YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PRINCIPLES OF FAITH**

**By Rav Joshua Amaru**

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This week’s shiurim are dedicated by Mr Emanuel Abrams   
in memory of Rabbi Abba and Eleanor Abrams

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The Mitzva to Believe in God

**Can there be a Commandment to Believe?**

I want to begin by focusing on a famous question, which I think is much deeper than most of the standard answers given to it. For the Rambam, the belief that God is the source of everything is the first mitzva of his *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*:

The first mitzva is the commandment that He commanded us to believe in the Divinity. That is – that we believe that there is a first Cause to all that exists, as He (may He be blessed) says: I am the Lord your God… [i.e., the first of the ten commandments].[[1]](#footnote-1)

There has been a great deal of discussion, both in medieval and modern times, regarding this commandment to believe, especially in light of the Rambam’s phrasing in the beginning of the *Mishneh Torah*:

The principle of principles and the pillar of wisdom is to *know* that there is an Original Existence who is the source of all that exists…[[2]](#footnote-2)

Many have pointed to the seeming discrepancy between the insistence on *knowledge* that appears in the text of *Mishneh Torah* as opposed to the commandment to *believe* in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*.[[3]](#footnote-3) Without entering into that discussion,[[4]](#footnote-4) there is clearly a different, deeper problem with this commandment. How can one be commanded to believe something? R. Chasdai Crescas, the great medieval critic of the Rambam, asks this question and argues that it is incoherent to command belief, since what we believe is not in our control.[[5]](#footnote-5) God can command us to act but not to believe.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Belief as a State of Affairs**

One way of formulating this problem is to say that believing is a state of affairs rather than an action and you can only be obligated to do actions – not to be in some state. I do not think that this formulation cuts to the heart of the issue. There are many situations where certain states of affairs are obligatory (or more precisely – people are required to be in certain states), namely, where one is required to have some skill, knowledge or ability. It would be strange to say that all students are required to do is answer the questions on math tests – we require that they know (some small amount of) math and the test is merely a way of indicating that they are in that state. Similarly, there is something wrong with someone who merely acts in a kind and considerate manner but is not actually kind and considerate (like if he is acting that way just to impress someone).[[7]](#footnote-7) So it does make sense that there are states that one is obligated to be in. Most clearly are states in which one is obligated to *know* something– whether one’s phone number, Jewish History, or the Torah.

What about an obligation to believe? Does it make sense to say that someone is obligated to believe that X? Certainly an obligation to know something can be formulated as an obligation to believe: one ought to believe that 2+2=4, or that one’s phone number is whatever it is, because these are things one ought to know, and believing them is part of knowing them. So the problem with an obligation or commandment to know or believe something is not simply that it is not an action but a state of affairs. Why, then, does there seem to be something awkward or unconvincing about a commandment to believe in God or to know that there is a God? What is the appeal of Crescas’s challenge to the Rambam? In order to understand the question better, we need to explore what it means to know and to believe.

