Perspectives on Emunah

By: MICHAEL ROSENSWEIG*

Question: What would you describe as the source of your faith?

R. Rosensweig: The source of faith is by definition something that is very multifaceted and variable. For people who grow up in a *frum* environment, there is obviously the enormous advantage of a *masorah* that constitutes the foundation of many facets of Judaism, none more important than one's faith. As one advances in personal growth and *avodat Hashem*, personalizing, intensifying, broadening, and augmenting the inherited *masorah* refines and deepens one's bond to Hashem.

One may certainly come to faith without that invaluable framework. The faith odyssey of Avraham Avinu, who rediscovered monotheism, magnificently demonstrates this truth. I will soon discuss my conviction that his odyssey, though undoubtedly also very singular, remains extremely relevant and even somewhat paradigmatic to all believers. But since we are focusing more personally, I am enormously appreciative to have enjoyed the considerable benefits of being raised in a home permeated by faith, in which nothing was more important than belief in God, trust in His providence, and commitment to a life of *halakhab* and its values. The *masorah* of faith and its implications for *avodat Hashem* were and remain the linchpin of my personal belief.

Ḥazal say “*gimmel shutfin be-adam*,”¹ describing the formation and development of children as a partnership between parents and Hashem. Their intent transcends the obvious physical component and entails not only initial child rearing but, undoubtedly, also the ultimate aspiration to

* David H. Schwartz conducted this series of interviews on *emunah*. See his “Introduction to: Personal Perspectives on *Emunah*” in this volume of *Ḥakirah*.

¹ *Kiddushin* 30b.

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cultivate dedicated *benei Torah*. Parents are essential role models who preside over personality and character development beginning at the most formative age; they play a singular role in facilitating priorities, values, and especially beliefs. Moreover, the reliance and dependence on parents inspires, promotes—indeed cultivates—a powerful sense of trust. These facets are each essential to forming a faith personality in which, as life progresses, there is a sharing and later a transfer of dependence, reliance, and trust from the parental partners to Hashem.

One who is fortunate to have been raised in an environment permeated with faith imbibes that atmosphere in which the assumption of God's presence and the acknowledgment and appreciation of His *hashgahah* is "*girsā de-yanketa*" (ingrained learning from childhood), not only intellectually, but even more, experientially. My parents, each in their own way and together as a team—unself-consciously—engendered a home suffused with belief, and were essential partners with God in my and my siblings' development as *benei Torah*. My father was a self-made *ma'amin* and *oved Hashem* in every respect. He determinedly pursued a life of faith and halakhic commitment at his own initiative from a very young age and, in the process, transformed an entire family. In Avraham-esque fashion, he was instinctively drawn to a life of Torah and attached himself to *talmidei hakhamim*, men of deep belief and scholarship, who became his role models. My mother's trajectory was the exact opposite. She came from a respected long line of prominent *rabbanim*. She grew up in an environment in which *emunah* was axiomatic and foundational. I feel that we were the beneficiary of both faith experiences. *Emunah* was conveyed as a given, as a foundational fact, albeit one to be cherished and cultivated.

Gradually, the first stage of *gimmel shutfin be-adam* facilitates the next phase, in which inherited and formatively shared faith, "*Elokei av*"² and the sensibilities it entails, begin to be filtered through one's own individual persona—"*zeh Keil*"²—and personal experiences. As one matures intellectually and spiritually, there is an ongoing appropriate transfer of dependence, reliance and trust to Hashem, Who is *Avinu* as well as *Malkeinu*, that constitutes and signifies the personalization and intensification of one's *emunah* and Torah commitment. This process proceeds apace as one becomes further immersed in Torah study, in developing relationships with *rabbeim* and *haverim*, and in experiencing life challenges and opportunities, as well as other dimensions of authentic Torah growth.

The transfer of ultimate trust from parents to *Avinu Malkeinu* is consequential not merely as an efficient and practical mechanism but as a process that impacts substantive and qualitative *emunah*. At a formative

² *Shemot* 15:2.

stage, a child's trust in parental authority and knowledge is not contingent upon evidence or proof. It stems from the core relationship itself, from its depth and breadth. This absolute trust is ultimately reserved exclusively for Hashem. It does not, however, preclude efforts to better comprehend Divine justice or other faith issues and challenges, as long as the posture of submission and trust is maintained. As the parent-child relationship evolves and matures, the respectful, even rigorous questioning of an insider eager to further and deepen understanding is a natural and important facet that may facilitate further growth and an intensification of the bond. This paradigm—"Torah be ve-lilmod ani tzarikh"³—is a vital part of the *gimmel shutfin* equation.

Like the parental relationship, the bond with Hashem, while immutable and supreme, is dynamic in an aspirational way. While the bedrock foundation of faith hopefully does not change, its dimensions likely expand and deepen as one grows in knowledge, sophistication, and experience. Thus, *emunah* is a core axiom, but also a life-long process.

As I referenced earlier, Avraham Avinu rediscovered monotheism. There is a huge debate in rabbinic literature about how old he was when that happened. Some say he was three and some say he was forty, and some—a simple reading of Rambam, for one—suggest that it began when he was three and it continued until he was forty. The spiritual and philosophic quest of a three-year-old obviously is incompatible with that of a forty-year-old. The idea is that this is an ongoing process and it changes depending on a person's age, intellectual maturity, emotional profile, and the experiences he undergoes. There are faith elements that are conducive to being discovered at three and others that are only accessible at forty. In between these ages, there are other conducive milestones and stages, and the same quest may require a sustained process or different phases. Like Avraham Avinu, especially in Rambam's view, it is vital to constantly and consistently pursue truth and spiritual growth.

Ramban has a very nice comment in the end of *Devarim*, on the verse "*Arur asher lo ya-kim et ha-Torah ha-zot*."⁴ He says that it demands that one should work to affirm—not *le-kayem*, to fulfill, the laws and the authenticity of the Torah, but rather, to affirm—the Torah itself. Clearly, Ramban does not intend that one should indoctrinate oneself or trick oneself into belief. What he means is you should seek ways—among other things that he says in that verse—to reinforce your faith. I think what that means is that as you mature and you become exposed to different aspects of life, intellectually and emotionally and experientially—it could be witnessing

³ Berakhot 62a.

