**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Topics in *Hashkafa***

**Rav Assaf Bednarsh**

**Shiur #18: Belief in God (2)**

**Adapted by Leora Bednarsh**

**Philosophical Proofs of the Existence of God**

 Jewish philosophers have offered two basic proofs of the existence of God.

One proof, known as the cosmological proof, deduces the existence of God from the existence of the physical universe. R. Saadia Gaon[[1]](#footnote-2) and Rabbenu Bachya[[2]](#footnote-3) establish that everything in the world was created, and nothing can create itself, and there cannot be an infinite chain of objects that create one another. Therefore, there must be some first cause that created everything in the universe, and that first cause is God.

The Rambam presents a slightly different version of the cosmological argument, which is valid even if one were to postulate the eternity of the universe. He argues that all movement must be caused by some force, and therefore, since there is movement in the universe, there must be some prime mover who moves the highest sphere, which then moves the lower spheres, and ultimately the physical objects in our world. That prime mover is God.[[3]](#footnote-4)

A second classic proof of God’s existence is known as the teleological proof. This proof argues not from the mere existence of the universe, but from the design of the universe. Rabbenu Bachya argues that if I were to show you a written essay and claim that I accidentally knocked over a bottle of ink and it spilled in this particular pattern, you would certainly call me a liar, because intelligent writing could not be formed by coincidence. Likewise, concludes Rabbenu Bachya, there is no merit to the claim that the earth and its fullness, which are much more intricate and complex than one sheet of writing, were formed without a creator. The entire universe, from the ecosystem to the structure of plants and animals to the wondrous workings of the human body, is so amazingly well-designed that it could not have turned out this way if it were not designed purposefully by an intelligent creator. Just as the intricate design of a watch proves that it was created by an intelligent watchmaker for the purpose of telling time, so too the world must have been created purposefully (*telos* in Greek means purpose) by an intelligent designer. This designer is God.[[4]](#footnote-5)

**Explanations for the Phenomenon of Atheism**

**Disbelief Due to Neglect of Study**

 If there is philosophical proof of God’s existence, how can anyone deny it? Advocates of philosophical faith have developed two theories to explain the existence of disbelief. One theory emerges from the explanation of R. Yitzchak Abarbanel in his treatise *Rosh Amana*, which is dedicated to an analysis of the Rambam’s principles of faith. The Rambam counted belief in God as one of the six hundred and thirteen commandments.[[5]](#footnote-6) R. Chasdai Crescas objected that one can only be commanded to do something that one can freely decide to do or not to do. Belief is not volitional, as one must necessarily believe that which has been proven to him and cannot choose to believe with certitude that which has not been proven to him.[[6]](#footnote-7) Abarbanel defends the Rambam by explaining that the commandment is not to simply believe, but rather to engage in philosophical study and learn those prerequisites and logical arguments that lead to belief. While the belief which arises as the result of such study arises automatically, the decision to engage in philosophical study is indeed volitional, and one is commanded to devote one’s time and resources to engaging in such study.

According to this explanation, we can understand the phenomenon of disbelief. The study of philosophy is difficult and time-consuming. Those who have dedicated themselves to theological investigation will eventually believe. But those who are lazy or apathetic and do not study properly will not be influenced by the philosophical evidence of God’s existence. They are liable to profess atheism as a result of their ignorance. According to this theory, then, disbelief is an intellectual failing that arises from a neglect of study.

**R. Elchanan Wasserman: Disbelief Due to Moral Failing**

 R. Elchanan Wasserman offers a different explanation for the phenomenon of disbelief.[[7]](#footnote-8) He assumes that philosophical belief does not require arduous study or in-depth knowledge of philosophy. Rather, even a cursory analysis of the world suffices to prove the existence of a Creator. R. Elchanan believes that the teleological proof is so obvious that no one could honestly observe the heavens and earth, much less the intricate workings of the human body, and not immediately conclude that the world testifies to the existence of God, just as a shirt testifies to the existence of a weaver and a book testifies to the existence of an author. R. Elchanan brings evidence to this approach from the fact that the Rambam counts belief in God as one of the six hundred and thirteen commandments. Since every thirteen-year-old Jewish boy and twelve-year-old Jewish girl is obligated in this commandment, it is clear that belief in God does not require intense philosophical training or advanced intellectual ability. Additionally, the Halakha obligates every gentile to believe in God and fulfill the seven Noahide commandments, including even those whose lifestyle does not allow for academic achievement or intellectual advancement. This expectation would be unjust if belief in God is not easily attained by any normal human being.

 If belief in God is so obvious, asks R. Elchanan, how can anyone honestly doubt the existence of God? He answers that in fact it is impossible to honestly doubt God’s existence. Rather, R. Elchanan finds the explanation for the phenomenon of disbelief in the Torah’s prohibition of bribery. The Torah, when forbidding the acceptance of bribes, explains that “you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning” (*Devarim* 16:19). Bribery has the power to corrupt the intellect and prevent one from thinking logically, as evidenced by the testimony of the Torah and the many stories of Talmudic sages whose judgment was biased by a whiff of bribery.[[8]](#footnote-9) If a paltry sum of money has the power to corrupt our reasoning, argues R. Elchanan, then certainly the bribe offered by the evil inclination – i.e. that if we deny God’s existence then we can then indulge our passions without restraint – has the power to blind us to the truth and pervert our intellect to the extent that we can deny the undeniable fact of God’s existence.[[9]](#footnote-10) The sole explanation for disbelief is that it stems from a moral failing. One who is beholden to his desires will experience a strong subconscious bias to reach a conclusion that justifies his lifestyle, and will therefore conclude, against all logic, that God does not exist.

