Personal Perspectives on Emunah

By: MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN*

Question: What would you describe as the source of your faith?

R. Lichtenstein: That is a good question. It depends on how you describe source. On one level, of course, the source of my faith is my upbringing; I was raised in a family in which faith was a cardinal value, so I was brought up to believe from a very young age, and I was educated at home and in school in a believing framework.

However, if you ask me, as an adult, what is the source of my faith, then I have to give a different answer that relates to the current justification of my belief and not to its biographical source. For this, I will allow myself an overarching comment which I believe will relate to some of the other questions on your list as well. At the end of the day, I think that the primary source of faith is not logical or theological; rather it is rooted in our personality and how we experience the world. Our basic experience of the world is that we feel there is something beyond the exposed material elements we observe, that there is a spirit whose presence can be felt within the world and that there are spiritual elements that our emotions and personalities intuit as transcending the material world. In the words of *Sefer Bereishit*, there is a רוח אלקים מרחפת על פני המים (1:2), and in the words of William Wordsworth, *l-havdil*, we can feel "a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused."[1] It is a universal experience that we often feel; for instance, when observing a beautiful sunset or a majestic mountain, the response is emotional and it is not only an aesthetic response to an impressive visual scene, but also an emotional-existential feeling of coming into contact with the spiritual element and entity that lurks beyond it. This direct and immediate experience of encounter with

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* David H. Schwartz conducted this series of interviews on *emunah*. See his "Introduction to: Personal Perspectives on *Emunah*" in this volume of *Ḥakirah*.

1 "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798.

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a spiritual entity and the rejection of a materialistic outlook on the world is the encounter with God and the recognition of His presence.

Let me add the following point as a continuation of the previous one. God created the world in a way that you can interpret it both from a believing and a non-believing perspective. You can view the universe through the spectacles of belief, but you can also observe it from a secular and atheistic viewpoint. Both will be able to provide a coherent reading of reality which is open to dual interpretation. If this were not the case and the universe was sending an unequivocal message, all scientists would either be believers or non-believers. However, as we all know, there are many believing scientists, including some very prominent ones, and there are also many non-believing scientists, some of whom are also very prominent. The fact that you can look at the world, investigate and analyze it and yet arrive at opposite conclusions regarding faith indicates that nature is not sending a clear and unequivocal message regarding metaphysical questions. In other words, our understanding of nature and its religious implications will often be a function of the lenses of the viewer which means that his personality and its intuition of a religious perspective or its lack of it will determine his view of nature and creation. Therefore, in contrast to Rambam and most medieval thinkers who subscribed to the cosmological proof of God's existence, I think it is fair to say that we do not accept that proof.

Allow me to comment on two recent *Gedolei Yisrael* and their contrasting approaches regarding this issue. If one reads the opening passages of the *Ḥazon Ish's Emunah u-Bitaḥon*, it is like going back in time to the 12th or 13th century and reading an account of how God's existence can be proven by observing the wonders of Creation. It is the cosmological proof par excellence and it is presented as self-evident to any honest observer. However, if it is indeed the case that God's existence is so clear, there is obviously a huge problem, i.e., if it is indeed so clear that nature proclaims God's existence unequivocally, why is the majority of the Western world, or at least a very sizable minority, including many prominent intellectuals, secular? In response to this objection, which he is well aware of, the *Ḥazon Ish* claims that it is only because of the *yetzer ha-ra*—in particular, man's desire to be novel and original so that he will be considered a unique and special being—that is to blame for all the *apikorsut* that is out there.

These claims are because the *Ḥazon Ish* had a very naïve—I say this in a descriptive, not in a judgmental sense—and innocent view of nature and a very different opinion regarding man. He was unfamiliar with science—he never studied science as a discipline nor was he familiar with the history or philosophy of science—so his view of science is understandably very

naive, wondrous, and innocent. Actually, his view is that of a poet, not of a scientist; of a person gazing from afar without analyzing its workings. On the other hand, he knew man intimately and he was extremely familiar with human weakness and arrogance as well as the competitive and jealous nature of human character. Time and time again, his writings exhibit deep insight into human nature, and because of that he is well aware of all the failings and the shortcomings of human nature. Therefore, his view of man is extremely skeptical, and he judges man harshly because he knows precisely with whom he is dealing.

In contrast, if you read the Rav, you will discover the opposite. *U-Vikashtem Me-Sham*[2] is an essay written by someone well versed in the philosophy of science, familiar with the paradigm shifts regarding the relationship between science and metaphysics that occurred over the generations and aware of the epistemological and empirical problems that exist when trying to generate metaphysical proofs from scientific knowledge. The Rav's position, therefore, is that God's existence cannot be deduced from nature. His presence can be experienced through the natural world, but His existence cannot be proven from it. He does state that man's haughtiness and arrogance, on one level, is responsible for the fact that he dismisses God and views nature through secular lenses, but he makes it clear that nature does not send out a believing message. Nature itself is opaque, in the sense that it can be interpreted in a secular manner and, therefore, it too is part of the reason that God's existence cannot be deduced unequivocally from nature.

Thus, you have two thinkers who address the same issue in their works—one who has been exposed to the vicissitudes of faith and science that occurred throughout the 19th century and their implications, and one who is unfamiliar with all the problems and doubts that were raised and so you get from him an innocent perspective which is almost pre-modern.

To return to your question about myself, I do not belong to the *Ḥazon Ish*'s camp. I do not subscribe to the idea that nature can provide unequivocal proof of God's existence. I do believe, however, that you can *feel* God expressed through nature. If a person has faith and he can experience religious emotions, he will feel God expressed through nature. Put differently, I think that as poetry, we feel God in nature all the time. We constantly experience God in nature. We cannot prove it, but once you are a believer, you will often encounter the Divine spirit and its presence suffused in nature in a multitude of places. This is why I find reading religious—and also Romantic—poetry, of great value, since it conveys to us

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2 Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *And From There You Shall Seek,* published for The Toras Horav Foundation (Jersey City: Ktav, 2008).

the sense that nature is animated by spirit, and this is extremely meaningful to my religious experience. I know that it does not prove God but it helps us relate to Him as our God. I should add that the poetry that I am referring to does not necessarily need to be monotheistic poetry; even Romantic poetry that is pantheistic or partially so can be religiously meaningful. Although pantheism as theology is diametrically opposed to the transcendental foundation of our faith, we have in common with it the idea and the experience that there is a spirit that lurks within nature. From my point of view, the "something" that Wordsworth referred to in his phrase "a sense sublime of *something* far more deeply interfused" is the *Kadosh Baruch Hu* (KBH). Interestingly, the Rav (presumably unaware of Wordsworth's poetry) uses an identical phrase when he describes man's relationship to nature in *U-Vikashtem Me-Sham*: "האדם גילה **משהו** המופרש מן העולם אבל אינו יודע מה גילה" (p. 138).

On these issues, I was very powerfully and positively influenced by Buber's volume of essays that was published under the title *Eclipse of God*. In those essays, he discusses the deep relationship that man can forge with God when he encounters God and the meaning of the emotional element that we experience, emphasizing that this is not merely a subjective feeling but is due to the most basic and elemental fact that we are encountering the reality of God's presence. God as a reality is the source of the religious experience and only because of His presence do we experience religious emotions. It is this point that I felt to be so important—a profound thinker whose profound religious outlook was focused on the emotional element of the soul and its relationship to God (and not upon rational arguments or proofs from observations of nature), but who expressed a deep conviction that this experience was rooted in a relationship to an objective real entity and was not a subjective imagination.

Let me add an anecdote. For years, I used to tell people that Buber said that "to seek the source of religious experience in the human soul is like looking for the moon inside the telescope." I.e., just as the reason that you see the moon through the lens is because it is really out there in the sky, so too, the soul experiences the encounter with God because He is really out there. To claim that the experience of the encounter with God is a subjective feeling that exists in the soul, is akin to thinking that the moon is inside the telescope. This is a beautiful and precise metaphor, but after searching online in vain for such a quote, I now realize that this statement which I heard from Professor Shalom Rosenberg, *z"l,* was his own witty and clever summary of Buber's view, and not a direct citation of the German thinker. Not surprisingly, Buber's own words are much more serious and less humorous: "one misses everything when one insists on discovering within earthly thought the power that unveils the mystery.

