

# *To Instill or to Instruct: The Case Against “Emunah Education”*

By: Yosef Chaim Danziger<sup>1</sup>

## **INTRODUCTION**

Rabbi Dovid Sapirman’s book *Emunah: A Refresher Course* serves two distinct roles. It is on the one hand a terrific compilation of some of the clearest rationales for believing in Yiddishkeit, concisely and lucidly presented. This author, like many others, found it an enjoyable and enlightening read.

It is also – indeed, primarily – the culmination and now central tool of his decade long advocacy to revolutionize our chinuch methods. R. Sapirman does not logically demonstrate Yiddishkeit merely as a guide for the perplexed, or as a point of further reading for mature maaminim. He advocates that logical emunah curriculums, either based on this book or the teacher training he makes available through his Ani Maamin Foundation, should be introduced as a standard part of middle and high school education. To this end he trains teachers to teach such courses to their students, and promotes having visiting “emunah professionals” deliver occasional lectures at every school.

For the most part the campaign has been gaining traction. The frum popular media has taken up the cause, and the idea of teaching emunah has been becoming more and more mainstreamed. Enthusiastic askanim have also lent their energies toward spreading the word: Emunah must now be taught.

The activists argue that emunah just isn’t being transmitted properly without these innovations; our students are seriously doubting the truth of the Mesorah. Even those who claim to believe aren’t real maaminim, as they can’t rationally articulate the justification for their faith. Another point is that today’s generation lacks the passion and excitement for Yiddishkeit which the activists feel can only be given over through logical emunah education.

Many disagree. They claim that this all misunderstands the needs of today’s youth, and they have a different understanding of what constitutes “real” belief. As for passion, they feel that that’s best given over through, well, passion.

The detractors maintain that emunah lessons raise more problems than they solve. Furthermore, when emunah is given over in this way it tends to be both shallow and fragile.

The second and third sections of this essay will try to clarify the arguments against the proposed innovations. **Section II** takes a critical look at the claim that our generation’s challenges indicate an emunah crisis, while **Section III** elaborates on the specific dangers raised by emunah education.

In order to responsibly evaluate the debate we must first clearly identify the point of contention. Interestingly, much of the discussion on this topic seems to neglect this fundamental first step. In some cases quotes regarding the highest levels of emunah are cited as evidence in a discussion that is really about effective methods of education. In other cases the merits of teaching various Yiddishkeit related subjects are presented as if they establish the need for teaching logical emunah as well.

**Section I** of this essay is therefore devoted to disambiguation. The goal is to clarify the debate by pointing out what are *not* the objections to Rabbi Sapirman’s approach. We feel that many of the justifications for

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<sup>1</sup> The author teaches 8<sup>th</sup> grade at a Flatbush yeshiva ketana. He can be contacted at [ycdanziger@gmail.com](mailto:ycdanziger@gmail.com)

the approach are thereby shown to be not to the point. Section I further tries to clarify the debate by exploring each side's assumed core definition of what emunah is<sup>2</sup>.

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This essay is primarily about education – what would be the most and least effective ways to train our students in emunah. I would not embarrass myself by offering my own infinitesimal chinuch experience as the source for my observations. The ideas expressed here were formulated by discussing the topic with wise ba'alei seichel and experienced mechanchim. I can only add that all of my dealings with bachurim – either as a Rebbe, as a tutor, or just as a friend – corroborate these conclusions.

**It should be stressed at the outset that the subject of this essay is not R. Sapirman or the Ani Maamin Foundation in particular.** As mentioned, the concept of emunah education has been catching on and there are various lecturers and teacher training courses out there that are not affiliated with the AMF. In some cases their programs are far further off the beaten track than the AMF is. This essay is addressed to them as well. The reason we base much of our discussion on R. Sapirman's books is simply because that is where the arguments in favor of the approach are elaborated on. An analysis of the costs and benefits must therefore include a very close look at what he has to say.

There is no question that the activists have nothing but the best interests of Klal Yisroel in heart. The criticisms here are not chas v'shalom directed at people, only at the ideas in dispute. (If our words are at times somewhat stronger than casual that is only a reflection of the weight of the topic – one does not discuss the future of the mesorah in the same dispassionate tone with which we comment on the weather.) That being said, we feel that a terrible mistake is being perpetrated on our children's generation. It is our fervent hope that we can help to bring the alternative point of view into clearer focus.