⁴ 27:26.

history but also examples of personal *hashgahah*, moments of feeling the presence of, or being in the presence of God, or other manifestations of transcendence, things that just make no sense absent faith—you should seize these moments and capitalize spiritually on them. Not indoctrinating yourself to believe what may not be true, but finding ways to strengthen the foundation of your *emunah* and to expand it; these are all part of the process of growth in *avodat Hashem*, necessarily an ongoing process.

So, as you move out into the world and away from your parental and formative environment, and you build on your own experiences and your own proclivities and your own personality and so on, if you are acutely sensitive that this is something that is important, then you will always be looking to deepen and to expand your faith. As noted, I strongly believe in the relevant consequentiality of the Avraham Avinu paradigm. It is simply a very intriguing, even fascinating reality that the Torah does not record or chronicle the odyssey of Avram Avinu in *emunah*. Who would not want to know exactly what transpired and how he came to his epiphany? Even the questions of how old he was, and which argument—if it was an argument—or which experience—if it was an experience—led him to his faith conclusion. The Midrash is replete with diverse perspectives on these questions and there is considerable discussion among the commentaries, but it is surely significant that there is nothing about this incredibly important chapter in the Torah itself. Obviously, this striking omission is intentional and educational.

I believe that it was left out precisely because the Torah did not want to imply that any particular pathway to faith is the exclusively normative approach. In other words, it was a recognition that there is more than one methodology to finding faith, and that factors, experiences, or arguments that effectively impact one person, may leave another person cold—and vice versa. Some people are drawn to aesthetic phenomena and some to intellectual insight, yet others are moved by emotional epiphanies or are inspired by relationship bonds. I am sure that not everything and anything is a legitimate course to attain faith, but I think that there are numerous valid and effective roads to *emunah*. Given the theological and halakhic perspective on Hashem's comprehensive presence—“*leit atar de-panui minei*,”⁵ “*mekomo shel olam ve-ein olamo mekomo*”⁶—it is simply compelling to me that there would be many pathways to find God.

The Torah abstained from detailing Avraham's odyssey for numerous reasons. First, because his own rediscovery likely did not consist of a single experience or approach. This is especially true if it was an ongoing

⁵ *Tikkunei Zohar* 122:2.

⁶ *Bereishit Rabbah*, 68:9.

process beginning at three and ending at forty or probably even continuing after that. Moreover, whatever the specifics were for Avraham Avinu, even if there was only one primary factor, or if there were several specific dimensions, it would be unnecessarily narrow to imply any limit on so crucial a quest. The Midrash, by suggesting a wide range of possibilities, each appropriate for different ages or different personality types, conveys this very powerful principle.

On a personal level, I know there are certain experiences or phenomena that deeply influenced me that do not necessarily affect other people in the same way. This is certainly true in the other direction, as well. In my view, this reality reflects the enhancing diversity of Hashem's world in a very inspiring way. As you progress in life, and your personality develops, and your experiences and exposures multiply, and significant events occur—whether they are historical events, things you go through on a family level, meaningful personal losses or gains—the palpable feeling of *hashgafat Hashem* and simply of the presence of and contact with transcendence all contribute to reinforcing and furthering *emunah*.

Question: You mentioned there are certain things that may touch you but do not touch others. Are there any particular things that touch you personally, perhaps especially strongly or perhaps more than others? On a personal level, are there some that resonate more, or some that resonate most, for you?

R. Rosensweig: Faith must become personal, but it should continue to nurture and develop and be enriched by experiences, interactions, and interrelationships with others. I am certainly very taken with and deeply influenced by certain personalities, people for whom I have great trust and respect. *Mori ve-Rabi*, Rav Lichtenstein once wrote that his faith was strongly reinforced by his contact and bonds with great men that he profoundly admired. His trust and belief in them by extension became a compelling basis for the enhancement of his own belief.⁷ When I read that, I was very moved by it; I felt that I recognized that phenomenon in myself with respect to my own experiences in the presence of great men. I have already noted that family ties have had great impact on me, beginning with my parents, but equally the great *talmidei hakhamim*, true *hakhmei masorah*, that I have been privileged to be exposed to and inspired by. Particularly my personal *rabbeim*, the *Rav*, ז"ל, and Rav Lichtenstein, ז"ל, have had

⁷ "The Source of Faith Is Faith Itself," *Jewish Action* (1992), 80. (Reprinted in *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2 (Jersey City: Ktav, 2004), 363–367).

incalculable impact on all facets of my life, certainly including *emunah*. Authentic *hakmei masorah* should be revered not only for the obvious—their immense scholarship and piety, their singular methodology, their devotion to *kelal Yisrael*—but also as rare personalities who integrate idealism with realism guided by their own *emunah*. These giants in Torah, who embody great integrity and consistency even as they are very real and relatable people, are an invaluable source of inspiration in all aspects of *avodat Hashem*. Certainly, the kind of faith that they exude even as they navigate challenges and difficulties—personally and in a leadership capacity—inspires and reinforces faith.

I would say also that the grandeur of Torah and halakhic structure—its capacity to comprehensively address all dimensions of life in a very subtle and profound way—is a crucial source of personal faith. I guess what poetry or other esthetic experiences might be for other people, immersion in the beauty of consistent and nuanced values by means of *talmud Torah* is for me. Experiencing the halakhic process and system constitutes an encounter with transcendence that is faith affirming.

Indeed, this is a core halakhic concept, although one which is insufficiently appreciated. We recite *birkat ha-Torah* prior to Torah study. The Gemara in *Berakhot* (21a) establishes that this is based on the verse “*ki shem Hashem ekra, havu godel lei-lokeinu*.”⁸ According to Ramban (*Sefer ha-Mitzvot, hashmatat esin*), this is a *de-oraita* obligation that merits independent counting in the 613 *mitzvot*! On the surface, the connection to this verse that refers to how one should respond upon encountering Hashem’s name is puzzling. There is, however, profound significance in the equation between Torah study and the manifestation of Hashem’s name. In the introduction to his Torah commentary, Ramban, I believe consistent with his *hiddush* in *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, develops the notion that the entire Torah consists of varied configurations and combinations of the *shemot Hashem*, Divine names. Undoubtedly, this also embodies a mystical-kabbalistic theme, which I leave for others to explicate. However, on a purely rational plane, this identification underscores the indispensable role of *talmud Torah* as a foundation of Divine belief and the basis for a relationship with Hashem. Names are crucial points of access and interaction. It is axiomatic that forging a relationship with God is the most important, most indispensable condition to a meaningful existence. Determining a method to contact and connect with transcendence is the highest priority.

