**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

**Rav Assaf Bednarsh**

**Shiur *#*19*:*  Belief in God (3)**

**Adapted by Leora Bednarsh**

***Emuna Peshuta***

In the previous *shiur*, we explored the position that religious faith stems from logical proof, whether philosophical or historical. A second approach to understanding the basis of faith is found in the concept of *emuna peshuta*, simple faith, espoused by many Chassidic philosophers. According to this conception, one does not even ask the question of why we believe. If one must ask the question and then provide the answer, faith is no longer simple. Rather, I believe in God for the same reason that I believe that I exist and that what I see with my eyes exists. I believe because I just do.

R. Tzadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin explains that the first of the Ten Commandments, “I the Lord am your God” (*Shemot* 20:2), was stated as a fact and not as a commandment because it refers to *emuna peshuta*. We don't have to do anything in order to believe. A Jew just believes, as a fact. R. Tzadok points out that one cannot be commanded to believe. If someone doesn't believe, they can't will themselves to believe just because someone told them to do so. Rather, R. Tzadok explains, a Jew naturally believes because faith is implanted in the Jewish soul.[[1]](#footnote-2)

The *Kedushat Levi* explains that this faith stems from the revelation at Mount Sinai. When God revealed Himself to the Jewish People at Sinai, He not only intellectually proved His existence to those who directly witnessed the theophany, but also implanted in the "spiritual DNA" of the Jewish People, in the souls of the Jews throughout the generations, a natural intuitive faith in God.[[2]](#footnote-3) The *Bnei Yissaschar* holds likewise that a Jew should naturally believe in the tradition he received from his ancestors. He harshly condemns those who search for logical proof of God's existence, stating that anyone who requires philosophical proof of God is casting doubt on his lineage from Avraham Avinu, as God graced Avraham and his descendants with the natural ability to intuit the truth of His existence. Any true descendant of Avraham would believe in God as naturally and intuitively as we believe in the existence of our own bodies, of the people we interact with, or of the ground we walk on.[[3]](#footnote-4)

The *Bnei Yissaschar* points out that during the time of the Inquisition, the philosophically accomplished Jews gave up their faith under threat of persecution, while the simple Jews, who believed in God without any intellectual understanding, remained steadfast in their faith no matter how much pressure was placed upon them. He explains that intellectual faith, which is based on the limited power of the human intellect, is limited in its strength. The simple faith of a Jew following the traditions of his ancestors, however, flows from the Divine revelation at Sinai, and the force of Divine revelation is infinite. Therefore, only simple faith has the unlimited power to resist any pressure that may be brought to bear against it.[[4]](#footnote-5)

**Chassidic Explanation of Disbelief**

According to this theory, the source of faith is found in the essential nature of the Jewish soul. We can therefore understand why there are gentiles who deny God's existence; just as a Jewish soul naturally believes, a gentile soul naturally disbelieves. However, the existence of disbelieving Jews needs explanation. If belief is implanted in the essential spiritual nature of a Jew, how can we explain the phenomenon of Jewish disbelief?

Chassidic thought explains this phenomenon by noting that there are various spiritual forces that can corrupt even a Jewish soul with the impurity of the *sitra achra*, negative spiritual forces, and cause a Jew to act in a decidedly non-Jewish fashion. The *Yesod Ha-Avoda* writes that one can achieve strengthened faith and purity of heart by protecting oneself not only from heretical opinions and corrupted philosophies, but from eating forbidden foods, inappropriate sexual indulgence, and inappropriate speech. These factors, explains the *Yesod Ha-Avoda*, are the most powerful causes of the intellectual corruption that leads to disbelief.[[5]](#footnote-6)