He who refuses to submit himself to the effective reality of the transcendence as such… contributes to the human responsibility for the eclipse" [of God].[3]

I will allow myself to hand the microphone to Prof. Rosenberg and let him continue his explanation, which I heard in a class of his 40 years ago. In the Enlightenment and the Eighteenth-century Age of Reason, those who were agnostic or opposed to religion considered it to be a sort of opium for the masses[4]—it did not reflect any reality whatsoever and was viewed as nothing but a delusion. Just as opium can manipulate your consciousness and allow you to escape from harsh reality to a fantasy world, so, too, religious emotions were viewed as a form of escape and a delusion.

Later, William James[5] came along and unlike the rationalists of the previous century, he validated the religious experience as an experience, but he granted recognition to it as a psychological, and not as a metaphysical, experience. He was a psychologist whose interest was the human psyche, and he realized that religious emotion is a basic and universal phenomenon, and that unlike external stimulants such as alcohol or opium, it is intrinsic to human nature. However, he considered it a psychological phenomenon. Therefore, when James investigated the varieties of religious experience, he did not think that the existence of these experiences proves anything about God. It just means that this is what *you* feel. Buber's claim, though, was that if God does not exist, it is impossible to have such experiences.

To illustrate this point, I will tell you a story which I have repeated in the Yeshivah many times because I think it vividly expresses this idea. Many years ago, I was in *miluim*, patrolling the border between Israel and Egypt. It was a long and boring shift: from midnight to 6am, we drove back and forth along the same strip of barren desert scenery next to a metal fence. At some point between 2:00 and 3:00 am, we stopped for coffee to stretch our legs and relieve our boredom. There we sat around a small campfire—it would be a great scene for a movie about faith—a group of 6–8 soldiers. One of them—a *ḥiloni* graduate student at the Technion—discovered to his surprise that I am a *rav*, so he said to me, a bit provocatively, "What would you say if someone would go off to the East,

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3 Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), pp. 23–24.

4 The actual metaphor was coined later but he was referring to a mindset that viewed religious worship as false.

5 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature,* has been in continuous print since 1902. A current edition is available from (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004).

join a Buddhist monastery, and would spend his days communing with nature and enjoying the solitude and quiet?" I said, "I would say it is very unfortunate," and he asked me, "Why?" I answered, "Because we believe that God is a Being that man is in contact with, that the religious experience is an emotion directed towards God who is a real entity and not a mindset, and that the relationship between us and Him is a connection with an independent Being Who is ultimate and objective reality."

Now, he could not understand this, so he said to me, "But what is the problem? He is happy, he is calm, he is no longer chasing after money, he is no longer in the rat race for a career, he has found inner peace, etc." So I tried to explain to him again and again the same point about God being a real Being and that the point of religion is not inner calm but a relationship with a transcendental Being, but I was getting nowhere. Then, though, I had some *siyata di-shmaya*, and I said to him, "Tell me, what would you say about someone who hugged a broomstick and experienced the very same romantic and sexual emotions that a person experiences when he hugs a woman?" He was a bit taken aback and after stumbling for words, he answered: "I'd say that is perverted!" I saw my opening and said to him "Why??? It is the same inner feeling, it is the same emotion, what difference does it make if he feels it to a woman or to a broomstick? Either way, he is feeling a very pleasant and positive feeling? Huh?" So he said, "But it's wrong." I continued to insist and asked him again, "Why is it wrong? After all, it is the same inner feeling, etc."

Now that he was stuck, I said, "Let me explain to you what you really think. You think the following: there is a proper, normative way to experience sexual desire and there is a perverted way. Normatively, men are supposed to feel these emotions only towards females and not objects; therefore, if you feel it towards an object rather than a woman, something is wrong. You have deviated from the proper norm and you are experiencing improper and perverted sexual desire. Now, why is this so? Because sexual desire and being sexually aroused are feelings that only exist because there are males and females in the world and there is a male-female dynamic. If both sexes were not created or were not attracted to each other, there would be no such thing as sexual desire. If the world were devoid of females, you could never have such an experience when you hug a broomstick. Sexual or romantic emotions only exist because there are real men and real women who exist. Due to this, we have within us sexual passion, and in abnormal cases, they can be diverted from their true recipient and be directed to the wrong object. Once you have romantic emotions—because there is an opposite sex—you can mistakenly divert and mimic them."

This is exactly what Buber was trying to say. Why do religious emotions exist? Only because God exists. If there were no God, there would not be any religious emotions. Religious emotions exist because there is an objective entity to Whom we can relate. Now, you can deviate from that. You can direct your religious emotions to *avodah zarah* and worship idols, you can focus upon nature and be pantheistic, you can choose many flavors of spirituality—but all of this is only because God exists.

That is why Buber writes about the "eclipse of God." From his point of view, God is always present and accessible to man just as the sun and moon are always in the sky. However, these heavenly bodies can be eclipsed and concealed from our view, even though they continue to exist and are still in the sky. What happens in an eclipse? The object is concealed from us since our view is obstructed. The same applies to our relationship to God in the modern world. God is present, but His presence is obstructed from us by modern theories and lifestyle. These obstruct our view but do not impact upon His presence and relationship to man, who can feel and experience a relationship with God, if he has the proper sensitivity to feel His presence. As I mentioned before, Buber's whole approach struck a really deep chord in my *neshamah* and his deep conviction gave me strength and support.

My father wrote that "The source of faith is faith itself."[6] I think that is in a sense the same idea. He wrote a lot about his *rebbeim* in that article, but that is a really different statement than the idea expressed in the title. Drawing inspiration and support from your teachers is very important, but the idea it expresses is that the source of faith are my mentors. However, the statement that the source of faith is faith itself really means that you have these faith experiences, and what guarantees their validity is the very experience of feeling them, which is what I have been describing and what he discusses at the conclusion of that article.

Now, obviously all of us grow up under certain circumstances. It is impossible to know what might have been if I had grown up in a non-religious family or *l-havdil* in a non-Jewish family. Indeed so. However, there are universal spiritual experiences that are common to people from varied backgrounds and which we were not trained and indoctrinated in from infanthood, since they are not part of our principles of faith. For instance, if you go to the Alps or the Himalayas and see a majestic mountain, you feel a sense of awe and majesty that we identify with and relate to. If I talk about the majesty of the mountain, or the primeval sense of the waves, or the innocence of snow, I think people understand what I

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6 "The Source of Faith Is Faith Itself," *Jewish Action* (1992), 80, reprinted in *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2 (Jersey City: Ktav, 2004), 363–367.

am talking about. The very fact that I am describing the mountain to you as majestic—which is an emotional poetic response and not a physical or geological description—and assume that you know what I am talking about is itself a good example of this universal feeling. The same is true regarding many natural phenomena, e.g., beautiful sunsets, powerful waterfalls, etc. All of these evoke a universal spiritual response which is why we read and enjoy Romantic poetry. Since we have experienced the same experiences and feelings that they describe, we relate to their poetic expression of the awe, majesty, mystery, spirit and other such sentiments that they engender. Independent of our upbringing, we do not experience the world only as physical matter. We intuit that there is a spirit animating all of this.

All these spiritual feelings are not a function of my upbringing. My second grade *rebbe* did not preach to us about this. Nevertheless, these feelings are universal and may very well be innate. This provides confidence that the same is true regarding our religious sensitivity and that the spiritual experiences of *avodat HaShem* are also universal and innate and not a function of conditioning and training.

Imagine that you are alone on a desert island, without any outside influences. Will you feel, at times, that there is spiritual presence that hovers above the surface, overlooking your shoulders and animating the environment, or not? Will you only experience the geological characteristics of the place or will you feel something greater and more spiritual that pervades it?