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<sup>2</sup> While in the course of writing this essay, the most recent edition of Dialogue Magazine was brought to my attention. In there, Dr. Jonathan Ostroff (a contributor to R. Sapirman's book) weighs in on "the Emunah debate". Essentially his piece is a critique of the book *The Heart of Emunah* by Rabbi Ruven Schmelczer, which advocates an alternative approach to Emunah. It is quite clear from both Dr. Ostroff's introduction and conclusion, as well as from the introduction to the discussion written by HaRav Aharon Feldman Shlita, that the intent is to advocate for R. Sapirman's approach by pointing out the flaws in R. Schmelczer's book.

What is incredible about the piece is that it does not even attempt at a justification of R. Sapirman's approach. It is entirely geared toward exactly one argument: the discussion of if Emunah can and should ever be rationally analyzed. (For what it's worth, we agree that it can be, and under some circumstances should be. We will spell all of this out in Section I.) Dr. Ostroff completely ignores the point that makes R. Sapirman controversial in the first place – that these innovations make for terrible *education*.

After a lengthy article about topics unrelated to chinuch, Dr. Ostroff simply concludes that it is important to introduce logical "substantiation" of emunah principles into our classrooms. He then notes that these are sensitive topics and children differ greatly from one another in their needs and acceptance abilities in this regard. This does not concern him, because he's confident that "a wise teacher" will tailor the presentation to each child accordingly – something obviously impossible with R. Sapirman's advocated curriculums and school assembly style lectures.

Our essay was not written as a defense of *The Heart of Emunah*, nor as a response to Dr. Ostroff. (Although we did add occasional footnotes referencing his article where appropriate.) However, we feel it important to point out that none of his arguments lend any justification for R. Sapirman's approach or defend it from the well-known criticisms that will be outlined here.

## **SECTION I**

### **1. Opposition is to logic based emunah discussions, not to teaching basics of Yiddishkeit.**

In 2009, Rabbi Sapirman published his first kuntres which laid out the case for teaching emunah – “Emunah at Home and in the Classroom” (EHC). What is fascinating about the kuntres is that a good fifty percent of it could have been written by his staunchest opponents. A large part of what he advocates centers not so much around teaching emunah, but around teaching yahadus. Biur tefilla, Sefer Hachinuch, yud gimmel ikrim, sheish zechiros, clarity in various areas of torahdikeh hashkafa – these are all critical toward developing both more knowledgeable and more passionate Yidden. There may be some debate over focus and presentation style, but in general nobody is opposed to having Jewish education place more stress on Yiddishkeit.

What becomes confusing, however, is when the two become a package deal. At some point the narrative somehow became that teaching yahadus goes together with teaching emunah, and opposition to the latter automatically constitutes opposition to the former. So many of the arguments in favor of teaching emunah end up claiming support from the well accepted arguments in favor of teaching yahadus: How can we raise yidden who don't even know the yud gimmel ikrim, we must inculcate a passion for davening by teaching biur tefilla, etc. These are fine points, but specifically for the subject which they discuss. We have to be careful not to conflate the issues; when someone expresses agreement that biur tefilla is important, he has not therefore accepted a full package which includes logic based emunah discussions in a classroom setting. And a Rishon, Acharon, or contemporary Torah giant who stresses the need for teaching Yahdus does not thereby imply support for the other aspects of the ‘teaching emunah’ agenda.

### **2. The debate is about the best way to establish the truth of the Eibershter's existence. It is not about whether it's important to be aware of His presence.**

When we say the word ‘emunah’ in the context of this discussion what we refer to is ‘the knowledge that the world has a Creator and that the Torah is true’. The two schools of thought revolve around what is the best way to arrive at this knowledge and to transmit it to our children.

In other contexts the term emunah is used to describe another ideal. Aside from the raw knowledge that Hashem exists, we strive to gain an appreciation of his presence in our world and our lives.

The Chovas HaLevavos has a section entitled Sha'ar HaBechina, the goal of which is to recognize Hashem all around us by contemplating the natural world. In this way we are constantly “seeing” Hashem; we live with awareness of Him, and appreciate all that He has created for us. Furthermore, recognizing His wisdom of plan and purpose can move us toward grasping His essence in whatever fashion is humanly possible.