According to *Chassidut*, if a Jew disbelieves, it is not due to any intellectual error or incorrect thinking, but rather to an impurity in his soul caused by one of the negative spiritual forces that corrupts spirituality. In a Chassidic yeshiva, if a student were to admit that he doubts the existence of God, the response would not be an intellectual or philosophical argument proving faith, but rather an inquiry into what impurity in his soul could have led him to think in such a non-Jewish fashion. Perhaps he has been looking at inappropriate images or eating foods that do not meet proper halachic standards. Chassidic belief is not something which emerges from a thought process, but rather something that reflects the nature of your soul. Therefore, the *Shomer Emunim* instructs that if a heretical thought crosses someone's mind, he should immediately put it out of his mind and think about it no longer, just as he would if an inappropriate sexual urge arose in his mind. Heresy is not an intellectual competitor to faith, but rather merely an impure thought that should not be graced with intellectual analysis.[[6]](#footnote-7)

According to these Chassidic thinkers, heresy is neither an intellectual nor a moral failing, but a spiritual impurity. Faith is the result of neither diligent nor honest intellectual inquiry, but merely the reflection of a healthy Jewish soul.

**Experiential Basis of Belief**

R. Soloveitchik offers a different understanding of the basis of faith. He explains that authentic faith is based on our experience of the Divine. He therefore rejects the cosmological proof of God, viewing it as a mere corruption of an authentic cosmic experience. According to R. Soloveitchik, a Jew once looked at the heavens and earth and saw the wondrous power and intricate wisdom of God, and then the philosophers turned it into a logical argument demonstrating the existence of an abstract notion called God. He paraphrases Kierkegaard's sarcastic criticism of Anselm of Canterbury, who spent many days in prayer and supplication that he be vouchsafed a rational proof of God's existence: Does the loving bride in the embrace of her beloved ask for proof that he is alive and real? So too, must the prayerful soul clinging in powerful love and ecstasy to her beloved demonstrate that He exist? According to R. Soloveitchik, one experiences God's existence by talking to Him in prayer, by hearing Him speak in the voice of the Torah, and by seeing His fingerprints in the intricate beauty and majestic grandeur of the created world. An authentic belief, which constitutes part of the fabric of one's existence, can only emerge from one's experience and existential reality.[[7]](#footnote-8)

The path to faith, then, lies in cultivating religious experience. The way in which we pass our faith to the next generation is not by teaching our children logical proofs, nor by bequeathing them a different spiritual DNA than their neighbors, but by sharing our experience of God and His Torah and bringing that experience to life.[[8]](#footnote-9)

I believe that R. Soloveitchik's insight accurately reflects the experience of most believers. Many religious people believe not because of intellectual arguments, nor do they believe unthinkingly for no conscious reason whatsoever. Rather, they are inspired by experiences of spirituality, transcendence, and connection to God. Of course, on a purely intellectual level, one can never prove that his experiences are true. Perhaps he just felt that way, and feelings do not prove anything about the objective nature of the external world. But, R. Soloveitchik might answer, that is the difference between a human being and a computer. A computer only believes that which can logically be proven; a human being, in contrast, never does anything of significance based on logical demonstration, but rather lives out his humanity based on deep intuitions and apprehensions of transcendent reality in the recesses of his heart and soul.

Contemporary philosophy has realized that we cannot logically prove that even the world or other people exist, nor can we logically demonstrate a moral obligation to refrain from murder or other moral evils. We certainly cannot logically discern the purpose of life or demonstrate to what ends one should dedicate his efforts and resources during his brief sojourn in this world. But one who therefore refuses to reach a conclusion about any of these issues would not be sophisticated; he would be psychologically ill. A human being has resources beyond the intellectual that are capable of grasping transcendent truths and accessing deeper meaning.

According to R. Soloveitchik, then, the fact that faith flows from human experience and not intellectual analysis is not a weakness of religious faith, but is rather a strength. Religious faith is thus promoted from what the Rav calls “intellectual gymnastics” to an authentic aspect of human existence.