If I go back to the poets for a moment, from a slightly different angle, let me ask, why do we consider Sophocles to be a great poet, or why do I think that Shakespeare is so enriching and worth reading? Presumably, we should not be interested in their work. After all, they lived hundreds and thousands of years before us, in radically different circumstances than ourselves in almost every possible parameter—economic, technological, sociological, historical, etc. What can they possibly tell us about our lives in the twenty-first century and how can these ancients be relevant to us? The answer is that even though we live in totally different circumstances than they did, they are relevant to us because they address the universal dilemmas and struggles of man. The issues they deal with are the same as ours since the most basic human emotions are constant throughout time. Jealousy, conflicting loyalties, love, old age, parent-child relationships, romantic troubles, faith, etc.—are the basic emotions and themes that engage us as human beings. They remain constant throughout time and confront us as humans, regardless of time and place, since they are not a function of circumstance, but are essential to the human condition. Wher-

ever and whenever there are people, these issues will engage them. Therefore, when Shakespeare writes about love or parent-child relationships, we relate to his work, since he offers profound observations on universal issues that concern all human beings. The fact that they persist throughout the generations proves that they are real and inherent in life and are not a subjective fantasy or a temporary trend.

The same is true of religion. Religious experiences have been part of the human condition from the dawn of mankind to this very day. If these experiences were not real but were simply illusions, they would not have persisted for 5,000 years, they would not transcend local circumstance, and they would not have expressed themselves across all kinds of societies: in the East, in the West, Jewish, non-Jewish, medieval, modern, and so on.

Now, if it all boils down to experience, one can say, "but I do not always experience it," and that is true: sometimes I have felt deep and profound religious experiences, many times not. But I think that if you experience a deep religious experience, even if only occasionally, it validates faith, since as we said above, such an experience can only be derived from real contact with the KBH. Thus, although it is a point in time as an emotion, its significance, both religiously and *hashkafically*, extends throughout life. I should add that I have seen and felt such experiences not only in myself, but in many others as well.

Yet I admit it is not foolproof. You can always come and say, "this is how you were brought up, this is the society or the circumstances that you live in," and so on and so forth. Indeed, it is not black and white; there really is an ambiguity here. As I told you at the outset, everything that you observe can be interpreted and explained through physical causality without the need for the Divine or the supernatural to explain it. Experiences can be judged as being subjective, so there is no absolute proof, but my position and belief is that subjective experiences have an objective correlative, and without this objective correlative, we would not have these experiences. However, I do recognize that a person can debate that and can argue it, so that, at the end of the day, faith is not a thousand percent proven, and you cannot fully demonstrate it.

Regarding this issue of experience and how we can assess what we feel, let me relate this to *davening*, which is the religious experience in which we address the KBH and engage Him directly. Years ago, I came across something that Uri Zohar[7] wrote when he was *chozer be'teshuvah*. It is a

[7] Uri Zohar (1935–2022) was an Israeli actor, comedian, and director who left show business to become an Orthodox rabbi.

pamphlet, called *u-baḥarta ba-ḥayyim*. He tells there the following story, which I found fascinating.

When he began the process of being *ḥozer be-teshuvah*, the most problematic thing for him was to *daven*. He describes how ridiculous he felt, because there he was, talking to a wall. Even though he intellectually and rationally decided that he should begin to believe (he describes the truth of faith in that very same pamphlet as certain as the mathematical truth of 2+2=4), he still felt absurd. This feeling is easy to understand and a very sincere and successful description of the difficulty of experiencing His presence, even when we address Him. I often tell my *talmidim* that I will give a million dollars to anybody who can talk to a wall or to a tree. It is simply impossible. You can address a tree as an actor in a play, because acting is "the willing suspension of disbelief," but it cannot be done in real life. To talk to a wall, you have to really be convinced that it is listening, but that, of course, is impossible. This describes Zohar's difficulty—as long as he did not feel a living presence in the room, he was talking to a wall and struggling. He describes that it was suggested to him to go into a room and lock the door, so that he would not feel exposed or compromised if anybody would walk into the room and think that he is crazy. If I remember correctly, he would indeed lock the door, until he developed the self-confidence not to do so, which really means that he began feeling that God was listening.

What I take from that story is as follows: it illustrates to us that the fact that we can *daven* is because man can experience God's presence and not only be intellectually convinced of His existence. I will explain: when I talk on the telephone, why do I feel totally rational and not ridiculous, even though I am muttering into a piece of plastic? Because I know there is someone listening on the other side. If Rip Van Winkle would wake up and see people talking on the phone, he would think they are crazy, talking and gesturing as they shout at a plastic object. When the first cell phones came out, in the early 1990s, I first saw them in *miluim*, because some fancy lawyers (who nevertheless did *miluim*) showed up with these bulky gadgets. Since the reception at the time in the Negev was not so great, they would stand next to a tree to improve their reception. It was quite a surreal sight, seven or eight people each under a different tree, each seemingly talking to a tree.

Why, though, were they not ridiculous? How can anyone talk on the phone? The obvious answer is because we know that beyond the physical sphere, there is someone listening. Indeed, the moment the line goes dead, you hang up immediately, since you suddenly feel absurd. In order to be able to *daven*, you have to basically have an inner awareness that you are talking to someone. That there is someone listening beyond your space.

You are not talking to the wall, but to God. "*Hinei zeh o'meid aḥar katleinu, mashgiaḥ min haḥalonot, meitzitz min haḥarkim.*"[8] I think the fact that we can *daven* illustrates the inner fact that we have a religious experience and that we feel what Rudolf Otto called[9] a numinous presence that we address and to which we can relate.

Now, of course I realize that someone can come and say "it is all an illusion" and I concede that you cannot completely overcome doubt. However, as I said above, if it is a universal experience—universal both in terms of societies and in terms of time—it apparently is a real experience. The fact of the matter is that people do not talk to trees, but they do talk to God. This means that we do feel a real presence, not an illusory one.

I once spoke to a bunch of high school kids, and I used this analogy. One of them asked me, "When I talk to my mother on the phone, she responds, and therefore I know that there is someone on the other end, but when I *daven*, God does not answer me, so how do I know that He is there listening to me?" I said to him, "First of all, your question is valid and you are right—my analogy is not fully accurate. However, even if not fully accurate, I still believe that it is relevant. Let me tell you that my wife calls her father every Friday to wish him a *gut-Shabbos*, even though he cannot, unfortunately, understand or respond, due to his medical condition. The phone is put to his ear, he does not respond, yet it is very meaningful to her because she has a distinct feeling that she is talking to her father, even though his voice does not respond. I could not give her a dead phone and say, 'Okay, here is your father.' Similarly, we talk to God because we recognize He is there, even if we do not hear his response." I realize that this is not a logically valid analogy, but it captures the feeling that I am trying to convey.

Everything I have been telling you, I think, to a large degree is more or less the Rav's perspective on this. He addresses these issues in *The Lonely Man of Faith* and in *U-Vikashtem Me-Sham*

One further point regarding the issue of belief and accepting God. I tend to think, from what I observe, that the rejection by many kids of their parents' belief is often not rooted in philosophy, but in relationships. Since our contemporary worldview recognizes both belief and non-belief as valid choices and since nature's message is equivocal, it is not always

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8 *Shir ha-Shirim* 2:9 ("Behold, he is standing behind our wall, looking from the windows, peering from the lattices").

9 *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 7 and throughout.

theology that causes people to cease being observant. This obviously depends on cultural trends and movements—there are societies and points in time in which there are cultural shifts, intense involvement in philosophy, ideological movements and "isms" with which people are preoccupied. In such societies, conversions and switches of belief are mainly motivated by philosophy and theology. However, there are many societies in which ideology does not dominate the cultural landscape and people are not motivated by theological doubt when they change their beliefs. My perception of the last fifty years or so is that most people who have gone "off the *derech*," have not done so because of philosophy. It is usually due to one of two reasons: convenience or relationships, and more often than not, the latter. Disappointment and strained relationships cause emotions of anger or rejection—not necessarily consciously—and these cause people to leave the fold. This occurs, first and foremost, in parent-child relationships, but it can also be a result of negative interactions with other elements of Orthodox society. Sadly, it is often *Avinu Shebashamayim* Who pays the price for disappointment and a poor relationship with *avinu sheba-aretz*. If you are angry at your parents and you know that your being *frum* is extremely important to them, this is a perfect way of getting back at them. It is extremely aggressive, yet it is not considered as such by the child, because he thinks it is philosophical doubt and not a breakdown in relationships that motivates him. After all, he is not trying to trample anything; it is just that, what can he do, he is simply following philosophical conviction. The same dynamic is true if it is not motivated by anger but by a desire to leave society and disconnect from it.