**Two Aspects of Knowledge and Belief: Possession and Conviction**

Varying aspects of the concepts of knowledge and belief are brought into focus in different contexts. In some contexts, the opposite of knowledge is ignorance: given some fact, like ‘2+2=4’ whose truth is not in question, we can wonder whether someone has that knowledge or does not. If we limit the discussion to propositional knowledge (i.e., facts that are stated in assertoric sentences: *knowledge that* rather than *knowledge how* to do something),[[8]](#footnote-8) then the content of such knowledge is basically information. So when we ask if someone *knows* the name of the Vice-President of the United States, either he has that information or he does not; he is either knowledgeable about it or ignorant of it. In such contexts, we use ‘believe’ only to distinguish cases where someone thinks he knows but is mistaken: We might say, “Simon believes that the Vice-President is Joe Lieberman,” as a way of describing what he thinks while implying that he is mistaken. To say that someone believes instead of knows is to say that he is ignorant of the fact he claims to know. When we talk about knowledge and belief in this way, we treat the proposition as a sort of *thing*, as an *object*, and are talking about whether someone has or possesses that thing. Truth or falsity is simply a property of the thing. If the proposition is true, then he knows it. If it is false, then he merely believes it.[[9]](#footnote-9) When we speak of knowledge in this way, it is clear that there is no problem commanding or obligating someone to know (or believe) something. It is merely obligating them to be in the state of affairs that involves the possession of some information.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In other contexts, belief is not mere possession of data but a relationship of conviction to that data. Knowledge is the further attribution of some degree of certainty to that belief. “Sarah believes that the supermarket is around the corner” and therefore she walks that way when she needs milk. The explanation for her action is not merely that the data is stored in her mind – it is her conviction about the location of the supermarket that explains her walking that way. Beliefs, in this context, are just part of the way people are – Sarah’s belief is some proposition that she thinks is true. In other words, to have a belief is to be convinced that something is true. The opposite of belief in such a case is not ignorance but doubt or uncertainty. If Sarah lacks confidence in the data she has about the location of the supermarket, she will hesitate to walk that way.

When someone claims to know something, we can wonder about the knower’s authority to make such a claim: Does she “know” it, or is it merely her belief? How did she come to believe it? Sometimes these questions apply to oneself and the use of belief comes to distinguish cases of firm knowledge from uncertainty: “I believe that the supermarket is that way but I don’t know for sure.” At other times the attribution of belief or knowledge comes from the outside: we might accept that someone has some belief but question whether it is true. No one can know, though one might believe, that the moon is made of green cheese because, well, the moon just isn’t. Alternatively, we may refrain from addressing directly whether the belief is true but focus on her justification for holding it. We might ask her for proof – for some account of why we too should accept it or at least how she came to know it: “How do you know it was the butler in the pantry who stabbed Professor Plum with the knife?” “Because I saw him do it.” If the witness claimed that she arrived at her conclusion based on merely a hunch, we might say: “You don’t really know it – you just believe it.” In these contexts, the difference between knowledge and belief involves the justification the person has to her claim. When she came to believe it for a good reason (and we think it is true), we say she knows it.

In such situations there is a temptation to say that someone only really knows something if she can prove it, but this is clearly an unreasonable standard. I can know that the Pythagorean theorem is true even if I cannot formulate the proof of it. Likewise, no one can really prove that what she is looking at is a tree but it is hard to deny that she knows that that is a tree. (This “mathematical” formulation – that knowledge requires proof – will be significant later, however, when we talk about knowledge of God and the demand that one be able to prove it.) For most purposes, what someone is claiming when she says she knows something is that she believes it (i.e., believes it is true) and that she acquired that belief in a reliable way (i.e., that the belief is justified).

**Reformulating the Problem**

Now we can see the problem with an obligation or a command to believe or to know. Insofar as we are discussing knowledge as possession of information, it is perfectly reasonable to obligate someone, or command him, to know something, and hence to believe it. I can require my students to know the gemara by heart, or to declaim the Rambam’s 13 principles, or whatever. And in knowing those things, they will necessarily believe – that that is what the gemara says, or that is what the Rambam’s 13 principles are, though that does not necessarily indicate that they accept or take to heart the content of either the gemara or the 13principles. So, inasmuch as knowledge is understood as possession of information, there is no problem: you can be obligated to be in some information state.

But belief and knowledge as conviction do not seem to be subject to obligation in the same way. I can command you to investigate or learn about some issue, I can even demonstrate or prove it to you, but I cannot reasonably command you to accept some conclusion. Whether or not you accept the conclusion or are convinced is just something that happens – it is not up to you any more than it is up to me. I can even command you to *try* to be convinced of something, but whether or not you are is simply an empirical question; commanding someone to believe or know in this sense is equivalent to commanding them to be taller or shorter – it is nonsense.[[11]](#footnote-11) Crescas, in criticizing the Rambam’s mitzva to believe, asserts this powerful objection.