R. Sapirman likes to describe what he does as Sha'ar HaBechina. Indeed a section of his book, as well as some of his lectures, are devoted to discussing niflaos haborei. However his point in doing so is not the daily awareness and deeper comprehension of Hashem that is the goal of Sha'ar HaBechina. Rather he is analyzing the natural world in order to once again relitigate whether or not there *is* a G-d. Sha'ar HaBechina starts with Hashem's existence as a given, and encourages us to reflect upon his wisdom and handiwork every time we, say, take a bite of a watermelon. R. Sapirman on the other hand has us simply deciding on the facts of the matter as we chew.

We don't point out this distinction to be petty or to quibble over semantics. It's true that analyzing the natural world certainly *can* demonstrate the existence of a Creator, and it's not unprecedented to loosely refer to such an enterprise as Sha'ar HaBechinah. Still, to argue in favor of the analytical emunah approach by reminding people how much inspiration they get from niflaos haborei is to confuse the matter. Niflaos haborei demonstrations are beautiful and exciting, but why must they be presented as a discussion of

analyzing the evidence of a creator? Can't that just be assumed as a basic fact, and point out some of the amazing thing that he has done? This would accomplish all that Sha'ar HaBechinah is about, and surely listeners will be reinforced in their original belief to boot, even without belaboring the point.

A similar confusion arises when we discuss 'hashgacha pratis'. Many people feel inspired by tracing some unlikely train of events that led to a yeshua or that prevented a calamity. It should be fairly obvious that the emotion does not come from establishing through each story that Hashem must exist. The stories are generally not miraculous or even statistically improbable – many people miss planes that don't crash and many others catch planes that do. The hisoraros presumably comes specifically because the person is already a maamin. With the foreknowledge that the orchestrator of these events is the Eibershter, he can feel gratitude and closeness by recognizing the Eibershter's guiding hand choosing to protect him. Whatever the benefits of focusing on hashgacha pratis may be, it would certainly be incorrect to mention them as support for logical emunah investigation<sup>3</sup>.

### **3. Opposition is not limited to the Emunas Mechkar vs Emunas Pshuta debate.**

There is a generations old dispute amongst ba'alei hashkafa regarding the best approach to recognizing the Ribbono Shel Olam's existence. Some stress the importance of arriving at that knowledge through philosophical or logical investigation, with the goal to prove through the seichel that Hashem must exist. This is generally called emunas mechkar<sup>4</sup>.

The other approach is loosely described as accepting emunah as a heritage from previous generations, without actively probing or questioning. This has always been known, at least colloquially, as emunah pshuta<sup>5</sup>. Many ba'alei hashkafa seem to promote this approach, at the very least for the general public<sup>6</sup>.

The debate is nuanced, and on reading many of the quoted sources it's not always clear exactly what the points of disagreement are, if any. Oftentimes the fact that two Gedolim, in different contexts, stressed different aspects of emunah does not have to indicate a difference of opinion. There truly are several different aspects of emunah that can be stressed,<sup>7</sup> and they vary in their appropriateness for different people at different stages. (That would also explain the fact that some Gedolim have been quoted on both sides of the debate<sup>8</sup>). All in all to quote a source that indicates a preference, without responsibly quantifying if the quote was meant as an ideal for everyone or just for some, or if it was a reference to only a certain type of mechkar, etc. does little to clarify the matter.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Rabbi Sapirman himself does not advocate the use of hashgacha pratis stories in proving Emunah.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the best known sefarim of this genre are Moreh Nevuchim and Sha'ar Hayichud of the Chovas HaLevavos. Sefer Hakuzari provides mechkar which is more logically rather than philosophically oriented. It has therefore presented a somewhat wider appeal than the first two.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Sapirman uses the term emunah pshuta to refer to something else, something along the lines of a "very strong Emunah". These are not technical terms so it is almost meaningless to argue the point, but it's safe to say that at least as far as common usage is concerned 'emunah pshuta' is generally employed in the way we use it here. It is to this usage of the term that our grandparents applied the positive associations generally attached to it.

<sup>6</sup> Sefer Hachinuch (introduction), Chassid Yaavitz (devotes his Sefer Ohr Hachaim to the topic), Maharam Chagiz (quoted at length in Sefer Lev Tov on Chovos Halevavos, introduction to Sha'ar HaYichud), R' Elchanan Wasserman (Kuntres printed in back of Kovetz Ha'aros, Siman 1), Steipler (Chayei Olam introduction and Perek 28, Kraina D'Igrasa, letters 44, 45, & 46), Bnei Yissaschar (quoted in Lev Tov, ibid.).

