

The Challenge of Faith Commitment

by Rabbi J. David Bleich

The thirst for knowledge, the desire for understanding and the yearning for meaning are present in every thinking individual. For people of faith the quest for a deeper appreciation of the fundamentals of their belief system is compelling. For Jews that quest is integral to the *mitzvah* of *talmud Torah*.

During roughly the first half of the twentieth century laxity in religious observance posed the major challenge to the continuity of Jewish tradition in Western society. Economic conditions combined with a desire for social acceptance within the dominant culture to create a milieu in which the Jewish community became increasingly tolerant of relaxed religious norms. Even in observant circles compromise of a greater or lesser degree, oftentimes born of expedience but not infrequently motivated by a sincere desire to preserve the preservable, became prevalent.

Within the Orthodox community, by the grace of God, that has changed. A shifting social climate, ethnic pride, the emergence of cultural diversity as a desideratum, a new economic reality and, above all, higher standards of Jewish education which inevitably dispel inconsistencies and raise standards of commitment, have all coalesced to produce on these shores a generation of observant Jews whose standards of religiosity are superior to those of their

Rabbi Bleich is a *Rosh Yeshiva* and the *Rosh Kollel le-Hora'ah* at Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchonon, the Herbert and Florence Tenzer Professor of Jewish Law and Ethics at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law and *Rav* of Congregation B'nai Jehuda – the Yorkville Synagogue in Manhattan.

parents and, with increasing frequency, of their grandparents as well. *Akhshtar dara*—How the generation has progressed! And for that we must be thankful.

Would that such were the case with regard to ideological commitment, ethical values and social mores as well. In generations past, the Thirteen Principles of Faith were not the subject matter of instruction in the curriculum of either the *heder* or the *yeshiva*. They were transmitted with mother's milk and absorbed through the osmotic fabric of the Jewish family. Observance, at some times and in some places, may have been less than meticulous, but ideological vacillation was far more rare.

The "*Ketzos Yid*" of Jewish folklore, an individual depicted as sitting at a table on *Shabbat* hunched over a rabbinic tome with a cigarette between his fingers, if he ever existed, was a rare bird indeed. But even he recognized that the Thirteen Principles constitute the bedrock of Judaism. For the immigrant generation, even in non-observant sectors of the community, the synagogue one did not attend was the Orthodox synagogue and the only Judaism to be embraced or rejected was the Judaism of unequivocal belief.

With the passage of time, a different form of Judaism began to gain ascendancy—a Judaism based upon practice rather than belief. Orthopraxy became a socio-religious phenomenon. Identification of motivating forces are the domain of the historian; to students of philosophy or of Halakhah they are of scant interest. But it is certainly likely that such an ideological metamorphosis must be attributed either to a desire for intellectual justification of certain antinomian tendencies or as an adaptation and internalization of liberal theological beliefs prevalent in the dominant society. The latter phenomenon represents a limited form of intellectual assimilation. From the vantage point of Jewish tradition, the result, to a greater or lesser degree, is a form of cultural Judaism rather than espousal of a faith commitment. And yes, particularly when observance is intense and consistent, it is quite possible that the undiscerning may be incapable of identifying a peer as a cultural Jew rather than as an ideologically committed Jew.

Cognoscenti, few as they may be, are all too aware that while a generation ago the phenomenon of the non-observant Orthodox was the focus of consternation, in our time, it is the observant non-Orthodox that should be our concern. It may well be the case that, presently, the base level of educational attainment among Orthodox laity in the diaspora is greater than at any identifiable period of Jewish history. In that sense our educational endeavors

have been crowned with unanticipated success. Not so with regard to transmission of Jewish belief. Western society is strongly materialistic and lacking in rigorously defined and firmly held dogmatic beliefs. For reasons best left to analysis on the part of others, but undoubtedly due, at least in part, to interruption of a cultural continuum resulting from a wrenching adjustment to Western society and a Western way of life, currently, the dominant influences brought to bear upon a developing adolescent are not the traditions transmitted through the medium of the home but the intellectual trends and mores of society at large. Our educational institutions, by and large, have not risen to the challenge. Matters of belief and ideology are simply not stressed in our schools. Not surprisingly, products of such an educational system who have grown to intellectual maturity while continuing to identify themselves as Orthodox seek to justify that appellation by challenging norms of Jewish faith accepted throughout the ages as fundamental to Judaism.