The path to belief, then, lies not in more advanced intellectual inquiry, but merely in freeing oneself from the influence of one’s passions and thinking honestly, without bias or preconception. That is a standard that not everyone fulfills, but everyone – whether old or young, sophisticated or illiterate – is capable of meeting. R. Elchanan points out that the Halakha relates to the sin of disbelief with exceptional severity. If it were possible to commit heresy as the result of an honest mistake, the Halakha would instead have related more leniently to the sin of disbelief than to other sins, because the heretic was only doing what he honestly thought was right. If, however, disbelief stems from an intellect corrupted by the prejudice of illicit desires, then it is understandable why disbelief is considered an inexcusable sin.

**Critique of R. Elchanan Wasserman’s Argument**

R. Elchanan’s perspective is founded on deep psychological insight, and it is easy to find real life examples of people whose heretical beliefs seem to flow from a desire to justify an irreligious lifestyle, as opposed to sincere intellectual inquiry. However, it is far from clear that this is the only source of heresy in the world and that there are not atheists who reached this philosophical error via honest (if mistaken) reasoning rather than moral corruption. Perhaps there are atheists who do not indulge any desires that would be restrained by the Torah. Or perhaps there are those who were not biased by their desires, because they reasoned that even if God existed it would be permissible to indulge their passions. One could sincerely believe that God exists but does not require us to restrain our actions in any way, or at least not to restrain ourselves any more than any decent person would if left to his own devices.[[10]](#footnote-11)

If so, why would anyone deny the existence of God? Perhaps they are honestly unconvinced by the teleological argument. Darwin’s theory of natural selection presents an alternative explanation of the seemingly miraculous design of human beings and all other organisms. Astronomy, which posits the existence of billions of stars and planets, provides an alternate explanation of the wondrous structure of the earth and the solar system. If there are billions of planets, the fact that one of them is ideally suited for human life is not necessarily remarkable.[[11]](#footnote-12) It may be that a lack of belief represents neither an intellectual nor a moral failure of the heretic, but rather the weakness of the philosophical approach to belief.

**Non-Philosophical Proof of the Existence of God**

 According to R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, Jewish belief should be based on tradition instead of philosophy. But if there is no absolute philosophical proof of God and we merely accept the traditions handed to us by our predecessors, why should I believe my ancestors more than someone else’s ancestors? How do I know that my tradition is more correct?

 Some contemporary thinkers,[[12]](#footnote-13) based on a few sentences in the *Sefer* *Ha-Kuzari*,[[13]](#footnote-14) argue that while there is no philosophical proof of the truth of our belief, there is a historical proof. They argue that a tradition of mass revelation cannot possibly be a fabrication. No one could have convinced an entire nation that they experienced a revelation at Sinai if they had not, and no one could convince an entire nation to teach their children that there had once been a revelation at Sinai if that generation did not honestly believe that such a tradition had been passed on to them by their forefathers. Therefore, if millions of contemporary Jews sincerely believe in the Sinaitic revelation, then the previous generation must have likewise sincerely believed in it, and so too all the way back to the generation who lived at the time of that revelation. If the Jews alive then believed that they themselves witnessed the revelation of the Torah at Sinai, then they must have indeed witnessed it, in which case not only God’s existence but also the Divine origin of the Torah is a proven fact.

 Much ink has been spilled in recent years arguing about the merits of this proof. While some have been convinced by this argument, others have pointed out flaws in its logic. In any case, a historical proof, like a philosophical proof, requires an explanation for the existence of disbelief. As explained above, either we attribute disbelief to an intellectual failing, or we attribute it to bias resulting from a moral failing, or we conclude that the historical argument is not quite strong enough to constitute a proof.

 In the next *shiur*, we will explore other theories that eschew any type of proof, whether philosophical or historical, and provide other explanations for the source of faith.

1. *Ha-Emunot Ve-HaDe’ot*, ch. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Chovot Ha-Levavot,* book 1, chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:5; *Moreh Nevukhim* 2:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. In the history of western philosophy, there is a third prominent argument for the existence of God, known as the ontological proof, which proves the existence of God not from the physical universe, but rather from the existence of the concept of God. This argument, which is clearly more formal and abstract than the previous two, is popular in Christian thought, but it was never embraced by Jewish philosophy. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, positive commandment 1; *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:1-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. *Or Hashem,* introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. *Kovetz He’arot al Massechet Yevamot, Dugma’ot Le-Biurei Aggadot al Derekh Ha-Pshat*, chapter 1; reprinted in *Kovetz Ma’amarim*, chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. *Ketubot* 105b. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. This sentiment is captured by a famous quote from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*: “If God does not exist, everything is permitted.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. R. Elchanan argues that if God created the world, then He must have created us to serve Him and fulfill his will, and since human logic cannot discern the Divine will, God must have revealed His will to us, and therefore the Torah must be a true revelation that obligates us to follow its strictures. However, it is unclear why a person cannot sincerely (if mistakenly) hold that God created us in order to bestow pleasure upon us without reciprocal obligation, or alternatively that God created us in order to serve Him but implanted within us a moral and spiritual intuition that tells us all we need to know in order to serve Him properly. Even if these arguments are not valid, they are not obviously illogical. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Some contemporary religious philosophers argue that it is highly improbable that the species we know could have arisen randomly, even granting the power of evolution and natural selection. Others argue that the exact values of the basic physical forces which are necessary for the existence of life as we know it are almost infinitely unlikely to have come into being randomly without some form of intelligent design. While these arguments have merit, few people are well-versed enough in physics and statistics in order to properly analyze them and reach a firm conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. For example, R. Dr. Dovid Gottlieb, [www.dovidgottlieb.com](http://www.dovidgottlieb.com). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* 1:25, 48-49, 83-87. See also Ramban, *Shemot* 19:9 and *Devarim* 4:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)