<sup>7</sup>Of course, full-fledged philosophy has always encountered strong opposition, but not all mechkar is philosophy and not all opposition to mechkar is limited to opposition to philosophy.

<sup>8</sup> Such as the Ba'al Shem Tov, as observed by Dr. Ostroff early in his piece.

<sup>9</sup> A full analysis of the sugya is beyond the scope of this essay and the abilities of its author. We therefore limit our use of primary source material to illustration and clarification purposes, not to argue for one side over the other.

Much of the contemporary discussion has centered around citing sources that seem to promote one way or the other. However, when all is said and done neither side of the teaching emunah debate limits their position to either side of the mechkar/pshuta debate.

Rabbi Sapirman maintains that his approach is not mechkar, but is rather “substantiating emunah in a way that appeals to the seichel” (EHC pg. 67). For arguments sake, in this essay we accept this distinction<sup>10</sup>.

Equally important is that the opposition to R. Sapirman’s approach is not necessarily dependent on opposition to mechkar. Theoretically, even should the opponents accept an assumption that emunah has to be logically proven, they would still strongly oppose the ‘teaching emunah’ system. That is because the primary opposition is to logic based emunah discussions that are a) direct (as opposed to spontaneous passing references), b) in a public setting, c) for young people, d) *especially* if it’s in dialectic or question/answer format. It is a pedagogical opposition much more than it is an ideological one. Even if the highest levels of emunah can only be reached through mechkar, the prudent thing would be to give over emunah to students in a way that they can accept it. The ultimate avodas ha’emunah can be left for adulthood, for those individuals who are holding by it.

As it happens, however, implicit in the debate lies a subtle difference in defining emunah. This has been the source of much confusion, and we will therefore discuss it shortly.

#### **4. Opposition is not based on an assumption that emunah is illogical.**

R. Sapirman’s advocacy rests heavily on his understanding that real emunah depends on logical substantiation of the truth. To him it is obvious that emunah without rational proof represents a “magical leap of faith<sup>11</sup>”; it is not true belief but is rather just an exercise in “going through the motions<sup>12</sup>”. Indeed, put in these terms the need for logic based emunah investigation seems compelling.

Of course, as we’ve mentioned, even this need not translate into classroom discussions. Nevertheless, many nuances in the issue hinge on the differences in original assumptions. It is therefore imperative that we try to clarify the various opinions as to what the optimal emunah is.

There are two basic approaches to knowledge of the Ribbono Shel Olam. The first assumes that ‘knowledge’ by definition means through reason, by means of rational proof. In this approach, the received tradition is only a starting point. Until the maamin can rationally articulate why he accepts Yiddishkeit over all the alternatives, he cannot be said to truly ‘believe’. We will refer to this approach as ‘intellectual based emunah’.

The second approach maintains that knowledge doesn’t always come through logical proof. Sometimes you can gain knowledge through an experience that you can’t necessarily articulate rationally. Emunah is accepted through such an experience.

At first glance, this second approach seems either strange or contrived. After all, how can you believe something if you can’t even explain how you know it to be true?

In reality, however, there is nothing unusual about emunah in this regard. A large percentage of your knowledge is comprised of facts that you can’t prove logically, but rather is information that you’ve gained through the use of some other sense.

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<sup>10</sup> Theoretically such a distinction is probably valid, though it is not at all clear what his parameters are. We’d prefer that he’d actually quote some of the anti-mechkar sources and demonstrate how their opposition does not apply to his advocated reforms.

<sup>11</sup> RC pg. 31

<sup>12</sup> EHC pg. 26.

Say, for example, you run your hand along a tabletop and it feels smooth. You are now aware that the tabletop is smooth, yet you would not be able to prove that information logically. This is because you did not arrive at the information through logic but rather through a different sense – the sense of touch. In fact, if someone who is unfamiliar with the sense of touch asks you to explain what makes you so sure that it's smooth, you would be stymied. The best you could do is just tell him that you have some sort of sense that tells you this information.

This then is the second approach to understanding emunah. It is not something we necessarily arrive at logically, but rather through another sense – a sense structured to recognize the existence of the Borei Olam and the truth of His Torah. We will refer to this approach as 'experiential emunah'. One who experiences Hashem in this way may not be able to rationally articulate his feelings, but that is no more of a question on his faith than the question of how to explain the sense of touch.

