**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Topics in *Hashkafa***

**Rav Assaf Bednarsh**

**Shiur #17: Belief in God**

**Adapted by Leora Bednarsh**

**Philosophical Faith**

There is a long-standing debate among Jewish thinkers about the role of philosophy in Jewish belief. Some thinkers – such as the Rambam, R. Saadia Gaon, and Rabbenu Bachya – maintain that our faith should ideally be based on philosophical truth and not merely a blind acceptance of tradition.

Rabbenu Bachya writes explicitly in *Chovot Ha-Levavot* that one who refrains from philosophical speculation is worthy of criticism and is not properly fulfilling his religious obligation.[[1]](#footnote-1) He brings various proofs from biblical and rabbinic texts for the obligation to philosophically prove the existence and unity of God. For example, the *pasuk*, “And you shall know this day and consider it in your heart, that the Lord He is God in heaven above and upon the earth below; there is none else” (*Devarim* 4:39), which commands intellectual knowledge and investigation of the unity of God. Similarly, the verse, “And you shall keep [them] and do [them], for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the eyes of the peoples, who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Only this great nation is a wise and understanding people’” (ibid. 4:6) indicates that our commitment to Torah must be based on a wisdom and understanding that is acknowledged even by the gentiles, which can be nothing other than objective philosophical proof. R. Saadia Gaon likewise brings biblical proof-texts as evidence that we are commanded to engage in philosophical inquiry and seek out proof for our religious beliefs.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Of course, these thinkers recognize the importance of tradition. R. Saadia Gaon emphasizes that it is not permissible for a Jew to abandon his traditions and search for philosophical enlightenment without any prior commitments. Rather, one must hold fast to the Jewish tradition and lifestyle, and then philosophize in order to prove that which one already believes, thus strengthening the power of one’s beliefs and providing a defense against those who might question it. Rabbenu Bachya also implies that one who is intellectually incapable of philosophical reasoning may rely on his traditions and will not be criticized for failing to engage in philosophical inquiry. Nonetheless, this group of thinkers holds that the ideal mode of Jewish belief is logical proof based on philosophical inquiry.

**Traditional Faith**

On the other side of the spectrum, many thinkers eschew all philosophical speculation and hold that Jewish belief should be based on tradition alone, and not on abstract philosophical reasoning. Perhaps the most famous advocate of this approach is R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, who begins his philosophical work, *Sefer Ha-Kuzari*, with this notion. This book elucidates R. Yehuda Ha-Levi’s philosophy in the form of a dialogue between the king of the Khazars and a Rabbi. The book opens with the king being told in a dream that his intentions are pleasing to God, but his actions are not, thus setting the king on a quest to determine which actions constitute the proper mode for worship of God. He consults with a philosopher, a Christian, a Muslim, and finally a Jew, who convinces him of the truth of Judaism. It is notable that even before the dialogue begins, the source of the king’s religious knowledge is not objective logic, but rather personal revelation, thus foreshadowing the ultimate conclusion of the king’s quest.

When the Rabbi first introduces Judaism to the king, he tells him that Jews believe in the God of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, who took us out of Egypt and graced us with miracles and prophecy. When the king responds by wondering why he did not say that we believe in the Creator of the world, the Rabbi responds that our belief in God is not based on abstract philosophical notions, such as creation, which can be deduced by logical reasoning. This, explains the Rabbi, is the basis of universal philosophical religion, which is subject to debate and can never be free of questioning and doubt. The Jewish religion, on the other hand, is based on our historical relationship with God, specifically the miracles of the Exodus and the revelation at Sinai. Having seen the evidence of God’s existence with our own eyes, we have no need for philosophical proofs.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Basis of Disagreement 1: The Strength of Religious Belief**

It seems reasonable that both philosophy and revelation are valid sources of religious knowledge. Why, then, do some thinkers insist on the primacy of philosophical belief, while others insist that only non-philosophical belief is authentic, and even permissible? We will explore three complementary analyses of the root of this fundamental philosophical disagreement.