Educational experience teaches us that bad relationships often cause people to reject faith, and good relationships often lead people to preserve faith, even if they do have real doubts. This is related to what we discussed above—after all, if you are angry at your parents, you do not reject science: you do not deny gravity or molecules and atoms. The reason is because science is simply taken as a given. It is a fact, a description of reality and not a question of choice. Similarly, in societies in which faith is a given, even if you have horrible relationships, you do not deny belief since faith is axiomatic and cannot be doubted. Therefore, you find other ways to annoy and anger your parents and to fight with society. However, when you live in a society in which religion is viewed as a choice and you are aware that there are non-believers, which means that not believing is a viable alternative, then relationships express themselves in your decision regarding belief and/or observance of *mitzvot*. This does not mean that we can dismiss all non-belief by attributing it to psychology and poor relationships, because this is not the case. Moreover, it does not really matter what a person's motivation is; at the end of the day, he has questions

which are real and legitimate and you have to be able to deal with them and to address them, regardless of how or why he arrived at them. The fact that his motivation may be psychological is irrelevant; you still have to deal with the essence of the claim.

Question: Do you ever have doubts about the veracity of our faith principles? And if so, how do you deal with doubts when you have them?

R. Lichtenstein: I do believe that because faith is rooted in experience and cannot be definitively proven, that, yes, there is a certain amount of doubt that may accompany it and there are indeed moments when you ask yourself "maybe we should be more empirical and just treat nature as something which does not require religious interpretation or explanation," rather than posit an entity beyond the realm of our existence.

What we discussed above about the inconclusiveness of nature allows for belief and prevents empiricism from ruling God out, but on the other hand, it also creates space for doubt, since it does not bring certainty either way. The fact that nature is equivocal allows you to push back against an aggressive secularism and atheism, but it also prevents absolute certainty. Therefore, there is an element of empirical doubt that accompanies faith, since although we feel God's presence, feelings are more subjective. Having to base faith upon feelings and emotions, while the non-believer relies upon an empirical approach that does not observe God in the world, can raise doubts. These doubts exist, because we are schooled in a very empirical mindset; science has done wonders through that. If you lived 800 or 900 years ago, a vast majority of your views regarding everything are based upon faith and belief, and you do not have any scientific explanations, that is one thing, but today we observe most of the things we trust. So therefore, yes, there is always some doubt regarding faith, because its claims are not empirically observed. Now, I understand that science is also based upon establishing paradigms to explain data and that these paradigms are thought constructs that are not observed, yet nevertheless, scientific knowledge is more rooted in observable facts and therefore its paradigms are not empirically the same as principles of faith.

So yes, there is an amount of doubt. I have spoken with people whom I respect and admire who are well aware that you cannot prove faith, but they live with a deep conviction and total certainty, nonetheless, because of their inner basis of faith. I respect and admire them, but I am not at that place. I have my moments of doubt. They pop up at all kinds of unexpected moments, some more opportune, some less opportune. Actually, I am not bothered by them in my daily routines—not during my

daily *avodat HaShem* nor in my educational or intellectual activity. There I feel total conviction—based upon what we discussed above—and act accordingly. I wake up in the morning and go about my routine of living a life of devotion and commitment without constantly being in the throes of doubt. However, there are moments which I would describe as a twilight zone in which you allow *hirhurim* to surface, when you retreat into yourself and do not confront the world and/or a text and your cognition or reason are not the primary faculty; in these moments, doubts can and do present themselves and they need to be addressed. If to adopt Yeats' definition of poetry as an inner dialogue within your own soul, then it is in our moments of poetry, not prose, in which our doubts arise.

To address your question about how to cope when these moments occur, it is hard to articulate a precise answer, because it is more of a personal response rather than a logical one. I do not sit down and build a spreadsheet: these are my problems, these are my answers, these are the advantages and disadvantages of each option, as I do when I tackle a commercial problem. It is more what we call in Hebrew "*al mishkavay ba-leilot*": when you toss around in bed and your mind wanders or those moments in which you daydream and your mind strays from the here and now to other realms. It is not an organized process.

There are different strategies for dealing with doubt. The most obvious is to resolve it. Sometimes you say to yourself "this is the answer to my problem" and you are convinced. On other occasions, though, you do not eliminate the doubt but suggest to yourself a counterproposal so that there are two competing options that can be considered valid and then you need not let the skeptical claim force you to alter your religious position since there are counterarguments that support faith. On yet other times, you simply banish your doubts and do not let them bother you (or at least you try to prevent them from disturbing you).

I would add that an agnostic perspective is no less problematic and that there are many questions that arise from it too, so that the struggle with doubt, when it surfaces, is not an attempt to cling to a traditional position which you feel is rationally unconvincing, even if spiritually comforting; rather it is a dilemma between two positions, each of which has its difficulties. Simply put, doubt just means that you can see the other side as a viable option; it does not mean that the other side is necessarily the correct side. Thus, I can and do believe that religious faith, although not providing a definitive conclusion, gives a preferable answer to these questions and that it is difficult to understand the world from the agnostic perspective as well. I realize that it is not a philosophical proof, but at the end of the day, when you wonder about creation, why does the world exist, how did the world come into being, the lack of empirical Divine

evidence in the world, randomness, whether spontaneous creation is reasonable, and similar questions, or when you are bothered why has God allowed this and that to happen, I feel that when you put it all together, faith and the arguments in favor of belief, although not problem-free, give the more satisfactory answer to these questions.

However, since all the above is not absolutely conclusive, and the strategy of resolving doubt does not always work, there remains at the end of the day a modicum of doubt that surfaces every so often. You see, some things you can dissolve and they are no longer doubts. What you cannot dissolve, you can banish. However, what you banish can return. As I said above, there are those who are able to resolve all their doubts. I live as if my doubts are resolved, but I think that I am more able to banish rather than to dissolve some of them and, therefore, they surface every so often. The doubt emerges, but it remains a *teiku*, so it does not demand to be acted upon, and/or the previous emotions and counterarguments that I described before re-emerge and confront it.

Once, when I was a young *rebbi*, I had a *talmid* who was very much engaged in learning. He learned with passion, skill, and *hasmadah* and he was really doing well. At some point, he began to have theological doubts with which he struggled. We had a very good *rebbi-talmid* relationship—we were close, we spoke often and after quite a few conversations, I felt that his religious situation was one of "honest doubt." (There is a book by a critic named Basil Willey about figures whom he calls "Honest Doubters"[10]—a group of 19th-century intellectuals who sincerely wanted and strived to believe and whose personality was a spiritual one, that had religious feelings, but they struggled with philosophical and theological doubt that bothered them so much that they were suspended in a religious position of "honest and sincere doubt." They either had great trouble or simply could not commit to belief.) One day, a few months later, I asked him, "Where are you holding?" and he said to me, "This whole thing is driving me crazy. I have not arrived at satisfactory answers, so I took all my thoughts and doubts and I put them on a shelf and left them there." Basically, he decided to freeze the whole process and suspend it—the doubts were not resolved nor were they acted upon. They were stored in the freezer and left there for the time being. They could be reconsidered in the future, but they no longer pressured him in the present.

At the time, I thought that this was an extremely superficial move. Now, however, I think that what he did was emotionally profound. Belief is not a mathematical equation, and it does not follow the rules of game

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10 Basil Willey, *More Nineteenth-Century Studies: A Group of Honest Doubters* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956).

theory—what I mean is that there is an existential element to it. Belief and religious commitment are integrated into our personality and part of our identity and, therefore, acceptance or rejection of belief are decisions that profoundly influence our personality, our identity, and our emotional well-being. Therefore, taking these elements into account is legitimate from an existential perspective, even if not from the vantage point of pure logic. It is possible and reasonable to do this because of what we spoke about previously, i.e., that he had doubts and questions, not conclusive negative proofs. This can justify relying upon his feelings as his religious guide and accepting a system of belief, as we discussed earlier, but it can also justify remaining in doubt but deciding to make a personal decision rather than a philosophical one. The latter scenario—he just felt that he needed a "time out," emotionally—was what happened here, and I understand it perfectly now. It was an emotional response from the depths of the personality, and I respect him a lot for that.

