

Introduction to: Personal Perspectives on Emunah

By: DAVID H. SCHWARTZ

The world is vastly different today than it has been for nearly all of Judaism's—and its rabbinic leaders'—history. The rapid pace of change in science and in man's understanding of his place in the world—which is only accelerating—gives rise to the question: Is the bedrock source of our faith, and our understanding of what faith even is, necessarily the same today as it has been over the millennia, or is there inevitable change, whether subtle or stark?

In its Fall 1992 issue, the Orthodox Union's *Jewish Action* magazine featured a symposium in which rabbinic and other leaders were asked, among other related questions, “What are the most significant factors which support your faith in God and Torah? What is most convincing to you on an intellectual level and what is most meaningful and inspiring on an existential level?” This symposium was the catalyst for, among other contributions, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein *ztl's* famous essay therein, “The Source of Faith is Faith Itself,” in which he describes the source of his own faith. While the essence of the essay was not necessarily simple to understand, what struck me about it was the deeply personal focus of his answer. He was not looking to deliver a mini-“*maḥshava shiur*” but rather to speak candidly from the heart about his own perception and his own lived experience of the nature of his *emunah*.

More than a generation has passed since that symposium, and a lot has changed in the world. It occurred to me that it would be worthwhile today to re-examine the area of faith, not academically but at a similarly deeply personal level, focusing on a cross section of the highest levels of rabbinic leadership in the Modern Orthodox world today. From a more extensive list that I had submitted to them, the *Hakirah* editors selected a small group of such scholars, whom I then approached to interview (in person or over Zoom). While not all agreed to participate, almost all of them did (in some cases after a bit of convincing). The participants were, in alphabetical order, Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein, Rabbi Michael

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Rosensweig, Rabbi Hershel Schachter, Rabbi Mordechai Willig, and Rabbi Benjamin Yudin.

I proceeded to meet with them individually during 2024, in several cases over multiple sessions. I asked each one a near-identical list of questions, several of which overlap, with the understanding that they may choose not to answer all of them:

- What would you describe as the source of your faith?
- Is it essentially the same as the original source when you decided to go into the rabbinate or has it changed over time?
- In your opinion, is *emunah* intellectually obvious/self-evident (once one thinks about it and investigates)?
- Do you ever have doubts about the veracity of our faith principles? If so, how do you deal with them when you have them? Which area provides the most doubts?
- Is there greater reward for someone who believes and is righteous than someone who does not believe and is righteous?
- Is belief a moral issue? That is, is someone who tries but does not believe being, in any sense, bad?
- Why has God chosen not to make Himself obvious (assuming He has so chosen)?
- Does *emunah* require more than pure rationality?

At times, I added follow-up questions in real time, where I felt it might flesh out the ideas being discussed or otherwise could be additive.

The interviews that follow are edited and at times paraphrased versions of the conversations. In editing the transcripts for journal publication, I occasionally converted the spoken language into a style more suitable for written format, while still adhering to the transcript and the conversational language of the original. My goal was to maintain the authenticity of the interviewees' voices while presenting their insights in a clear and fluid manner. Still, the large majority of the text remains an exact transcript of what was said. And most importantly, in all cases every word of the finished product has been reviewed and approved (in some cases after many edits and/or additions) by the interviewee.

Citations to sources referenced by the interviewees were added by me and appear as footnotes.

I found these conversations enlightening, thought provoking and inspiring. It is my hope that readers will find them equally so. 