At the same time, the ability to access the omnipotent, omniscient Creator seems philosophically impossible. By definition, God is a reality that should be beyond our capacity in every way. Rambam, in all of his

⁸ *Devarim* 32:3.

works, speaks of the doctrine of negative theology and negative attributes—you cannot even use language in a very accurate way when it comes to God. In the post-Kantian world, there is also a consensus that proofs for existence of God—a major philosophic and scientific enterprise in the ancient, medieval, and early modern world—are a futile exercise, as the goal—utilizing human capacity to access Divinity—is inherently beyond any viable methodological reach. The bigger point I am trying to make is that there is an apparently paradoxical dichotomy at the very center of human existence. On the one hand, faith and a relationship with God is the *sine qua non* cornerstone of a meaningful life; at the same time, the attainment of this core foundation appears to be inherently beyond man’s capability.

The halachic solution to this enigma lies precisely in the Talmud’s assertion that the verse “*ki shem Hashem ekra havu godel lei-lokeinū*” underpins *birkat ha-Torah*, as it depicts Torah itself and introduces its study. If we attach ourselves to the *devar Hashem*, we truly connect and interact with Him. What Rambam calls the unity of the “*maskil u-muskal*,”⁹ or what some mystics refer to as *d’veikut*, the idea is that through Torah, through the Word of God, we are able to encounter Him. That accomplishes not only contact with His will and His values, incredibly inherently valuable as it is, but also constitutes an interaction, an encounter, an unsurpassed experience. The Divine gift of *talmud Torah* renders accessible what otherwise would be impossible. *Ḥazal* speak of encountering the *Shekhinah* when they describe various circumstances of *avodat Hashem* and *talmud Torah*. When *Ḥazal* speak of Torah study as a method of repentance, as an antidote to *yetzer ha-ra*, or of the “light of Torah” as a therapy for spiritual challenges, they undoubtedly refer not only to the impact of Torah values, but also to the very encounter with *retzon Hashem* and *metziut Hashem* by means of *devar Hashem*.

To me, *limmud ha-Torah* is a vital source of *emunah*. Torah studied in depth, with all of its profound intricacies and interconnections, radiates profound wisdom, a purity of truth, and a certain unmatched grandeur that I associate with Divinity. The esthetic quality often associated with other disciplines—art, music, poetry, etc.—can be a powerful presence in Torah study for those who are immersed in and attuned to its subtleties. Moreover, the *talmud Torah* pathway to *emunah* has a compelling facet beyond other roads to faith. As *d’var Hashem*, the focal point of study and source of comprehensive normative *avodat Hashem*, it is the natural prime vehicle for Divine inspiration and faith. It is no coincidence Torah study

⁹ *Guide to the Perplexed* 1:68; cf. *Mishneh Torah*, *Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:10.

is the acknowledged apex of *avodat Hashem*—*ve-talmud Torah k'neged kullam*:¹⁰ not just as a supreme *mitzvah*, and not only as the invaluable epistemological basis for *mitzvot* observance, but at least equally as the encounter with Divine truth and transcendence itself. I recently came across a similar perspective in Rav Michal Feinstein's, *נתיבות*, insights into *parshat Be-Hukkotai*. He speaks inspiringly about experiencing the truth quality of Torah as a significant source of *emunah*, a theme that speaks to me and the sensibilities I have tried to convey.

Question: If we compare when you decided to go into the rabinate with now, do you see a meaningful change over time in terms of what seems to serve as the main source of your *emunah*, or has it been pretty constant?

R. Rosensweig: I do not think that something like *emunah* ever remains static. The dynamic character of existence ensures that something as crucial as one's fundamental beliefs continues to evolve, hopefully to broaden and deepen. At the same time, the core foundations of my faith have been constant and consistent. As one advances and progresses in *talmud Torah*, its impact is reinforced and intensified. The role of compelling and inspirational religious heroes has expanded as well. I have even greater appreciation over time for the influential figures with whom I have interacted. Their *demut deyuknam*¹¹ continues to be a living, powerful, and even motivating presence in all dimensions of my *avodat Hashem*. The merging of these two factors—role models and *talmud Torah*—is another area of growth. In time, one aspires to become more attuned to the *hakhmei ha-masorah* that you encounter in your quest of learning Torah. The enormity and consistency of the accomplishments of the great *halakhic* and *hashkafic* thinkers is truly breathtaking. The more one becomes familiar with their personal history, their leadership in challenging circumstances, their dedication to Hashem and to the furthering of halakhic life, the more they, too, emerge, even on a personal plane, as the inspirational embodiment of *emunah* and *mesirut nefesh*.

Of course, the concretization of *emunah* is continuously reinforced by a variety of other experiences and encounters as life progresses. These include marvel triggered by many facets of the beauty and seemingly compelling design inherent in the natural world—“*mah rabu ma'asekha Hashem*”¹²—but especially are engendered by personal moments of wonder and awe that concretize a palpable Divine presence. These often coalesce

¹⁰ *Mishnah, Peab* 1:1.

¹¹ Cf. *Rashi, Bereshit* 39:11.

¹² *Tebillim* 104:24.

around family milestones—joyous and sorrowful—as well as other personal interactions, but certainly are also strengthened by witnessing the *yad Hashem* in unfolding events of great magnitude, particularly those connected with the trajectory of *klal Yisrael*'s destiny in our lifetime.

Question: In your opinion, do you consider *emunah* to be intellectually obvious and self-evident, for an open, truly objective, unbiased observer who does investigation? Or is there a leap that needs to be taken?

R. Rosensweig: There is a famous essay by Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman¹³ in which he argues that if people were unbiased, moral, and honest they would have no obstacles to *emunah*. He begins with a query: if, according to Rambam, Aristotle was so intellectually gifted that his stature was just below the level of a prophet, how is it possible that he was not a believer? Moreover, why did numerous philosophers—all impressive intellects—struggle with and often reject God's existence? If attaining faith is so daunting, how can the *halakhab* expect, even demand that we cultivate belief? There should be an *o'nes* exemption. Thus, he concludes that only other corrupt agendas deflect one from embracing belief.