Aside from this philosophical perspective, there is a factor of *mesoret* that I obviously take into account, and since you are asking on the personal level, I admit that I probably have a conservative temperament that does not try to do radical or rash things and that recognizes tradition and received knowledge as a value, so I do not see myself making radical change in my life at the moment. I know it sounds very romantic—at the age of 65, you change your mindset, you disappear, you go off into the jungle, and you reinvent yourself—but I know I am not going to do that. Nevertheless, I do feel that there are moments in which I have questions and you have to live with that.

I understand all of the contemporary religious philosophy that talks about the religious necessity of a leap of faith and that if faith were proven—as Rambam, or, *l'havdil*, Descartes or Spinoza claimed—then it would not be faith since we would be just surrendering to facts, whereas we want it to be faith and commitment. I understand this and recognize the profound religiosity within this approach, but as a result, the level of certainty that thinkers of the past had is gone, and I often wish that maybe we could have more certainty, even at the expense of a leap of faith. If you take a leap of faith and jump off a cliff on the assumption that there is a pool of water waiting at the bottom of the cliff because you were told that there is—yes, it is a tremendous and impressive leap of faith, but part of you would definitely be much happier if you had a picture of the pool before you actually jumped off.

I do agree and accept John Henry Newman's approach that it is one thing <u>why</u> you believe, it is something else <u>how</u>. In other words, you can come and say, "I cannot prove, I may have doubts"—but once you decide to buy into faith, it has to be done whole-heartedly with your entire being.

You cannot say, since I have doubt, I will only have passion 50% or 75% of the time, or that I will do only some of the *mitzvot* but not all or I will eat only a "*ḥatzi zayit*." You can decide not to buy into the system, but once you buy into the system, it has to be with passion. *Le-havdil*, it is like a *shiddukh*: sometimes, you are not convinced about the match, you have doubts, you deliberate and you are very ambivalent about whether or not to get engaged or to break it off—but once you decide to make a commitment, you have to hurl yourself in and to take the plunge totally. You cannot hold back and be reserved because you had ambivalence before you decided. You can decide not to marry her, but once you marry her, you have to be fully committed, fully exposed. You cannot offer 60% of the commitment or 60% love just because you were ambivalent to begin with.

Since I have mentioned Newman, there is an additional point worth making. He said, "I do not believe in God because I observe order in nature; it is the reverse: because I believe in God, therefore I observe order in nature." I think that is true about many other phenomena as well. Even regarding our attitude to *Tanakh*: *Rishonim* relied upon *Tanakh* to prove principles of faith, but since certain things that previous generations saw as proofs, we are not convinced by them, we cannot use the *Chumash* as a proof. However, once you commit to believe, *Tanakh* becomes holy and orderly because you view it is *dvar HaShem*. This is the case regarding history: we may not believe in God because of how history plays out, but once I believe in God, I accept that there is a Divine plan in history that we have to try to understand and decipher.

I will add an additional point regarding the role of tradition in establishing belief. I was once asked SOS to help with a crisis of belief of a second grader—she did not ask about belief in God, but she did raise doubts about the veracity of the Torah. Maybe surprising, but she began to doubt it in the second grade. The teacher felt it was a bit too much for her to handle—after all, they do not train second grade teachers how to cope with theological doubt—so she asked me to speak to her class. The student told me that the fact that it was written in the Torah did not convince her because how could she know it was true? So I said to her, "Do you believe the story about George Washington and the cherry tree?" "Of course!" she answered. I asked her why, and she said it was because she heard the story from her mother and teachers, but she couldn't justify it beyond that. So I explained to her: "You believe your mother is a truthful person and that she cares about your welfare and does not want to fool you. She obviously wants to give you accurate information, so she is telling you what she believes to be true and is not lying to you. Now, your mother heard this from her mother who heard it from her mother who

also did not want to lie to her." And so on, and so forth. Essentially, I explained to her the concept of "*ve-hodatam le-vanekha ve-livnei vanekha*"[11] and its role in transmitting principles of faith.

Thus, it is true that tradition has a role in authenticating faith and we need not belittle it. Nevertheless, it is a secondary role—what we call in Halakhah "*mesayei'ah*"—and not the basic principle. Within the human soul and its relationship to God is where you really find the anchor of faith.

Question: Would you say those moments [of doubt] have become more or less frequent or similar throughout your adult life?

R. Lichtenstein: It does not happen every day and I do not track it. I have reached a point where if it happens again, it is already familiar. I will say that there were periods in which I felt it more intensely, but I am not sure that I can talk about an arc of development.

Question: Which areas provide the most doubts?

R. Lichtenstein: The issues I find bothersome can be divided into two general categories. One category is the question of God's existence that we have already discussed.

The other is actually two problems that are related and, in a sense, are two sides of the same coin: 1. the problem of theodicy, and 2. the problem related to History.

Theodicy. The first is the problem of theodicy: *tzaddik ve-ra lo*, *rasha ve-tov lo*. The problem is a real problem that cannot be dismissed.

If you learn *Iyov*, *Ḥavakuk*, *Yirmiyah* and other *sefarim* in *Tanakh* or if you read works of literature that deal with the problem of evil, be it *The Brothers Karamazov*, Tennyson's *In Memoriam* or other books or poems—they all express the human pain and suffering of innocent or righteous people and the sense of despair and disappointment from He Whom they looked up to, in a powerful and troubling way. And you do not have to read literature—we encounter cases like this in our lives as well. So, of course, it bothers us.

Anyone who has any personal religious sensitivity recognizes that *tzaddik ve-ra lo* is troublesome. "*Madu'a derekh resha'im tzalekhah*?"[12]—it bothered Yirmeyahu, it bothers everyone. Therefore, *Tanakh* deals with it

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11 *Devarim* 4:9.

12 *Yirmiyahu* 12:1.

extensively: *Yirmeyahu*, *Yeḥezkel*, *Ḥavakuk*, *Tehillim*, *Kohelet*, *Iyov*, you name it—it is all over *Tanakh*. In fact, to describe it as the major theological problem in *Tanakh* may be a misstatement; it would be more accurate to claim it is the only theological problem with which *Tanakh* deals.

It is not only an intellectual theological issue, it is a question of your personal trust in the Almighty and His relationship to human beings that is called into question. If you see a parent whom you trust, and you think he is the best person in the world, and then you see him or her all of a sudden doing things you think are horrible, you are in big trouble.

Let me share an anecdote. My father met a prominent educator who was in big distress because a very important *rav*, whom he admired and highly respected, and whom he would often present to his students as a paradigm of a *gadol be-Yisrael*, made some statements which were harsh and inappropriate. He described this to my father as an educational dilemma of how to reconcile the shortcomings with the high regard. My father suggested that he should explain to his students that rabbis are human beings, and they can make mistakes. So I said to my father, in theory you are right, but, nevertheless, what would you feel if it were not so-and-so, but it were Rav Shlomo Zalman, whom you respect so deeply? Would that not cause a crisis for you to see that RSZ is morally flawed? (I then added that he presumably chose RSZ in the first place because he was convinced, correctly, that RSZ would never do things that the other *rav* did, and that RSZ's sterling moral personality was part of what attracted my father to him, but that is beside the point of our discussion.)

And if it is not Rav Shlomo Zalman, but rather God Himself who ostensibly appears morally flawed...

You see, one can go and say, I admire so-and-so as a *gadol*, I think his Torah and *ḥiddushim* are wonderful, and his *hashkafah* inspiring, etc.—but okay, he is human; we recognize that *gedolim* have their weaknesses. But whereas to err is human, it is not Divine. And therefore, the *kashye* of what happened, for example, in the Holocaust, is a real, real problem. Do I have a good answer why Dr. David Appelbaum's daughter was murdered on the night before her wedding? I do not have a good answer. Why was he, the paradigm of *tzidkut*, murdered? How can one answer such questions?