**The Commandment to Try to Know God by Philosophical Investigation**

One of the standard responses to Crescas’s challenge of the notion that one can be commanded to know or believe in God is to understand the Rambam’s commandment to know God as the requirement to engage in philosophical investigation in order to demonstrate to oneself that God exists and is the cause of all other existences.[[12]](#footnote-12) Thus the commandment is not to arrive at the conviction that God exists but to engage in the activity of proving it to oneself, from which the conviction will follow. If we assume that such a demonstration is available, then the problem of commanding conviction is, if not entirely resolved, at least assuaged. We are commanded to engage in honest investigation and there is good reason to assume that such investigation will lead us to the conviction that God is the source of all that exists.

If this is the Rambam’s position (and I do not think it is),[[13]](#footnote-13) it has implications that many might consider untenable. Even if we accept that, in principle, it is possible to demonstrate that God is the source of all existence, it is surely very difficult to do so. Not everyone has the time, intellectual ability or background to reach the philosophical level required. If this is the case, the commandment is then limited to an elite few, and most Jews cannot be expected to fulfill it. Rav Soloveitchik, at least, believed that this could not be the case. All commandments, he claimed, are *exoteric* – in principle, they can be fulfilled by anyone. Rav Soloveitchik did not deny that there are *esoteric* elements in Judaism (elements that are relevant only to some elite group), but held that they cannot be halakhot or *mitzvot*, which do not apply to all. Surely the mitzva to believe in God, the foundation of foundations, cannot be limited to the intellectual elite!

In fact, the entire enterprise of proving that God exists is very questionable nowadays. In the Middle Ages there was a broad consensus that God’s existence is philosophically demonstrable and that a thinking person who honestly investigated would very likely arrive at that conclusion. Unfortunately or not, this is no longer the case and a mitzva to honestly investigate whether God exists (with the suspension of judgment that such investigation implies) becomes a high-risk endeavor. Tragically, many, many, intelligent, honest people find it very difficult today to believe in God, and it is exceedingly unlikely that honest investigation is going to bring them to faith. Moreover, at least for those of us who interact intellectually with the modern secular world, it seems likely that encouraging such honest investigation amongst believers is likely to undermine their belief rather than strengthen it – that is just the prevailing trend in the West.

Some might say that all those honest unbelievers are really not so honest, and the fact of God’s existence is really self-evident to anyone who delves into it properly. Besides the obnoxious patronizing tone of such claims, there is something religiously unsettling about such a position. Our faith in God is far more fundamental, and should be much stronger, than our faith in philosophical investigation. On the contrary, I would say that any confidence that we may have in our ability to understand how the world works and what it contains *depends* on our having been granted that ability by God. This is not the place to enter into the vast philosophical and theological literature since Kant that questions the grounding of faith in objective philosophical investigation, but I think that most people today, religious and unreligious, do not see such investigation to be a productive point of departure for religious faith.

**Conclusion and What’s Next**

So where do we stand now? We have seen Crescas’s challenge to the Rambam, that belief in God cannot be commanded because belief in God must be understood as more than being in some information state. Belief in God is the conviction that God is the source of all. Conviction is not something that you can be commanded to do – either you have it or you lack it. We then discussed the suggestion that the mitzva to believe in God is essentially the mitzva to engage in philosophical investigation in order to demonstrate to oneself that God exists. We rejected this position both because it makes the mitzva at best applicable to a select few and out of skepticism that such a demonstration is available at all.

I am sure that at least some readers feel that this discussion misses the central notion of faith. They are saying to themselves: “We all know what *emuna*, religious faith, is. It is the opposite of all this philosophical blather – it is precisely the commitment to God in the absence of demonstrable knowledge; it is a blind *leap of faith*. Whether or not it is technically a mitzva, both the Rambam and Rav Chasdai Crescas demand that we make that leap and place God at the center of how we understand our existence.” This position has a great deal of appeal to modern religious people (though I think the Rambam would not find it appealing) and I will discuss faith in this sense, and how it relates to a positive theology that includes principles of faith, in the next *shiur*.