First, these thinkers are disagreeing about the practical question of how to strengthen one’s belief and defend against doubt and heresy. R. Saadia Gaon explains that he wrote his philosophical work, *Emunot Ve-De’ot*, because he saw that contemporary Jews were philosophically confused and beset by doubt and heresy. He metaphorically describes his contemporaries as drowning in a sea of doubt, and he asserts that philosophical proof of Jewish belief is the lifeline that will dispel doubt, combat heresy, and strengthen his fellow Jews’ commitment to Judaism. Rabbenu Bachya is likewise skeptical of the lasting power of purely traditional belief. He describes one who believes based on tradition using a metaphor of a blind man being led by a sighted person, i.e. the philosophically knowledgeable teacher whose tradition one is following. Those who are far removed from the religious philosopher, who merely follow a tradition passed down through the generations, are compared to a line of blind people, each holding onto the coattails of the blind person in front of him, with a sighted person all the way at the front of the line doing his best to safely navigate a path for his followers. The danger here is obvious, for if any one person in this line should stumble or stray, all the people behind him will be utterly lost, with no way of finding the path on their own. Likewise, only one who has philosophical proof of the unity of God can be assured that he will not stray from the path.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In contrast, R. Yehuda Halevi holds that philosophical belief is subject to doubt; only traditional belief, based on revelation, can provide a firm, unassailable basis for religious commitment.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This argument may be based on their respective evaluations of the potential of philosophy to reach firm theological conclusions. R. Saadia Gaon writes explicitly that God has assured us that philosophical speculation will necessarily lead to those truths which were revealed to us via Moshe and the other prophets.[[6]](#footnote-6) R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, on the other hand, believes that philosophy is incapable of reaching firm conclusions in the realm of religion.

**Basis of Disagreement 2: The Nature of the Religious Experience**

Second, these thinkers may be arguing about the nature of the ideal religious experience. According to the Rambam,[[7]](#footnote-7) love is proportional to knowledge of the object of that love, and therefore the path to true love of God is intellectual understanding of the nature of divinity. The most meaningful religious experience is thus the intellectual experience of understanding God.

R. Yehuda Halevi, on the other hand, writes that purely intellectual knowledge of God will not lead to the development of religious emotions; only a personal, historical relationship with God can lead to a deep emotional yearning for His closeness.[[8]](#footnote-8)

R. Soloveitchik, who places himself squarely on the anti-philosophical side of this debate, writes that the problem with philosophical demonstrations of God’s existence is not whether they succeed, but that they succeed in being exactly what they were intended to be – cold, logical demonstrations of an abstract truth. According to the Rav, the only true religious experience is a primal experience rooted in emotions and awareness that are part of the fabric of life. He dismisses theological speculation as mere intellectual gymnastics.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Basis of Disagreement 3: The Object of Belief**

Lastly, these thinkers may be arguing not only about the strength and quality of religious faith, but about the object of that faith – i.e. the definition of the God in Whom we believe. Rabbenu Bachya explains that one who understands God philosophically has not only a stronger belief in Him, but a more accurate one. He argues that one who believes merely by way of tradition cannot achieve a proper understanding of the meaning of God’s unity and can never progress from the level of verbal declaration of his belief to a true understanding of the meaning of that declaration. Only via philosophy can one properly understand that God’s unity is qualitatively different from the unity we find in the physical world, and thus properly internalize the belief in the unity of God.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The Rambam explains this position by means of a metaphor involving commoners seeking the presence of the king.[[11]](#footnote-11) He compares the masses of religious Jews to those who want to approach the palace but have not located it. The Torah scholars, who possess true beliefs by way of tradition, have found the palace, but have not yet located its entrance. Those who have begun a philosophical study of theology are located in the vestibule of the palace, and those whose philosophical knowledge is complete are found in the king’s inner chamber, in the presence of the king. By means of this metaphor, the Rambam clearly expresses his belief that only philosophical investigation gives a human being the ability to come close to God by understanding His nature to the greatest extent possible.

The Rambam goes on to express harsh criticism of those whose philosophical understanding of God is undeveloped. He explains that if one philosophically understands the nature of God, then the more one thinks of Him, praises Him, and serves Him, the more one grows in spirituality. However, one who thinks of God and mentions Him all the time but defines God based on an intuitive notion or on a tradition he learned from others is serving a non-existent, imaginary being who is not actually God. The more devoutly that this individual mentions God at every opportunity, the more he is worshipping a figment of his imagination and straying from the service of the true God.

According to these thinkers, then, the definition of God is that being which is defined by a certain philosophical description. (The Rambam indeed posits that the tetragrammaton is an ancient Hebrew word for the philosophical concept of necessary existence.[[12]](#footnote-12)) Therefore, one whose notion of God is not philosophically rigorous cannot possibly achieve knowledge of and closeness to God, and his worship may be considered tantamount to idolatry.