As I have gotten older, I find that some of the answers that seemed to me extremely problematic when I was young seem more appealing and reasonable now. So I do think that my perspective has changed somewhat over time. For instance, I recognize that the primary address to blame for Appelbaum's murder are terrorists, not God. God apparently has a policy not to intervene in human affairs in most instances, which is part of the broader topic of *hashgaḥah* and *beḥirah ḥofshit,* but this is no longer an issue

of God condoning evil but of His policy regarding human autonomy. Likewise, I have much more sympathy for Rambam's claim that matter is inherently flawed and that the results of this deficiency, including disease, are programmed into nature and are an inevitable consequence of creation. Nevertheless, despite these reconciliations, the problem remains very disturbing and is a source of religious doubt.

I will also add that I believe that the different stages of our life experience and an older age do not always represent a better perspective, but a different experience. Certain things that are experienced and felt in youth are no less important than those that are experienced later in life; they are simply a reflection of different life stages. Optimally, a person should try to retain his youthful religious sensitivities and integrate them into his mature personality. Therefore, I want to continue to remember and experience how bothered I was by theodicy in my youth, and retain it as part of my spiritual being, even as I become more open to answers that I once rejected and more accustomed to instances of evil in the world.

History. The second problem, which is not unrelated, is history. *Tanakh* is full of the idea that God will give us the best possible material and historical circumstances—the Jewish people will be well off, *Eretz Yisrael* is the most desirable place to live, etc. Now it is true that *Tanakh* has varied messages and these include other ideas such as that *Mitzrayim* is materially a better place than *Eretz Yisrael*, and there are also messages that "*atem ha-me'at me-kol ha-amim*,"[13]—but there are many, many places in *Tanakh* that state the advantages of the Land of Israel and the superiority of *Am Yisrael*. As you know, the Catholic Church triumphantly claimed throughout the Middle Ages that its political and historical success as opposed to the lowly status of the humiliated Jews was proof of its religious narrative. So the question is, at the end of the day, how reasonable are these claims of *Tanakh* about our greatness and bounty, when we are a small, struggling nation while others are so much more powerful? Why is the KBH's chosen nation so small and weak throughout history? Why did God let the Christians persecute us so much for centuries? Now, I understand that *Tanakh* itself sends conflicting messages on this, that the narrative of sin, exile, and future Redemption that is a function of our special relationship with Him is supposed to interpret our historical fate and that *yemot ha-Mashiaḥ* will be different from other times. Nevertheless, the question is the degree to which Jewish history reflects our singularity and our chosenness can be disturbing.

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13 *Devarim* 7:7.

During the time we spent in Cleveland, my wife did research at a lab in the natural sciences (she is a biologist). She worked with a number of Asian-Americans and she came home one day and said to me, "Do you know there are a billion Chinese people?" You see, if you view the world through the spectacles of *Tanakh* and our collective Jewish consciousness, if you live in an insular Jewish enclave, you are unaware of the imbalance between ourselves and the mass of humanity, but if you are exposed to the world at large, this issue surfaces. To go and say that the whole world was created for *Eretz Yisrael* and for the Jewish people, and that everything that happens to the world is only because of *Yisrael*, when there are a billion Chinese people and a billion Indian people—is on some level disconcerting. Although I can give you a *maḥshavah shiur* with many valid explanations and we are not, strictly speaking, logically challenged by this question, nevertheless, you sometimes wonder, do our claims add up?

Whereas the previous issues related to doubt about God's existence, this question is about *beḥirat Yisrael*. Logically speaking, these are totally separate issues. However, since both relate to our principles of faith, any doubt cast on the authority of these *ikarim* regarding one principle undermines the others to a certain degree, since the source of their authority and the grounds of our conviction regarding them are similar. Additionally, the God whose existence we prove or doubt is not an abstract being to us—we relate to Him as the KBH and *HaShem Elokei Yisrael*. When Rambam proves God's existence, he states[14] that the Prime Mover Whose existence he has just proved in the prior five *halakhot*, is specifically *Elokei Yisrael*, citing "*Anochi HaShem Elokekhah*,"[15] etc.; thus, he collapses these beliefs together as being one and the same. Therefore, emotionally and theologically, it is a package deal for us, even if this is not logically the case.

Question: Do you view belief in and of itself as having a moral component? That is, with someone who tries and does not believe, is there any sense in which they are being a little bit "bad," or is it just an unfortunate fact that they do not believe?

R. Lichtenstein: I do not think it is a moral problem; it is a religious problem. Such a person is blind or deaf to God's presence but not morally corrupt. Is it a moral problem when there is someone who cannot love?

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14 *Mishneh Torah, Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:6.

15 *Shemot* 20:2.

Is a person who cannot get married because of emotional inhibitions morally deficient? I do not think that he has a moral problem—he has a romantic problem. This is not an insignificant problem, even if not a moral failure, since a person with a romantic problem misses many opportunities. If you marry, you have a much richer emotional and personal life. Similarly, if you believe, you are connected to the source of your being and you have all kinds of spiritual opportunities that are lacking if you cannot feel what Otto called the "numinous." It is not a moral issue—you are not morally corrupt, you are simply religiously "colorblind." Rabbeinu Baḥya, who based religious commitment on the obligation of gratitude to God, would probably claim that it is a moral problem, but that is because he assumes that God's presence is self-evident and can be proven, and therefore your refusal to recognize your Provider is ingratitude. However, if we accept that God's existence is not self-evident, I do not think that a non-believer suffers from ingratitude; he suffers from lack of belief.

Question: As a related question, if there are two people who are equally righteous, but one believes and one does not, is there greater reward for the first one?

R. Lichtenstein: Rambam treats this question explicitly. He says in *Hilkhot Melachim* chapter 8[16] that if a non-Jew observes the entire Torah for moral but not religious reasons, then he is a *ḥakham* but not a *ḥasid*. He is certainly a moral and ethical person, but his morality lacks a particular dimension. A person who is ethical, whatever the basis of his morality—Aristotelian, Kantian, Utilitarian, etc.—is a very impressive person. However, his morality is rooted in the human condition and is a function of a human perspective. Religious ethics, though, have a dual aspect. One is the human element which is common to non-believers as well. The second element is *ve-halakhta be-drakhav*[17]*—imitatio Dei,* emulating God. That adds an additional dimension to your morality; your morality now is not only about being a perfect human being, it is also a connection and attachment to God.

I will give you a metaphor. Let us say a person follows in the footsteps of his parents—for example, a ten-year-old who does exactly what his parents do. He sees that his parents go to a *simḥah* and they help clean up afterwards, so he does the same. His parents are very moral people, so he is too. Now, his motivation is a dual motivation. One part of it is because

16 8:11.

17 *Devarim* 28:9.

his parents are teaching him proper lessons and correct behavior. He trusts his parents and believes that what they do is the proper and right thing to do and he learns from them. However, he is also doing this because he wants to be similar to his parents. Imitation is a relationship which is expressed by the desire to be like the parent. Four-year-olds dress up in their mother's shoes and coats or wear their father's hats; sports fans wear the jerseys of superstars and *yeshivah baḥurim* follow the mannerisms of their *rosh yeshivah*. Analogously, the inspiration of *ve-halakhta bedrakhav* is part of the ethical motivation of an *oved Hashem*. *"Mah hu ḥanun ve-raḥum af atah heyei ḥanun ve-raḥum*[18]—emulating God and following in His footsteps is part of the man-God relationship and is an additional dimension to religious morality that is lacking in secular ethics.

I would add that in addition to the relationship of *ve-halakhta bidrakhav* that is expressed in *gemilut ḥasadim,* there is also an additional element of obedience and subordination to God's will. Every time a person observes and performs a *mitzvah*, there is not only *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav* but also *ka'asher tzuveiti*. For example, in honoring one's parents, on one level, it is a moral act and you are being a proper human being; on another level, you are following and emulating God and achieving *ve-halakhta bidrakhav*, and on a third level, you are obeying the KBH and following His orders—"*ka'asher tzuveiti."*[19] As Ḥazal state, "*Gadol ha-me-tzuveh ve-oseh mimi sheh-einu metzuveh ve-oseh*".[20] So actually there is a dual religious dimension which is added to the first dimension of human ethics.