The revered R. Abraham I. Kook, of blessed memory, *Iggerot Re'iyah*, I, no. 138, wrote with sensitivity about youth who have been led astray by “the raging current of the times” and eloquently portrayed the intellectual blandishments of our age as an evil maidservant who makes use of “all her enchantments to persuade our children” to accept alien ideologies. As a result, he asserted, “They are absolute victims of duress and heaven forefend that we judge the compelled as we do the self-willed.” Whether such doctrinal error be categorized as heresy or invincible ignorance, the contemporary state of disbelief should not be tacitly accepted. As educators we have been sorely remiss. At the very minimum, it is the manifest duty of rabbinic scholars to define the fundamental dogmas of Judaism, to delineate areas of legitimate disagreement, to acknowledge what may appear to be contradictory texts and to place them in proper perspective.

Hardly less significant are issues that do not reflect matters of dogma, but which should be resolved in light of a system of ethics and values that must inform public policy. Here, too, in an age gone by, Jewish reactions would have been almost Pavlovian. Ethical norms and values were deeply engrained in the Jewish psyche. Not infrequently, the Jewish response was unique and at variance from that of other religious or cultural groups. Such values were transmitted from generation to generation and became virtually intuitive.

That, too, has changed. Religious toleration and social acceptance have had a pernicious effect. It has become a common assumption that humanistic

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values are universal and hence must be integral to the teachings of Judaism. Thus, the Jewish position on virtually any social or political issue is presumed to be no different than that of any intelligent, enlightened and ethical member of society. Many are shocked to discover that this is not always the case. Jewish responses to such issues are predicated upon timeless Jewish teachings not always readily grasped by the uninitiated. Here, too, rabbinic scholars have all too often been remiss in failing to formulate authentic Jewish responses to the problems of the day based upon sacred texts and hallowed traditions.

Indeed, transmission of fundamental beliefs is integral to the *mitzvah* of talmud Torah incumbent upon us. Instruction in basic doctrines of Judaism is coextensive with teaching love of God. “And you shall love the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 6:5) is one of the 613 commandments incumbent upon Jews. Yet, emotions can no more be commanded than can sensory perceptions. A person might be ordered to be present at a certain place at a certain time, but, once there, it makes little sense to demand of him that he see certain images or hear certain sounds. Sensory perceptions are essentially involuntary and hence not subject to command. What can be commanded is that a person engage in the requisite antecedent activities that make such perceptions possible. Thus, ‘And it shall be to you as fringes and you shall see them’ (Numbers 15:39) is more accurately rendered as ‘And it shall be to you as fringes so that you shall see them.’ The commanded act is placement of the fringes in the garment; seeing them is the purpose of the act but is a resultant visual phenomenon that is virtually compelled.

“And you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). How can love be commanded? Either one experiences love for one’s fellow or one does not. If such an emotion is present, the commandment is superfluous; if absent, the commandment is vacuous. Rambam, in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot, mitzvot aseh*, no. 206, readily grasped that it is not human emotion that is the subject of the commandment but it is acts that are associated with the commandment—and indeed causally related to developing the emotions—that are commanded. The essence of the commandment is that a person have “love and compassion for his brother just as he has love and compassion for himself with regard to his fortune and his person . . . [and] all that I desire for myself I shall desire for him.” Love, declares Rambam, is expressed in concrete acts. The commandment “and you shall love the proselyte” (Deuteronomy 10:19) which follows immediately in the *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* as *mitzvot aseh*, no.

207, is understood by Rambam as having exactly the same ambit and hence as constituting nothing other than imposition of an additional duty *visa-vis* the convert encompassing precisely the same norms of conduct.¹

How does one love God? Rambam, *Sefer ha-Mitzvot, mitzvot aseh*, no. 3; *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:2; and *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part 111, chap. 28, defines the *mitzvah* in intellectual, rather than emotional, terms. As stated by Rambam in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot, mitzvot aseh*, no. 3, with regard to the *mitzvah* commanding us to love God:

That is, that we reflect upon and ponder His *mitzvot* and dicta and His works until we apprehend Him and delight in the ultimate degree of pleasure in apprehending Him. This is the mandatory love. In the words of *Sifri*: “For it says, ‘And you shall love the Lord your God’ (Deuteronomy 6:s). I do not know how to love God. Therefore, [Scripture] teaches, ‘And these matters which I command you this day shall be upon your heart’ (Deuteronomy 6:6). From that you will recognize He who spoke and the universe came into being:’ Behold we have explained to you that through reflection you will succeed in apprehension and achieve pleasure, and love will come necessarily.