Undoubtedly, this perspective is true for many atheists, and especially in some eras where denying evident Divine presence and providence seems quite untenable and even deliberately contrarian, obstinate, and willfully blind. *Par'ob*'s “hardened heart” is an extreme case in point, but there certainly are many more moderate examples as well.

However, I do not think that this assumption of self-evident intellectual belief is universally true. There are other factors, including personal or cultural orientations that can militate against conceding what appears rationally self-evident for others. Epochs of *bester panim* can certainly increase the challenge and difficulty of attaining faith. *Hazal* examined what specifically motivated Yitro to embrace Hashem—“*mah shemu'ah sham'a u-ba*”¹⁴—in a time in which Divine Providence was acutely apparent. They recognized that even for an honest and admirable man, extricating oneself from a deeply ingrained religious and cultural orientation required significant motivation and effort. Perhaps, as part of the total transformative process, also a goodly measure of *siyata de-Shmaya* and a leap of faith are helpful. Avraham's triple *lekh lekha* charge¹⁵ is particularly impressive from

¹³ “*Ma'amar al Emunah*,” *Kovetz Ma'amarim*.

¹⁴ *Zevachim* 116a.

¹⁵ “Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house...” *Beresheet* 12:1.

this perspective. Moreover, the Midrash acknowledged that even a single and singular individual may be drawn to belief in different ways. *Kriat Yam Suf*, *milhemet Amalek*, and *Matan Torah* are hardly interchangeable sources of *emunah*!

It is particularly important to emphasize, as we noted with respect to Avraham's paradigmatic journey to faith, that the intellectual path is not exclusive, nor is it even necessarily preferable to other courses. The preeminent role of the intellect in man's uniqueness—and for some commentaries in defining *tzelem Elokim*—establishes the prominence of the intellectual path. Rambam certainly accentuates this theme in all his writings. Yet not everyone is equipped with an intellectual orientation that enables *emunah*, and even those blessed with superior rational capacity may come to belief in other ways, as we have noted.

Emunah does not need to be self-evident—intellectually or otherwise—though for many it may be, particularly after appropriate, robust, and consistent reinforcement. As it is not merely an obligation but the linchpin of a life of Torah and meaning, it is vital, however, that it be always attainable even under conditions that are more challenging. As a matter of religious faith and as a halakhic axiom, we must always believe that the capacity to achieve belief is accessible to all, that formidable obstacles can be surmounted, when there is an openness to this quest and sincere effort is expended. This does not mean that impediments are solely attributable to corruption or other obvious failings. In any case, *siyata de-Shmaya* and the role of a leap of faith are significant factors in many odysseys of faith.

In connection with this point, it is worthwhile to revisit how the intellectual factor in faith has evolved. I previously alluded to the post-Kantian tendency to dismiss the capacity to rationally demonstrate Divine existence. In ancient and medieval times, proofs to support religious belief were a respected, prominent enterprise that engaged Greek philosophers and the greatest scholars of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. *Hazal* register some of these arguments, and R. Saadiah, Rambam, the *Kuzari*, *Hovot ha-Levavot*, Ralbag, Hasdai Crescas, R. Yosef Albo, etc. all participated in and contributed to this literature. The assumption was that faith was intellectually demonstrable if sufficient philosophic rigor was applied.

Even during this epoch, the *Kuzari* provided an important perspective and corrective regarding the significance of these intellectual efforts. In perceiving the *Kuzari* as a foil and counterpoint to the *Guide to the Perplexed*, some mistakenly portray R. Yehudah ha-Levi as an anti-rationalist. He, too, was counted in the rationalist school and advocated for the validity of proofs, but more importantly, he dampened the enthusiasm for their religious importance and relevance. He insightfully noted that philosophy

might demonstrate the theological reality of Hashem's existence, but *Elokei Avraham, Yitzhak ve-Ya'akov*, the source of Divine providence, halakhic law and values, the architect of Jewish destiny and universal eschatology, could only be accessed by tradition—*masorah* and history. Rational demonstration might produce the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle or something closer to the halakhic conception of theological accuracy, but it still would not inspire a life of sanctity and the drive to bask in the presence of the *Shekhinah*. Theological demonstration is important but not sufficient to provide a mechanism to interact and bond with *Avinu Malkeinu*.

Rambam, too, fully embraced this perspective. He begins *Mishneh Torah* with *Hilkebot Yesodei ha-Torah* by affirming theological truths, but immediately transitions to their implications for a meaningful life of *avodat Hashem*. Notwithstanding his acute enthusiasm for theological demonstration, other philosophic facets of Judaism, and a generally unequivocal rationalistic orientation, the total focus and purpose of all his writings is to guide and inspire toward a life in which halakhic practice and Torah study—suffused with *kedushah*—facilitate contact with Divine transcendence.

In *The Lonely Man of Faith*, the Rav reproduces Søren Kierkegaard's critique of Anselm, the father of the ontological argument. Anselm reported that he spent many days praying that he would be worthy to prove the existence of God through this very abstruse ontological argument. Kierkegaard, not just an abstract theologian but a religious man, ridiculed this declaration, asserting that somebody who has a relationship with God does not need to spend days fasting and praying to prove His existence because he experiences it in every aspect of his life.¹⁶

Is faith obvious if you are fair-minded? I think that differs for different people, but I think for some people it can be a hard-won achievement. Seeking multiple and cumulative pathways to belief is a more successful approach and ultimately facilitates more than narrow faith, as well. It is a better prescription to integrating the fact of your faith with a comprehensive commitment to a life of meaning, sanctity, and even transcendence.