Going back to your question, there is more reward for the righteous believer over the righteous non-believer, but it is not because of greater morality, it is because of the relationship with God, which is the religious dimension.

Question: How would you respond to the counterpoint or challenge to that answer, that if there is no moral advantage to the first person, then how is it just or fair that he is getting more reward?

R. Lichtenstein: A person who observes *mitzvot* is rewarded more than a person who does not because of his obedience and loyalty to the KBH. If a person who does not believe in God and does not recognize Him as commanding us to obey *mitzvot* observes them because of their moral or practical benefits, his actions are pointless as a religious observance.

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18 *Shabbat* 133b.

19 *Va-Yikra* 10:18, *Yeḥezkel* 24:18.

20 *Kiddushin* 31a.

Therefore, the believer who fulfills a mitzvah as a religious obligation receives a reward for this which the non-believer does not, but the added reward is not due to a moral gap but to the *avodat HaShem* that his mitzvah expresses.

Regarding punishment, if a person is sincere and has attempted to believe but is an honest doubter, if he did his best, yet he struggles and cannot believe, perhaps you categorize him as an *anus*, or a *tinok shenishba,* who are not punished. However, the issue at hand is whether reward and punishment are the relevant concepts. Rambam in *Hilkhot Teshuvah,*[21] regarding *karet* at least, does not view it as being an issue of reward and punishment; he views it as being connected to the Source of Life vs. being disconnected from the Source of Life. Rambam's view is that someone who violates such prohibitions is not punished, he is extinguished since he becomes disconnected from the Fountain of Life. *Karet* is like taking an electric appliance out of the socket; the fact that it does not work is not a punishment, it is simply the result of the loss of its power source. Reb Chaim's famous statement that a "*nebakh apikores*" is still an *apikores* expresses this approach of Rambam, since his point is that being an *apikores* is not an issue of liability but of spiritual health and you are ill, even if you are not at fault. On the other hand, Ramban[22] disagrees with Rambam and views *karet* as a punishment. Accordingly, regarding his opinion it is reasonable to claim that a non-believer who is "forced" by his opinions and/or upbringing into lack of faith will not be punished because he is an *anus*. He may not be rewarded but he will not be punished.

Question: Why has God chosen not to be obvious in the world? And whereas a common response is that this would stand in the way of free choice, is not that belied by, firstly, examples in *Tanakh* such as the Golden Calf, where God was indeed obvious and yet there was evidently plenty of room for free choice?; and secondly, does that answer not assume that whether to believe in the first place is a moral issue/choice?

R. Lichtenstein: Let me begin by saying that personally, there are many moments in which I really do feel sorry that He has not made Himself more obvious to us. When you read the thinkers of previous generations who really thought that God's presence was self-evident, it is religiously very appealing and there is a lot to be said for it. When you see

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21 Chapter 8.

22 "*Sha'ar Ha-Gemul*" in *Torat Ha-Adam* (Kitvei Ramban vol. 2, pp. 288–293, esp. 291–292).

Him clearly, there is no room for doubt. Therefore, the reality that He is not self-evident is indeed problematic. We do want Him to be apparent and clearly felt, rather than being concealed or obscured. When you get married, your companion is concretely in front of you and lightning strikes—we would want the same here as well. Therefore, there are times when I yearn and long for a simpler existence in which all would be clear. We often romanticize the ideas of free will and commitment that result from God's concealed presence in the world and their religious benefit, but we sometimes lose sight of the price we pay to enable these benefits.

The proper issue, though, is not whether it was simpler and easier in the past or not; the issue is whether it was correct or not. Apparently, the assumption that God's presence is self-evident has to be replaced with an awareness that this is not the case—at least not for us, but probably inherent in nature, unless things will fundamentally change in the future; therefore, going back to an age of innocence is not going to solve anything, because we are no longer innocent.

There is a very interesting passage in *U-Vikashtem Me-Sham*,[23] in which the Rav says that although there is no doubt that man is to blame for *kefirah*—for his arrogance in eliminating God from the picture—reality itself is partially to blame for this as well, since the world delivers to man a mute message which is not just silent but unclear and ambiguous. Since this is the case, and I am in full agreement with this description, we must assume that God willed nature to be such.

In response to your question why is this so, it apparently is rooted in our relationship to God, on one hand, and our role in the world, on the other hand.

The first of these is the idea of commitment. Forming a relationship with the KBH (*l-havdil*, it is true of human relationships as well), whether as an *eved* or as a *dod* and *ra'aya*, requires committing to it from the depths of the soul. A relationship that you commit to is very different from a relationship that was thrust upon you, and the KBH wants us to have to commit.

Now, I agree that you can commit to something that is self-evident, but it is understandable that the commitment and the relationship are enhanced when you choose to commit from your free will, because you feel that you have other options. Therefore, at the end of the day, I do buy into the idea that free will is at the root of this issue. It is important to emphasize that it is not only the need to allow humans free will, but that it enables us to experience *avodat HaShem* as an adult. In other words, free will is not only whether you can choose or not, it also means that once

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[23] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *U-Vikashtem Me-Sham* (Jerusalem: Orot, 1978), p. 139.

you choose, you have taken much more responsibility for, and ownership of, your choice. Thus, it is a more mature and more adult form of a relationship, and the crucial point is that *beḥirah ḥofshit* enhances the relationship and is not just a way of arriving at it.

On another level, regardless of whether God's impact upon the world is so obvious that you can prove His existence or not, the crucial point is not proving Him but experiencing His presence and the relationship that it creates. The Rav writes about this at length in *The Lonely Man of Faith* and in *U-Vikashtem Me-Sham*. In both works, his basic point is that proof is the less important and less relevant plane of discussion—the essential plane of discussion is the relationship.

God empowered man to continue the work of creation. This is Adam I of *The Lonely Man of Faith*, who received the mandate to further and develop creation—*le-ovdah ule-shomrah*.[24] God delegated to man the development of the world and made him master of the Cosmos. This is the reason that He gave man the ability to analyze, interpret, and control the world. In the words of *Sefer Bereishit*, man is told to conquer the world. This is a religious value and a basic concept of Judaism that elevates man's religious stature, but it is not unconnected to the rise of secularism in the modern world. If you ask why God allowed increasing secularization to occur, as we have witnessed in the transition from the Middle Ages and the medieval religious world view to a more modern scientific approach and the secularization of Western society in the 19th century, it is hard to divorce it from the scientific revolution and the Industrial Revolution that transformed society. When the universe is viewed with a scientific outlook, God becomes more concealed. He is not less present, but He is less observed. The Divine wisdom that appointed man to develop the world had to provide him with the ability to understand and analyze the universe and to identify the laws of nature so that he could master it. The autonomy that elevated man to his unique position in creation is not limited to physical control of the world—it includes the ability and the charge to interpret it through theoretical and applied science that are also part of controlling and conquering the world. The greatness of man and his control of nature are an essential religious value, but the accompanying price is that the more the world is scientifically comprehended, the less God is directly observed.

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24 *Bereishit* 2:15.

Question: But could not God do both, namely, empower man scientifically but also maintain an ongoing presence?

R. Lichtenstein: Not necessarily. The need to establish fixed laws of nature, both as an expression of Divine wisdom, as Rambam thought, and as a necessary condition for human control of nature, as we stated above, causes by its very definition an eclipse of God's role in the world. The question of why can God not empower man scientifically yet have a dominating presence in our observation of nature is like the question, can God create a stone that He cannot lift? The answer is that he cannot since it is really a logical contradiction and not a problem of effort—stones (and all other physical objects) have the qualities of mass which includes being able to be lifted. (Most, if not all, Jewish thinkers say that God cannot make two plus two equal five, because it is a logical contradiction, and He too is bound to the rules of logic.) The same applies here. To create a world in which you tell man to conquer and master the universe requires creating fixed laws of nature that can be interpreted and utilized by man, but these by definition make His presence less noticeable. Mandating mastery of nature but denying access to the laws of nature is an inner contradiction as is analyzing and understanding nature without making God's involvement less obvious to people.