1. Rambam, *Sefer Ha-mitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh* 1 (my translation from the Kapach Hebrew translation). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:1 (my translation). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There may be no discrepancy at all. The *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* was written in Judeo-Arabic and, as R. Chaim Heller points out in an annotation to his edition of *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, the original Arabic uses the verb *itaqad* which is often translated as “believe” but could just as well be translated as “know.” The Hebrew term in the *Mishneh Torah* is *leyda*, which certainly is better rendered as “to know.” Rabbi Yosef Kapach, in his commentary to the *Mishneh Torah*, argues vigorously, based on other sources as well, that both texts should be understood as requiring all to *know* that there is a First Cause of everything, where knowledge is to be understood as a kind of philosophical apprehension that is far more firmly rooted than mere belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a nice summary of that discussion and more, see Rabbi David Silverberg’s excellent essay at the Maimonides Heritage Center site: <http://www.mhcny.org/pdf/mitzvatasei1.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R. Chasdai Crescas, *Or Ado-nai*, Sifrei Ramot, Jerusalem, 1990 pp. 9-10 (Hebrew). R. Crescas also criticizes the idea of a mitzva to believe in God on logical grounds: the very concept of a commandment already implies a Commander, and thus it is at best redundant to have a distinct mitzva to believe in that Commander. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The problem is not limited to the first commandment; it extends at least to the second commandment (to believe in the unity of God) and perhaps to the third (to love God) and fourth (to fear God) as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Are there *mitzvot* that involve achieving a certain state (rather than performing some action)? The first four *mitzvot* in the Rambam’s *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* appear to be of this nature. They are: 1. Belief in God, 2. Belief in His Unity, 3. Love of God and 4. Fear of God. Rav Soloveitchik was very committed to the idea that some commandments involve being in a certain emotional or psychological state. He even coined a term for *mitzvot* in which the action – the *ma’aseh mitzva* – is merely the means to the end of achieving a certain state. He referred to these as *mitzvot* which have a *kiyum she-ba-lev* – whose fulfillment is in the heart. Examples abound throughout his writings, regarding mourning, prayer, *keriat shema* and other *mitzvot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Propositional belief and knowledge refer to knowledge or belief that something is the case, and it is only in this context that both knowledge and belief are pertinent. In contrast, much of what we know cannot be put into words – how to ride a bike, how to speak, how to write, etc. These are certainly things people know, but they are not things people believe. While someone can know how to ride a bike, to say that he believes how to ride a bike does not make sense. Likewise people believe *in* things – I might believe in you or, most significantly, we say that people believe in God – but that sort of belief does not translate (at least on the surface) into knowledge; it makes no sense to know *in* someone or to know *in* God. What we mean by “believing in” someone else is usually that we have confidence in him or her. The particular case of what we mean by believing in God will be addressed at length in future *shiurim*. In any case, a central application of the concepts of belief and knowledge is propositional (regarding statements about what is the case), which is generally formulated in terms of belief and knowledge *that*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The significance of this notion that a proposition is a thing, and knowledge and belief are its possession, will become significant in subsequent discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Though it would be bizarre to command someone to believe something rather than know it – i.e., to believe something that is false. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. That is not to say that you cannot acquire knowledge by instruction. A great deal of our knowledge is due to our accepting as true what people in authority tell us. I know the Pythagorean theorem largely because my math teacher told me. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. R. Kapach quotes the *Avodat Ha-melekh* as offering this interpretation. See note 3 above. It is clear that the Rambam valued such theological investigation very highly – in fact he saw the philosophical apprehension of God as the ultimate human purpose – but that still may not be the correct interpretation of the first mitzva. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I will elaborate on this in the next *shiur*. In addition to what I will discuss there, ascribing this position to the Rambam depends upon one’s reading of his negative theology (that no positive attributes can be ascribed to God, and He can only be described by what He is not). If we accept a fully radical interpretation of negative theology, then *all* theological assertions, even the understanding of God’s nature as First Cause, are at best metaphorical, and the possibility of philosophical demonstration of God’s existence is called into question. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)