In a post-Kantian world, this more comprehensive, spiritually aspirational approach may revive even rational proofs for Divine existence. Kant, as noted, argued that a transcendent being cannot be demonstrated with human rational tools because the language and the categories are, by definition, inadequate. Deductive logic cannot achieve this goal. He was

¹⁶ *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Doubleday, 2006), footnote on pp. 49–50. (“Does the loving bride in the embrace of her beloved ask for proof that he is alive and real? Must the prayerful soul clinging in passionate love and ecstasy to her Beloved demonstrate that He exists?”).

not questioning faith, merely asserting that logic must fail to solve this question decisively. However, this assertion is only true at a very high threshold of proof. If one's belief is contingent on foolproof deductive evidence, this avenue will disappoint. However, true faith is more cumulative, and either way—as noted by *Kuzari* and others—is not satisfied by rational inquiry alone. From this perspective, the imperfect but still quite compelling logical arguments for Divine existence are still quite significant and relevant. They may constitute an important dimension of cumulative *emunah*.

Indeed, how often do we apply the standard of absolute rigorous demonstration to the important and trivial aspects of our lives? We typically confidently rely on a combination of logic—deductive and inductive—instinct, sense perception and other imperfect but still reasonable standards as we make decisions, integrate impressions, and develop a worldview upon which we fully rely. In no important area of our lives do we adopt the posture that absent definitive proof, we are merely guessing or speculating. Our approach to *emunah*, the most vital aspect of our existence, should not be subverted because of a threshold that we rarely if ever apply in any other dimension of life.

Rav Saadiah in *Emunot ve-De'ot*¹⁷ has a comment about paradoxes, which I think is relevant to how we integrate the reality of demonstrative inadequacy in matters of faith. He says that paradoxes do not constitute a substantive problem. For example, one should not be troubled by the enigma that speculates whether omnipotent God can create a weight so heavy that He cannot lift it. This class of query is dismissed simply as an absurdity that does not imply a substantive flaw. If something is inconceivable by definition, it is insignificant. Thus, if it is true that objectively demonstrating faith is a logical impossibility—as post-Kantian thinking claims—as the goal is beyond the capacity and adequacy of the methodology, then it is not a deficiency that engenders a faith crisis. There is no reasonable expectation that you would be able to accomplish the goal; hence, there is no flaw in your failure to produce the result.

Instead of either exaggerating or dismissing the importance of rational evidence for faith, one should reset expectations and shift to a more nuanced position that promotes a more flexible, comprehensive, and cumulative position on cultivating and reinforcing faith.

I was very struck by a comment of Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlop, ז"ל, in his *Mei Marom*, shared by his grandson, Rav Zevulun Charlop, ז"ל. He was addressing why Rambam apparently attached so much importance to the philosophical demonstration of Hashem's existence, the foundation

¹⁷ *Second Discourse*.

of faith. He dismissed the notion that proof was a prerequisite for belief and by extension a halakhic commitment. Rather, Rambam's conviction regarding the centrality of rationalism in halakhic life dictated that employing philosophic thinking to prove and further concretize Divine presence constitutes a vital exercise in manifesting Hashem's ineffable presence in the physical world! From this perspective, even if one accepts the post-Kantian premise, one can still appreciate and significantly benefit from the enormous faith efforts of the *rishonim* and others who invested much to further manifest Hashem's presence.

Rambam begins *Mishneh Torah, Hilkehot Yesodei ha-Torah*,¹⁸ by formulating the first *mitzvah* and linchpin of halakhic life, the foundational goal of "*leida she-yesh sham matzui rishon*." The word *leida* certainly connotes rational cognition, knowing it. The emphasis is perfectly consistent with Rambam's comprehensive focus. However, it has been often noted that in *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, at least in the ibn Tibbon translation (*mitzvah aleph*), Rambam used the verb *le-ha'amin*, to believe, to convey this *mitzvah*. The apparent discrepancy is consequential, as we contemplate the nature of faith and the interrelationship between logical evidence and pure *emunah*. In Rav Chaim Heller's edition of *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, he notes that the Arabic word that Rambam employed actually accommodates both meanings: *yedi'ah* (knowledge) and *emunah*. Likely his intent was to neutralize the apparent discrepancy in favor of the "*leida*" usage. However, I think it is very conceivable that Rambam chose a usage that was intentionally ambiguous, that conveys both meanings simultaneously. The goal is *emunah*, and given Rambam's orientation, the most powerful and effective way to promote *emunah* is through *yedi'ah*. Possibly, the term "*leida*" is significant as well. Rambam does not emphasize the obligation to prove (*le-hokhiah*) Hashem's existence, though he devotes much energy to that project in the *Guide to the Perplexed*, but instead stresses the result, that one integrate faith as knowledge, as an unequivocal reality and truth. The term "*yedi'ah*" in *Tanakh* often has the connotation of intimacy, implying in this context a deeply meaningful conviction.

I believe that the intellectual efforts that were so prominent in the ancient and medieval worlds but have come to be dismissed in modern times are religiously inspiring, as they reflect deep piety and spiritual ambition. I also feel that they retain objective value in the cumulative promotion of *emunah*, albeit in a reformulation that accounts for changed intellectual sensibilities.

¹⁸ 1:1.

In this respect, Kierkegaard's critique of Anselm, while an important and technically valid corrective, is somewhat unfair. Anselm was not suggesting that religious faith was contingent upon and completely embodied by philosophic demonstration. He was aspiring to further root and concretize his belief in a manner that would perhaps also appeal to outsiders or skeptics, but more importantly would further manifest the Divine presence in this world and intensify and broaden deeply held belief. Prayer is an appropriate vehicle for such a noble aspiration.

Question: To the point you made earlier about the cumulative effect of aggregating multiple factors, those are things like the grandeur of Torah, the personalities, the patterns in history, and recurring emotional experiences. Correct?

R. Rosensweig: Yes, and, as I mentioned earlier, I think different people are affected by various factors and experiences in different ways. For some individuals, there is a primary or even a standalone foundation for their *emunah*. Others require or are further inspired by a more cumulative approach—moments in prayer, Torah study, encounters with nature, personal interactions, contemplating *hashgahah* in history or current events, discerning the evident intricacy and design in science, mathematics, physics etc. It is expected that people of different intellectual orientation and emotional makeup, each of whom has undergone different experiences and trajectories, will respond differently to stimuli or forces that promote faith. This, too, is consistent with *Hazal's* view that each individual is an “*olam malei*,” that “*ke-sheim she-ein parzufei hem shavin ze la-zeh, kakh ein dei'otei ben shavin zeh la-zeh*.”¹⁹ It is compelling that this acknowledged diversity should also apply to the odyssey of faith and religious commitment.