We can identify this "emunah sense" in one of at least two possible ways:

A) It can be intuitive – the eye sees a creation and instinctively recognizes that it has a creator; the mind grasps the inherent reasonability and necessity of the presented mesorah, and we therefore accept it as truth. In this respect it is similar to logic, except that we don't go through the calculations consciously. The truth is just instinctively digested by the maamin; although he may not be able to articulate the rationale behind his confidence, he fully knows this to be correct<sup>13</sup>.

B) Or it can be an esoteric sense. A person has within him a neshama which is a chelek Elokai m'maal. Perhaps that neshama connects back to its Source and allows the person to tangibly recognize – to sense – the reality of Hashem v'Toraso<sup>14</sup>.

The knee jerk reaction to this approach is that it seems self-referential. How are we to know that what the maamin is experiencing is "real" emunah, not some false emotion?

Perhaps the only answer can be that when he feels it he knows it. When one is dreaming, he can sometimes not realize he's dreaming and confuse his experience for reality. Yet when he's awake he

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<sup>13</sup> It is likely something along these lines that R' Elchanan Wasserman has in mind when he justifies the expectation of emunah (see above, fn. 6). R' Elchanan asks how we can expect every Jew to be a maamin when some of the world's greatest geniuses did not believe in Hashem. His answer is that emunah is obvious; the default position of the human mind is to grasp that a world must have a creator. It is only the distorted biased agendas of the 'geniuses' that manages to twist them away from this recognition.

The avodas haemunah, in his view, is not to poke under rocks and behind shrubs for 'proof' of the Eibershter. The Eibershter is staring us right in the face. The avodah is to remove the corrupting influences that cloud our thinking and help us to ignore this most obvious truth.

<sup>14</sup> This is almost certainly the understanding of the Steipler. In several places (see above, fn. 6), the Steipler describes tried and true methods of dealing with bachurim who are troubled by emunah related doubts. He advises them to engage in certain spiritual pursuits such as strengthening shmiras Shabbos and the like. He stresses that the Bachurim never report finding answers for their questions, but the doubts stop troubling them nonetheless. At first glance the Steipler seems discomfiting, almost self-serving. What accomplishment is it that their doubts disappear, if they do not discover any good answers for their questions? Is this what emunah is all about? Distraction and brainwashing?

With the understanding that emunah is an esoteric connection, however, the Steipler's tactic make perfect sense. With an increased boost in spirituality these youngsters were able to reconnect to their sense of recognition of Hashem. And then the questions became irrelevant because they were experiencing emunah directly, not intellectually analyzing whether or not Hashem exists.

somehow is certain that this truly is reality. He is not troubled by the challenge of how to prove that this is not just another instance of a dream confused with reality<sup>15</sup>.

At any rate, we have two broad paradigms for defining and attaining emunah: intellectual and experiential. Are these two approaches compatible? Well, it depends.

R. Sapirman does not accept the validity of experiential emunah alone. In his view, “someone who believes without any logical reason to do so does not have emunah pshuta at all, but rather a blind senseless faith” (RC pg. 34). Elsewhere he describes one who cannot articulate the rationale for believing in Yiddishkeit as someone who neither believes or disbelieves. He has accepted the frum package from his parents and teachers and that is that (see EHC pg. 26). To him, articulable logical reasoning is the only thing that can be considered real emunah. This assumption of course plays a large role in his advocacy for training our children in intellectual based emunah<sup>16</sup>.

But what of the other approach? Do proponents of experiential emunah believe that emunah must be illogical? The short answer is of course not, for the simple reason that emunah is indeed logical. Belief in Hashem is rationally compelling for most of the reasons that Rabbi Sapirman says it is, and more.

Why then the opposition to teaching emunah in this fashion? For one thing, there are many dangers in doing so, especially for young people who are not yet clear in their belief. We will attempt to outline these issues in Section III. Perhaps more important is that logic will never – *can* never – bring one to as real an experience of Hashem as does actually getting to know of Him through the “emunah sense”.

When you feel the table and it is smooth, you now have a firsthand experience of its smoothness. Perhaps you can arrive at the information another way as well. No doubt we could put together compelling rational arguments that the table must be smooth. After all, what would the motive be for someone to make a rough table? And if this manufacturer has indeed been producing rough tables, wouldn't we have heard about it from Consumer Reports? And so on and so forth.