R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, on the other hand, posits a different means for identifying the being referred to as God. In the fourth book of *Sefer Ha-Kuzari*, he distinguishes between the two most common names for God in the *Tanakh* – *Elokim* and the tetragrammaton (YHVH). He explains that *Elokim* is actually a common noun, meaning “ruler,” which describes any human or heavenly power and not specifically God. He identifies this word with the God of Aristotle and the philosophical notion of divinity, which contain no specific knowledge of a particular being, but only a generalized abstract concept. YHVH, on the other hand, is a proper noun and serves as the name of a particular being in the world, who is the God of our forefathers.

According to R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, a name does not describe the bearer of that name, but rather refers directly to him. For example, when I refer to “R. Aharon Lichtenstein,” I do not mean the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, nor the author of particular books, nor the son-in-law of R. Soloveitchik, but rather the person whom I personally met and referred to as R. Aharon Lichtenstein. And when my students use that name, since they have learned the name from me, they mean the person whom Assaf Bednarsh, who they personally know, knew and referred to by the name R. Aharon Lichtenstein.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Therefore, according to R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, when our forefathers spoke of *YHVH*, they meant the being whom they personally interacted with and called *YHVH*. When our ancestors, in the generation of Moshe, said *YHVH*, they meant the being whom they personally encountered at Har Sinai and called *YHVH*. And the meaning of the name *YHVH* nowadays is that being who my father heard from his father who heard from his father, etc., heard that his father saw atop Har Sinai and called *YHVH*.

According to this, one who believes in the God of his forefathers, but has a philosophically mistaken, perhaps even grotesque, notion of the nature of that God, is worshipping the true *YHVH* according to R. Yehuda Halevi, but not according to the Rambam. Conversely, one who has a well-developed philosophical notion of divinity but no tradition of revelation is worshipping the true God according to the Rambam, but according to R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, while he can worship some form of *Elokim*, he has no access to the worship of *YHVH*.

**Summary**

We have seen two competing schools of thought regarding the basis of our belief in God. One school believes that everyone capable of philosophical study is required to prove the existence of God by means of philosophy. The second school argues that one is obligated to stay away from philosophy and that belief should be based on the force of tradition. We analyzed three issues that may underlie this debate. First, they debated whether philosophy would successfully lead to firm proofs of our faith and help the believer resist error and temptation, or if it would instead lead to weak conclusions and tepid commitment. Second, we noted a dispute as to whether intellectual knowledge would lead to a more real experience of spirituality and love of God, or whether only a non-intellectual experience would allow for an authentic religious experience rooted in the real life of an individual. Lastly, we observed that this debate is not only about the mode of belief, but the object of belief. According to the Rambam, God is defined and identified by His philosophical description, and therefore one must philosophize in order to know the God Whom one serves. R. Yehuda Halevi, however, holds that the very definition of God is relational and stems from a chain of people whose personal knowledge of those further up in the chain defines the meaning of God’s name. Therefore, only traditional belief can lead to knowledge of God.

1. *Chovot Ha-Levavot* 1:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Emunot Ve-De’ot,* introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* 1:11-25. In the remainder of book 1, R. Yehuda Ha-Levi points out that according to this conception of religion, the Jewish religion is fundamentally relevant only to the Jewish People, who have a historical relationship with God, and not to the gentiles, to whom God did not reveal himself. Based on this, he develops his well-known doctrine that Jews are inherently different from gentiles. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Chovot Ha-Levavot* 1:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* 1:11-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Emunot Ve-De’ot,* introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* 4:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *The Lonely Man of Faith*, n. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Chovot Ha-Levavot* 1:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:51. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Moreh Nevuchim* 1:61. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In the 20th century, this issue of whether a name is shorthand for a description or serves as a pointer was the subject of Saul Kripke’s revolutionary work, *Naming and Necessity*. Earlier analytic philosophers, such as Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, understood names as implicit descriptions; Kripke argues that names are merely pointers to the being that is personally encountered and dubbed. (Coincidentally, Kripke, an observant Jew who is widely considered to be the greatest living philosopher, shares with R. Yehuda Halevi not only a theory of naming, but also descent from the tribe of Levi.) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)