In this light, I want to revisit Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman's idea that if a person is truly honest and he is not compromised morally and intellectually, faith would be obvious. As I mentioned, while I think it is an important perspective and often accurate, I do not think it is true for all people in all circumstances. Especially, when you live in an age suffused with atheism, skepticism, and agnosticism—in which science rather than being perceived as bolstering and reinforcing faith by virtue of the wonder and design that reflects Divine wisdom is often weaponized as a counterpoint or contrary force to undermine religious faith—one needs to appreciate the opportunity of easily finding Hashem and committing to a life

¹⁹ *Tanhumas*, *Pinchas* 10:1.

of religious service. When one is constantly bombarded by subtle and explicit messages that are uncondusive to and in some cases intended to subvert faith, individuals do not have to be willfully blind, corrupt, or intentionally obtuse to struggle with the concept of faith. That certainly does not preclude or justify an absence of belief, as there remain a plethora of accessible pathways as noted, but it does make the quest more difficult and, by extension, success more impressive.

Some are fortunate to have been blessed with an innate instinct for *emunah*, or a background that is very conducive and supportive of belief, but this is not universally the case. Moreover, returning to the Avraham Avinu model, some pursuits of faith begin at three, some at forty. These are clearly different processes. For many the quest is ongoing and multifaceted, beginning with the intuition of a three-year-old and extending to the mature reflections of a forty-year-old and beyond. Certainly, the deepening of faith is a long-term continuous process. For those with honest struggles in which clarity remains stubbornly elusive, attaining *emunah* can be a very formidable challenge. The fact that there are a range of different methodologies and potential pathways to faith and commitment and that a cumulative stance is a particularly potent and compelling approach is crucial to addressing honest difficulties. I emphasize again that notwithstanding even formidable obstacles, our faith in the inherent just and idealistic character of Torah dictates that if man is held personally accountable for his lack of faith, there must be sufficient opportunities and experiences, perhaps that also demand significant effort or that are afforded by *siyata de-Shmaya*, to inspire him or at least enable him to cultivate belief.

Question: Do you ever have doubts about the veracity of our faith principles and if so, how do you deal with them when you have them?

R. Rosensweig: I have not personally undergone that kind of crisis of faith, though I know of exceptional *ma'aminim* who have struggled and ultimately overcome honest doubts. My own faith, in which theological belief and halakhic commitment are inextricably intertwined, has, *barukh Hashem*, been a bulwark of stability. However, even those who do not experience a crisis of belief may encounter significant other questions, even some that are quite jarring. It is not a coincidence that the *berakhabah* that introduces *Kriyat Shema*, which crystalizes and integrates the dual pillars of theology and normative commitment—*yibud Hashem* and *kabbalat ol malkhut Shamayim*—focuses on the need for *siyata de-Shmaya* in fully comprehending and appreciating Torah principles: “*ve-tain be-libeinu le-havin u-le-haskil... ve-ba'er eineinu be-Toratekha ve-dabek libeinu be-mitzvotekha ve-yahed*

levaveinu le-ahvah u-leyirah et shemekha...” Sometimes religious truths can be perplexing and require guidance or just plain trust. This reality motivated Rambam (*Guide to the Perplexed*), R. Bahya ibn Pekuda, R. Saadiah, and many others to devote major works not only to clarifying principles of faith but also to directly addressing perplexities, confusions, and obstacles to complete belief and commitment.

There are questions that trouble sincere *ovdei Hashem*, some from the earliest periods—the times of the *avot*, of Moshe Rabbenu, of Iyov—that actually stem from the bedrock of *emunah* itself. Many experience distress when confronted by realities in which it appears that Divine justice is inexplicable, the issue of theodicy that shook the world of Iyov. The problem of *tzaddik ve-ra lo, rasha ve-tov lo* continues to be a mystery that has tested the limits of faith of great men and that possibly eluded even Moshe Rabbenu (different views in the Midrash and the Gemara). This quandary makes it very difficult to process national calamities like the Shoah, the tragic losses in the battles for the State of Israel, as well as personal losses and tragedies.

Other principles and values may also trigger confusion. The Torah’s overwhelming focus on compassion and an acute humane posture is difficult to reconcile with the charge to annihilate Amalek for those who do not fully comprehend *Hazal*’s profound perspective that “*kol she-hu rahaman al akhzarim la-sof na’aseh akhzar al rahmanim*.”²⁰ True compassion begins with zero tolerance for implacable evil. Sincere *ma’aminim* can find themselves grappling with concepts that are complex and challenging, or that require wider halakhic attunement and perspective.

It is important to cope with these challenges as well. We are obligated to reinforce not only core belief in Hashem and in the authenticity of His Torah, not only the 13 *Ikkarim* which carry extra weight as Rambam articulates, but all halakhic values and principles. This unqualified embrace of the totality of Torah is our highest aspiration as *ovdei Hashem*. Coping begins with humility and more *emunah*. Honest struggle is acceptable as a committed insider, as one whose confidence and trust in *Torat Hashem* constitutes his bedrock. Every individual, particularly one confronting perplexity, needs to re-invoke the principle of *na’aseh ve-nishmah*. The goal of inquiry is not to challenge, but to seek comprehension and perspective. This was the pathway of the paradigmatic Avraham Avinu, the ultimate *ish besed* grappling with Hashem’s decree to annihilate S’dom. *Hazal* note that his arguments drew upon halakhic categories, a way of underscoring that his posture was that of an insider seeking illumination, not a rebel challenging Hashem’s wisdom, authority, or morality. When it came to

²⁰ *Yalkut Shimoni, Nakh* 121:3.

the more perplexing but also more personal *akedah*, Avraham raised no objections, asked no questions, and unequivocally expressed his zeal to implement *tzivni Hashem*, crowning him as the quintessential “*yerei Elokim*”!