These may be terrific proofs. They may truly convince us that the table must be smooth. But it is still not an experience of the table's smoothness.

How (or even if) one accurately ascertains tabletop texture is perhaps an enterprise of little consequence. Not so emunah b'Hashem Yisborach. Emunah has at its root a goal to come to know Hashem; to experience an awareness of His reality. How terrible it would be to trade that in for a secondhand knowledge based on abstract calculations.

And a tradeoff it certainly is, at least for children being trained in Yahadus. When the concepts of Emunah are taught as being based on logical proofs, in the eyes of the student that becomes their source and primary justification.

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<sup>15</sup> Bear in mind that every sense is at the end of the day self-referential. The question is not more difficult regarding emunah than regarding the senses of sight, taste, or touch. You know your experiences are real when you have them, and when they feel similar to the way others describe the same experience. Indeed, even the instinctive sense of logic – the feeling that something proven rationally must be true – is also a sense like all the others, and is equally self-referential.

<sup>16</sup> At times he hedges himself, saying things like, “50 years ago, when a bachur believed in Hashem because his father told him, he was totally confident that they had transmitted the truth to him” (see RC pg. 35). B'mechillas kvodo, this is meaningless. If belief without logical reasoning is a ‘magical leap of faith’ today, then it was a magical leap of faith fifty years ago as well. That more people were willing to make the leap does not elevate the concept. And if back then there existed a ‘real’ emunah that did not rely on logical substantiation, then it still exists today; the yeshiva bachur's inability to convince a non-believer with rational proofs does not indicate a shallowness in his own faith (see EHC pgs. 26 & 36-37).

## 5. Objection is to the educational innovations, not to the idea of so inclined individuals studying further.

At risk of repeating ourselves – the objections are to the innovative idea of introducing a logic based emunah curriculum as a way of teaching Emunah in a classroom setting. There is much less objection to intellectually searching youths or adults reading further, or being referred to the many seforim and books that assist in this research. This genre is nothing new; seforim like this have been available for a very long time. Many individuals who need them and are holding by it have found them to be very helpful.

What the activists *innovate*, on the other hand, is the introduction of this style into the mainstream curriculum as a means of *teaching* Emunah. This is indeed extremely objectionable, for the reasons we will be outlining in this essay.

It would be useful to keep this in mind when reading some of the truly astonishing claims that these methods have been the mode of emunah transmission for generations. The claims tend to validate themselves by observing the existence of such Seforim as Moreh Nevuchim and Kuzari. While certainly many through the doros have gained great insight and inspiration from these seforim, for a number of centuries at least this has always been strictly the province of individuals. Never have these seforim been used as general education texts for transmitting emunah to youngsters, and it is quite likely that was not even their original intent.

It should further go without saying that there is little objection to using these methods as intervention in individual instances of youths struggling with serious emunah doubts. But the corollary should be equally obvious: citing such instances where the approach has proven useful does not serve as justification for the proposed educational reforms<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> This fairly basic distinction should clear up the “contradiction” in the approach of Rav Mattisyahu Solomon that so troubles Dr. Ostroff (pg. 124). The Mashgiach is quoted as having expressed a negative view of using logic based Emunah discussions in chinuch; on the other hand he also wrote an approbation to a book of the same, stating that he had used the arguments therein to help a perturbed teenager. Of course, there is nothing inconsistent: education has one set of standards, individual advanced study another, and intervention still another. (Dr. Ostroff’s third-hand quote of the Mashgiach’s own response to this question is quite vague, but as quoted it supports our understanding of his position. At any rate, *kushya meikara lessa*.)

## **SECTION II**

There may be many reasonable objections to teaching Emunah in the classroom<sup>18</sup>, but for our present purposes<sup>19</sup> all we need is the most basic one: As an educational method, giving over foundational basics in the form of dialectic debate leaves a lot to be desired. A two-sided presentation, even as we convince the student of the correct side through logical arguments, takes away the axiomatic quality from the concept in question. This introduces a lack of clarity, and makes it more difficult to build further ideas on the foundation.

Which is why it is almost never done. When we need our students to accept an axiom, we just tell it to them as a matter of fact. We don't present Pythagorean's theorem to our high-schoolers as an open question and then win them over with dazzling proofs to its veracity. We simply inform them that  $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$  and that's that. They can then use the idea in its countless applications, without being overly troubled by the question of how teacher knew this was true.