This is part of the tension that *The Lonely Man of Faith* deals with. On the one hand, it champions the religious value of empowering man—there is a passage that describes the "atheist cosmonaut" as representing Adam I in all his glory and religious significance—but on the other hand, the glorious power of man gnaws away at Adam II because of the harm it does to the man-God relationship. The Rav talks about this more in the context of the spiritual experience, but the same tension can be applied to belief itself. Adam I may be inclined to believe less because of his scientific and technological perspective, and therefore he is in tension with Adam II whose perspective towards nature is poetic.

To continue discussing the issue of scientific knowledge and its impact upon belief, let us look at a historical example. If you compare and contrast medieval Ashkenaz and medieval Sepharad, I think it is fair to say, broadly speaking, that Ashkenaz was more "*frum*" and more "*chareidi*," in a sense, while Sepharad was more "modern Orthodox," and apparently less *frum*. Although I am not a professional historian and cannot make authoritative statements on the issue, it appears that the level of *shemirat ha-mitzvot* was greater in Ashkenaz. In that regard, there is a lot to be said for the Ashkenazi model of boxing out science and general culture. After all, what really matters, when all is said and done, is obeying God. On the other hand, the scientific perspective, as well as its interaction with the

general culture, stimulated Sepharad to produce works which Ashkenaz could only dream of producing. Look at what medieval Sepharad produced: The *Moreh Nevukhim*, the *Kuzari*, *Ḥovot Ha-Levavot* and so many other works—basically all of Jewish philosophy. What do you have in Ashkenaz? It is meager. The level of sophistication of *Tanakh* interpretation, as well, is far superior in Sepharad to Ashkenaz: Ramban, Radak, Ibn Ezra, etc. Now, on the one hand, you might say, maybe it was not worth it if their level of observance was less. But on the other hand, can I imagine a Judaism without the *Moreh Nevukhim*, the *Kuzari* or the Ramban's commentary on the Torah? Or, for that matter, can one think of our cultural heritage without all the poetry that was written in Spain—Ibn Gevirol, Moshe ben Ezra, Rav Yehudah Ha-Levi and others?

Now, this is partially an educational question regarding the proper curriculum for each community and what will be the best educational approach for maximum observance. Much more needs to be said about this since there are additional factors, but time and space do not permit discussing them here. However, it is also a philosophical question regarding the risk and benefits of trying to reach a more advanced and elevated level of knowledge and human accomplishment which is a religious value, but also contains spiritual risk.

Question: Does *emunah* require more than pure rationality? Is rationality insufficient to have the desired level of *emunah*?

R. Lichtenstein: For the desired level, it is certainly insufficient. I will base my answer on *Kuzari*, who says the following. You can consider God as a fact in the world of nature. Nature and natural phenomenon require explanations and you can posit God as the Prime Mover of the physical world. This is what Aristotle did: he thought of God as the Prime Mover and he discusses this concept as part of his physics—but this is a scientific rather than a religious attitude in R. Yehudah Ha-Levi's opinion (or a partial religious attitude rather than a proper one) since the essence of *avodat HaShem* is our relationship with Him.

The same problem exists if we are only interested in the metaphysics and we arrive at belief through any of the rational proofs. It does not matter whether someone follows Rambam's proof or Descartes's proof or any other. What that person is getting is the knowledge that God exists. What he is not getting is a relationship, and this is exactly what bothers R. Yehudah HaLevi. His problem with Aristotle is not that God is involved in nature, it is that He is treated as knowledge and information, and there

is no relationship. The crucial thing in HaLevi's opinion is having a personal, emotional relationship with the KBH. For that, you have to go beyond reason. Relationships are not rational, they are emotional. So even though your reason might bring you to believe in certain metaphysical truths, it would not create a relationship. This relationship is what Kuzari calls "*ha-inyan ha-Eloki*"[25] and he squarely places it as the crucial element of *avodat HaShem*.

Do I rationally believe that my parents exist? Yes. But, so what? What matters to me is my relationship with them, not their biographical data.

Now, to relate to your second question whether rationality is sufficient to arrive at belief itself. As we discussed earlier, I believe that the world is open to a dual interpretation: you can rationally construct a paradigm in which God exists and you can rationally construct one in which He does not. So I wouldn't say that reason suffices to prove, but what I would say is that if you believe through reason, the crucial question is whether it brings you to have a religious experience and does it create a relationship between you and God.

Reason is a vital component of our being and an important part of our personality. For most people, experience and emotions are also channeled through the prism of reason in addition to their feelings, but it is not the main vehicle of how they experience the world or have relationships. Those are primarily expressed through their emotions. Some people, though, are very rational. Their personality expresses itself through reason. You can go to the Alps and be awed by their beauty and filled with emotion—like the Romantic poets who wrote about the Alps—or you can go to the Alps and view them through the spectacles of a scientist. To take another example, extreme rationalists, when they give a *hesped*—let us say for a parent—they give a *hesped* which is analytical and descriptive; no tears pour forth and the *hesped* sounds cold and detached, seemingly devoid of emotion. However, I would suggest that is not the case. The *hesped* is not devoid of emotion, rather the *maspid* is channeling his or her emotions through reason, because that is how they are wired. When I hear such a *hesped,* I do not say to myself that the person lacked a relationship with his parents; I say to myself that his way to express the relationship is through analysis and description, by positioning the father in a broader societal perspective, analyzing his accomplishments etc. Personally, I do not want to do that; I would much rather cry and be emotional—but I think it is wrong to say that people who express themselves through reason lack feeling. They have feelings which are expressed differently. This can be true of their relationship with God as well, which is why I

[25] 1:48; 1:90.

told you that the challenge is to transform rational proofs from knowledge into a relationship.

Postscript

I was asked to participate in a discussion of personal perspectives regarding faith. Agreeing to do so was not a self-evident decision. Needless to say, I had obvious hesitations and much ambivalence about the propriety and desirability of such personal exposure. Having decided to share personal faith experiences with the readers, I would to like to add a few words upon conclusion of the project, to describe how the experience itself of articulating my thoughts in this format impacted upon the faith experience. *Baruch Hashem*, I must share that I found that the conversations and their written iteration were themselves a religious experience that enhanced my *emunah*.

My thoughts on this subject were obviously not formulated in response to an interview but are the result of an inner dialogue that has been taking place throughout my adult life—as I assume and hope that the readers noticed—and the responses expressed those thoughts. Nevertheless, the need to articulate and present them to others required honing formulations, qualifying ideas, and clarifying concepts. All of this added coherence and depth to ideas and feelings that we often prefer to leave vague and served to bring them into better focus. This was not only a benefit to readers, it was also a deep religious experience for me. Deliberating for minutes or hours over precise formulations does not only improve them, it also focuses your being upon the most important and meaningful human experience which is your connection with the KBH. Simply put, thinking about these issues is an expression of one's relationship with Him and is felt as such.

Paradoxically, this was most pronounced in the passages that dealt with doubt. Expressing and articulating the thoughts that are presented there, which are sentiments whose vagueness is more pronounced in the soul than other thoughts, was an important exercise in self-reflection *per se*, but much more crucial was the accompanying mindset and state of mind which was experienced as an exercise in faith. I felt that the inner dialogue and that the feelings, both positive and doubtful, that were sincerely expressed and were originally meant to be revealed to the interviewer and the readers evolved into a form of connecting with the KBH. As I recorded the questions raised in that section, I realized that they also expressed a yearning to reach out to the KBH and an urge to connect with Him. In a slightly different formulation, it could be said that upon conclusion of the process of editing the most sensitive section, I emerged

from it with the feeling of a child who has shared his dilemmas with his parents—the readers may be observing but the conversation was really in this case with *Avinu She-baShamayim* who was listening to His child's thoughts and murmurings with empathy and understanding. The emotional basis of belief within the soul that the piece opened with was most acutely felt in the process.

In conclusion, I will just add that the above lines, which are my *hirhurim* on the project, may claim a more profound experience than I am worthy of, and the reader is encouraged to somewhat discount the statements, but at some level, they express the experience that I underwent in this process.

גדלו לה' אתי ונרוממה שמו יחדו. (תהלים לד:ד)