Sometimes answers are not immediately forthcoming; some conundrums remain. Halakhic man can live with questions, even perplexing ones, because his confidence in his own mentors—personal and by means of *masorah*—and his deep trust in Torah as Hashem’s blueprint for a meaningful life far override these questions. This constitutes the insider approach of “*Torah be, ve-lilmod ani tzarikh*.”²¹

The Rav once said that his grandfather (R. Hayyim Soloveitchik, ז”ל) and his father (R. Moshe Soloveitchik, ז”ל), whom he depicted as representing the apex of intellectual sophistication, analytical acumen, and halakhic creativity, were possessed of a naïve, childlike faith, *emunah pesbutah*. He did not mean that their *emunah* was unreflective or oblivious to endemic issues like theodicy or other enigmatic theological or halakhic themes. My understanding is that he intended to convey that there is a purity and power to profound *emunah* and *bitahon* that transcends even valid difficulties and puts them in proper perspective. Intriguing as they might be, they do not constitute an issue of *emunah*. In his introduction to *Lonely Man of Faith*, the Rav notes that he was never particularly troubled by current controversial issues like the apparent conflicts between science and religion, the implications of modern biblical scholarship, etc. The statement does not imply that he had invested in and solved or resolved these questions, but that they did not impact his *emunah*, nor even preoccupy his interest, which was instead focused on the exploration, analysis, and clarification of timeless halakhic and *hashkafic* themes, such as the topic he pursues in the essay.

One should not suppress valid vexing questions, but one needs to apply humility, trust and the perspective of an insider when confronting difficulties. Our belief in *Avinu she-ba-shamayim* and in the Torah He gifted us to enable a life of principle, idealism, and meaning demands no less.

Question: Assuming there are two people who are both righteous in all aspects of their behavior, but one of them does not believe and one of them does believe, or if one has a small or minimal amount of doubts and the other has a massive level of doubt. Is there a greater reward for the one who believes or believes more than the other?

²¹ See note 3.

R. Rosensweig: Belief is the *sine qua non*, the linchpin for a meaningful halakhic life. Halakhic observance and Torah study concretize faith and convert it from an abstract theological truth to a program of *avodat Hashem* that is the basis for a purposeful life. In *birkat ha-Torah*, we characterize the gift of Torah study and observance as “*ve-hayai olam nata be-tokeinu*,” the life essence of the Jewish people. Both are indispensable commitments; neither can stand independently absent the other. The Talmud asserts that one who embraces idolatry is tantamount to denying every one of the 613 *mitzvot*; one who rejects idolatry is tantamount to acknowledging each of the commandments. This striking statement establishes the obvious: that belief is foundational to observance. A confirmed non-believer’s observance is untenable, mechanical, and meaningless, even if it is punctilious. One who has faith, even one who struggles, no matter how imperfect his actual observance, remains an insider to whom the *mitzvot* are relevant and applicable.

When people struggle with their faith but remain insiders, it is obviously crucial that they do not abandon observance. Even if, God forbid, one seemingly abandons faith, one remains formally obligated. Moreover, we encourage clinging to observance with the combination of hope and confidence that attachment to Hashem’s word will itself ultimately engender a pathway back to faith. *Haʿal* speak of the religious impact of the illuminating light of Torah (“*ha-ma’or she-bah mahʿiro le-mutav*”²²). This should not be misconstrued, however, as implying that observance bereft of *emunah* is inherently acceptable.

There is a debate between Rambam and Behag whether *anokhi Hashem Elokekha*, belief in God, is included in the 613 *mitzvot* or not. Rambam in his glosses to Rambam’s *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* posits that Behag did not count belief, precisely because faith is so much more than a *mitzvah*; it is the foundation of all and the concept of *mitzvot*. Counting it simply as a halakhic norm would trivialize or at least reduce its qualitatively preeminent stature.

Rambam’s policy to count belief is particularly intriguing in light of this insight. There was no rabbinic thinker—medieval or modern—more discerning than Rambam of the enormous difference between the linchpin theological truth of truths and the enumeration of religious norms. That is exactly the point. For Rambam, it was crucial that *anokhi Hashem Elokekha* be integrated into the 613 *mitzvot*, and that the 613 *mitzvot* begin with *anokhi Hashem Elokekha*, to highlight that absent theological truth, the *mitzvot* are hollow, while absent the outlet of objective Divine *mitzvot* to manifest *avodat Hashem* and a life of *kedushah*, theological verity is mostly

²² *Eikhab Rabbati, Petiḥah 2.*

a spiritually arid abstraction. His acute awareness as a philosopher and theologian that faith and religious norms were generally perceived as unrelated and completely discrete dimensions, impelled him to underscore Judaism's unique worldview. Like R. Yehudah ha-Levi in the *Kuzari*, he was fully cognizant of the enormous gap between the god of Aristotle and *Avinu ba-shamayim, Elokei Avraham, Yitzhak ve-Ya'akov*.

The prominent presence of faith atop the *mitzvo*t dictates that even the apparently pragmatic parts of halakhic law, such as *Hoshen Mishpat*, have an idealistic, sanctified, even Divine dimension. This can be demonstrated repeatedly by analyzing the institutions of Jewish civil law—the court system, laws of testimony, laws of damages and acquisitions, etc. Specifically where Torah law apparently overlaps with Noahide law, the singular sanctified character of halakhah emerges with great clarity. In any case, as the *Tosefta* (*Shavu'ot* 3:5) emphasizes, even elemental morality and ethics cannot be guaranteed in a culture that rejects faith. The correlation between cultural advancement and ethical, moral standards has repeatedly been disproven, including very prominently during the Shoah and again in our own era. The fusion of faith and observance is Judaism's innovation and foundation. The bifurcation of belief and adherence to the halakhah is fundamentally unacceptable.

Rabbi Lamm, many years ago, wrote an article called (and named one of his books) “Faith and Doubt,”²³ in which he showcased sources that acknowledge the reality that doubt may plague and test religious personalities in a manner that does not disqualify the value of their religious observance. As noted previously, this question is complex, and halakhic observance can itself be a source of inspiration and affirmation as long as it is not cynically or rebelliously disconnected from religious belief. In any case, doubt is neither inevitable nor laudable. Intellectual honesty is honorable, but it is self-evident that religious commitment, which is fundamentally rooted in faith, demands maximal effort to authentically address and overcome breaches in *emunah*. Moreover, reinforcing one's *emunah* is a consistent priority for every *oved Hashem* irrespective of doubt or difficulty. It is a crucial dimension of one's lifelong striving to advance as an *oved Hashem*.