**Summary**

We have seen four theories about the basis of belief and disbelief. If belief is based on intellectual proof, whether philosophical or historical, then perhaps disbelief is an intellectual failing based on lack of diligent study. Alternatively, argues R. Elchanan Wasserman, disbelief is a moral failing, based on bias and dishonest thinking by those whose desire to indulge their passions, which then corrupts their intellect and causes them to reach patently illogical conclusions. A third approach, of the Chassidic thinkers, is that belief needs no justification whatsoever and is merely a natural property of a healthy soul. Disbelief would then be a spiritual failing, stemming from the impure nature of a gentile soul or from a soul corrupted by forbidden foods, illicit sexuality, or other sources of impurity. According to R. Soloveitchik, belief flows from experience of God, and disbelief may be attributable to a lack of religious experience. While there may be some heretics whose disbelief flows from intellectual laziness or from dishonest thinking and a desire to justify a hedonistic lifestyle, there may be others who honestly disbelieve because they have not been graced with the experience of the reality of God.

In my opinion, a modern Jew needs the insight of R. Soloveitchik, but should not necessarily ignore the intellectual proofs that have been offered throughout the ages. R. Soloveitchik may be correct that an existentially authentic faith can flow only from experience, as opposed to pure intellectual speculation. However, in all areas of human life, we often doubt our experiences and question our feelings, and sometimes justifiably so. Anyone who refuses to make a decision in life based on experience and intuition will never live a true human life. But anyone who is willing to build his life on a feeling without checking first that it conforms to some degree of rationality is in danger of making a costly mistake.

A modern Jew should appreciate that even if it is difficult to absolutely prove anything in the contemporary philosophical milieu, there is still significant evidence supporting religious belief. It may be hard to prove anything about what happened before the universe existed, but there should be some explanation for where the universe came from. It may be hard to prove that the wondrous intricacy of the universe and of biological life cannot be explained fully by various scientific theories, but it is nonetheless striking that such a wondrous world came into existence. Similarly, a look at Jewish history, whether or not it proves anything, strengthens Jewish belief. Perhaps one cannot find absolute historical proof as to anything that happened thousands of years ago, but it is striking that no similar religion has the audacity to claim that God revealed Himself to an entire nation and gave them a scripture. It is also striking, as many historians have pointed out, that not only the ancient Hittites, Egyptians, Arameans, and Babylonians have disappeared from history, but so have the traditions and beliefs of the ancient Greeks, Persians, Romans, and their neighbors. Yet the Jews still pass on their traditions and live by the same values and beliefs that their ancestors lived by thousands of years ago. The Jews have perhaps been persecuted more than any other nation, but they have also succeeded, persevered, and been redeemed more than any other nation. All of this does not constitute absolute proof of anything, but it does constitute evidence for the rationality of our faith.

Ultimately, though, religious faith, like all the deepest aspects of our humanity, must transcend mathematical logic and tap into a higher reality, accessible by the heart and soul working in conjunction with the mind.

1. R. Tzadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin (1823-1900), *Tzidkat Ha-Tzadik*, paragraph 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. R. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (c.1740-1810), *Kedushat Levi*, *Parashat Yitro.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. R. Zvi Elimelich Shapira of Dinov (c.1783-1842), *Bnei Yissaschar,* Month of Adar, ch. 3, section 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid.*,* Month of Sivan, ch. 5, section 19. In this passage, he notes that although in previous eras, great rabbis such as R. Saadia Gaon, Rabbenu Bahya, and Rambam promulgated philosophical proof of God’s existence, they constitute an exception, due to secret mystical reasons applicable only to their historical era. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. R. Avraham Weinberg (first Slonimer Rebbe, 1804–1883), *Yesod Ha-Avoda,* part 2, ch. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. R. Aharon Roth (founder of Toldos Aharon and related Chassidic dynasties, 1894-1947), *Shomer Emunim, Ma’amar Ha-Emunah*, ch. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. *Lonely Man of Faith,* n. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. R. Aharon Lichtenstein offers a similar understanding of faith in his essay, “The Source of Faith is Faith Itself,” in which he writes explicitly that “the greatest source of faith… has been God Himself,” and that although it does not constitute a rational demonstration, “existentially… nothing has been more authentic than the encounter with Our Father, Our King, the source and ground of all being.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)