Significantly, Rambam introduces that exposition by declaring that the *mitzvah* “And you shall love the Lord your God” requires first and foremost “that we reflect upon and ponder His *mitzvot* and dicta:’ The phrase “*she-ne-a-shev ve-nitbonen be-mitzvotav u-ma’amarav*—that we reflect upon and ponder His *mitzvot* and dicta” is crafted with precision. The content of His *mitzvot* and dicta is the corpus of the Torah in its entirety. We must “reflect upon and ponder,” i.e., understand the depths of meaning inherent in the words of Torah. Such understanding is integral to, and indeed synonymous with, knowledge and hence love, of God. In his *Guide*, Part III, chap. 26, Rambam insists that *mitzvot* are the product of divine reason. Accordingly, Torah, as the manifestation of divine reason, emanates directly from the essence of the Deity. It necessarily follows that knowledge of Torah is, *ipso facto*, knowledge of God.

Knowledge of Torah can be knowledge of God only because the Torah in our possession is, in its entirety, the product of divine revelation. In revealing

1. Rambam reiterates this point in *Hilkhot De’ot* 6:3-4. Cf., R. Yitzchak Hutner, *Pabad Yitzbak*, *Pesab*, no. 29, reprinted in *Netzab Yisra’el*, no. 4 (Nisan 5769), pp. 295-297, who endeavors to show the distinctive purpose and intrinsic nature of each of the two commandments.

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the Torah at Mount Sinai God revealed Himself to the extent that He can be apprehended by the human intellect. Were it otherwise, knowledge of Torah could not be equated with love of God. Mastery of any of the myriad facets of Torah constitutes at least partial fulfillment of the *mitzvah*. Thus, Ram bam's insistence that the Torah in its entirety, both the Oral as well as the Written Law, are the revealed word of God and that denial of the authenticity of the *mesorah* originating at Sinai and transmitted by Torah scholars from generation to generation is tantamount to renunciation of God Himself.

Man is not endowed with knowledge upon birth. One can no more be commanded to know than one can be commanded to love. Knowledge is acquired through a long and arduous process of study. An admonition to be proficient in Torah is a commandment to study Torah—an endeavor entirely within the scope of human capacity. To know God is to know His Torah; one masters Torah only by studying Torah. Mastering Torah is the *sine qua non* of loving God. Little wonder, then, that Rambam posits penetrating and intense study of Torah as the very first element in the fulfillment of the commandment “And you shall love the Lord your God.”

A person fulfills the *mitzvah* “and, you shall love the Lord your God” by intellectually recognizing the majesty of the Deity and the grandeur of His creation. Moreover, as elucidated by R. Ovadiah ben David, author of the unidentified commentary published together with that section of the *Mishneh Torah*, love is directly commensurate with knowledge: the greater the intellectual apprehension, the greater the love. *Ahavah* and *yedi'ah*, love and knowledge, become conflated into a single concept. As Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:6, declares:

One loves the Holy One, blessed be He, only through the knowledge with which one knows Him. According to the knowledge is the love, if little, little and if great, great.

Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:3, followed by *Sefer Haredim* 1:5, declares that such intellectual awareness generates an emotional state akin to lovesickness as described by King Solomon, Song of Songs 2:5. As stated earlier, in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* Rambam writes, “Behold we have explained to you that through reflection you will succeed in apprehension and achieve pleasure, and love will come necessarily.” Rambam declares that it is not simply belief in

the existence of God or of His majesty and glory on the basis of faith that constitutes fulfillment of the commandment “And you shall love the Lord your God”; rather, it is the intellectual pleasure that is born of rational apprehension in which lies fulfillment of the *mitzvah*. In his *Guide*, Part 111, chap. 28, Rambam reiterates that acceptance of basic truths concerning the nature of God is inferred from the words “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might:’ It is comprehensive understanding, internalization and its attendant intellectual exhilaration that constitute love of God.

The challenge facing our generation is authentic transmission of the essence of the commandment “And you shall love the Lord your God” to convey the message that Judaism is not only a religion of law and ritual but fundamentally a religion of particular beliefs and that those beliefs dictate uniquely Jewish responses to many contemporary issues.

Our endeavors on behalf of *talmud Torah* must extend to elucidation of principles of faith. In repairing breaches of the *mesorah* we will, please God, assure generations of *ma’aminim bnei ma’aminim*.