Question: Is there an element of morality in belief, which is to say, if someone tries with sincere, proper motives and does not believe or does not come close to believing, although the person is trying, is there any sense of

²³ *Tradition*, Summer 1967, pp. 14–51.

“bad” to that, in the moral sense? Is that person in any sense being bad?

R. Rosensweig: As noted earlier with respect to Rav Elchanan Wasserman’s perspective, I personally believe that if one is held accountable for failing to cultivate faith, there likely must at some point be sufficient, though not necessarily absolutely compelling, opportunity to enable the choice. However, as I believe that there can be circumstances in which the abstention from belief is not volitional, I do not think it is always a moral failing.

At the same time, failure to embrace transcendence in a meaningful way may have moral repercussions. I previously cited the *Tosefta (Shavu‘ot)* and alluded to culturally advanced civilizations that epitomized brutality and moral bankruptcy to exemplify this point. While this correlation is not inevitable, rejection of authentic religious authority and inspiration erodes and may subvert the essential foundation of moral imperative.

Even if it is not always a moral failing, it is a spiritual tragedy with grave consequences that extend even beyond squandering the basis for a life of authentic meaning. It is reported that R. Hayyim Soloveitchik formulated the conclusion, based upon his analysis of Rambam’s position on required belief, that “a *nebuch apikores* is still an *apikores*.” Rambam perceives required belief, including the 13 *Ikkarei Emunah*, as prerequisites for attaining the ultimate reward of *olam ha-ba*. This stance totally conforms to his consistent principled intellectual religious orientation reflected in his views on Divine providence, prophecy, *ahavat Hashem*, etc. Thus, rather than perceiving rebellious or even willful disbelief as a crime deserving of punishment, Rambam’s position somewhat dooms also those who simply failed, notwithstanding effort and sincerity, perhaps also due to inconducive circumstances, to cultivate sincere belief in the cardinal principles of the halakhah. Though Rambam’s perspective does not impute wickedness (*rish‘ut ha-gavra*) as the cause of this predicament, he nevertheless asserts that de facto heresy is determinative and consequential. R. Yosef Albo, in his *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, and others somewhat distance themselves from this de facto, harsh view and conclusion, although they would certainly agree that de facto heresy significantly impoverishes religious life. In any case, Rambam’s general prominence, and particularly his authority in matters of *emunah*, and even more specifically the fact that his 13 *Ikkarim* have largely gained normative currency in the *masorah* of *Klal Yisrael*, add even greater urgency to cultivating proper Torah beliefs and principles.

Question: Why has God chosen not to be obvious, to the extent you believe He has chosen not to be? The most common answer seems to be that if God would have been more obvious it would impinge on free will, but do we not see examples like the Golden Calf where there was no question of the obviousness of God's existence and yet there was plenty of room for free will? It seems to counter the claim that there is no free will when God is obvious.

R. Rosensweig: The concepts of *bester panim* and *gilui Shekhinah* and the notion that each defines certain epochs are well established in *Ḥazal*. The determination is often associated with national conduct, as reflected by the *tokhaphah* and other sources. There seem to be other factors that determine this phenomenon, as well, but mostly “*ba-nistarot La-Hashem Elokeinu*.”²⁴ Many of the details and the decisive calculus are mostly beyond our knowledge and comprehension. While the impact on the accessibility of *emunah* in a given age is undoubtedly consequential, one can mostly only speculate whether that consideration is also partly determinative. Obvious Divine presence may significantly facilitate *emunah*, but achieving faith in more subtle and trying circumstances constitutes an even more impressive accomplishment and may be particularly conducive to deepening one's belief and its religious impact. Furthermore, many eras are difficult to characterize or partake of neither or both features.

The normative takeaway is that notwithstanding the spiritual climate over which we may have little or no control, choice persists in both directions—to embrace or to deny Hashem's presence and role—and the overriding halakhic imperative is to seek and reinforce faith irrespective of the prevailing religious environment, its challenges, and opportunities. As noted, even in a period of obvious presence and *hashgahah*, *kelal Yisrael* have sadly been capable of willful blindness and egregious rebelliousness—like with the Golden Calf and other tragic episodes. At the same time, the paradigmatic Avraham Avinu quest and the subsequent *lekh lekha* charge to embrace a totally countercultural Torah ideology occurred in a framework intensely hostile to authentic belief and commitment. The Rav, זצ”ל, famously commented that if he had license, he would have added a fourteenth *ani ma'amin* to Rambam's list, asserting the conviction that halakhic life is accessible and relevant in every geographic and historical setting. This sentiment encapsulates the approach to *emunah* that we need to cul-

²⁴ Devarim 29:28.

tivate in all circumstances. It is a particularly important, even urgent perspective in our era which is simultaneously and dialectically both very hostile to faith and halakhic commitment, as previously noted. It is also, however, a time in which the need for halakhic spirituality is so vital, its message is so acutely resonant, and in which Hashem's presence and providence in the unfolding of Jewish destiny, especially in *Eretz Yisrael*, is so compelling, even undeniable.

Question: Does faith ultimately require more than pure rationality?

R. Rosensweig: Certainly, even according to the rationalist-oriented Rambam, faith must encompass all vital dimensions of life. Rambam depicts love of Hashem as an intense preoccupation (*Hil. Teshuvah* 10:2, 3) that eclipses all other endeavors, and as an overflow of exuberance (*Sefer ha-Mitzvot, aseih* no. 3) that seeks outlets and manifests multidimensionality. Significantly, in both contexts he invokes Avraham Avinu—"Avraham *ohav*"—as the paradigm! The expansiveness of his commitment and the cumulative character of his faith illustrate this capacious reach, as we have emphasized,

For many, the rational aspect may be relatively peripheral to other facets, including the experiential, the esthetic, or the inspiration engendered by any numinous encounter with transcendence. The comprehensive imperative of "*Be-kol derakbekha da'eihu*" (*Mishlei* 3:6), characterized by Bar Kappara (*Berakhot* 63a) as "*parshah ketanah she-kol gufei Torah teluyin bah*," succinctly but precisely crystallizes not only the outlets and manifestations of faith and commitment, but as the rationalist Rambam formulates it (*Hil. De'ot* 3:2–3), also its very source. 