Nor do we train our children in proper interpersonal relations through a philosophical discussion of might makes right vs the pragmatic and moralistic benefits of peaceful coexistence. We just instruct them that fighting is wrong, and then reinforce the point through stories, songs, and personal example.

So too with most of the fundamental ideas and ideals that form the basis of education. The arguments and proofs are often beyond the students' complexity horizon, and presenting it as a subject of debate introduces an element of uncertainty which negates the students' acceptance of the idea as a basic fact of life. Emunah, which must be the most axiomatic of all axioms, certainly should not – at least ideally – be any different.

This is all true even assuming all actually ends well – that the student, on considering the logic, accepts the idea. The obvious further complication is the fact that the presenter may not indeed fully convince his charges through the power of his arguments. In that case he has unjustifiably harmed those who would have originally accepted the idea, by introducing doubts and not fully resolving them. But even those whom he had come to help leave worse off than they came. A niggling doubt can perhaps resolve itself over time, especially in one who is surrounded by a culture of Torah, mitzvos, and Shmiras Shabbos. When addressed unsuccessfully, however, it can challila be strongly reinforced. Finding himself unconvinced by even the authoritative arguments of the professionals, the confused soul can feel validated in his rejections, and begin a slide toward a point of no return, Hashem yishmoreinu<sup>20</sup>.

R. Sapirman is clear that he feels his logical presentation will prove compelling. Indeed, his book is well formulated, powerful, and convincing. Even so, to assume that it will be completely effective for everyone, or even a large majority of readers, strikes as unreasonably optimistic. People, and especially children and teenagers, are not exclusively rationalistic. Many different perspective, background, and emotion based variables affect whether or not a particular argument will take hold by any given person. It is unrealistic to expect that because his points are logically airtight they will therefore sway all or even most readers. And for the unswayed, the net result of the enterprise can be irreversible damage, Rachmana litzlan.

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<sup>18</sup> What we mean by 'teaching Emunah' is something very specific, and has been clearly defined earlier. If you did not read Section I carefully, please go back and do so. Much of our discussion will be unintelligible or misunderstood without it.

<sup>19</sup> In Section III we will attempt to outline some of the other objections.

<sup>20</sup> To be sure, we are not arguing against intervention in individual cases of extreme necessity. When someone is going through a real and serious crisis of faith, the cost of inaction can be higher than the risks of action; he certainly should have his issues addressed. We are talking here about the risks involved in teaching Emunah in this way to all students, which includes those going through a stage of passing uncertainty.

In the face of these objections, R. Sapirman and the other activists remain firm that teaching Emunah is a necessary and prudent innovation to our chinuch system. The rationale divides into two broad points: Firstly, that this generation presents unique challenges. Our youth have real questions and the current system is not working – students are emerging unconvinced of the truth of Yiddishkeit. And secondly, they maintain that his program is beneficial for *everyone*, even those without any doubts.

This latter contention is on the face of it counterintuitive, as we've discussed. It therefore needs to be evaluated carefully, which we will attempt to do later in this section. But the more immediately crucial point is the first, because if true it would put to rest any comparison to other aspects of education. After all, few students leave high school thinking that  $a^2 + b^2 = \text{cheesecake}$ .

We must therefore examine the facts responsibly, and determine if there is indeed evidence of a large percentage of our students being failed by the present system. Of course, the percentage would have to be quite significant; if comparatively few are plagued by these Emunah questions those would have to be dealt with individually, not by a drastic overhaul of the approach for everybody. (Anyone holding out for a system with an across the board 100% success rate will be waiting for a very long time.)<sup>21</sup>

On an initial look over, it certainly does not appear that this generation's challenges center around the analytical probing that Rabbi Sapirman's book comes to address. In fact, when compared to previous generations, ours would seem to be the *least* thoughtful and logic based on record. One need only compare newspaper editorials (they used to span pages of multistep progressions of thought; today they are kept under 750 words in newspapers dominated by visuals), political discourse (Lincoln and Douglas each spoke for one and half hours by each of their seven debates; today's politicians get ninety seconds at a time to deliver some canned bit of tripe), or radio news reports (currently down to an average of *10 seconds* (!) per story because listeners subsequently lose interest) to be disabused of the notion that serious analytical investigation into life and the world is on the rise. It is not at all clear from where the idea would arise that this generation – more than any other – is suffering from an overabundance of thoughtful introspection.

So it's not that there's some new intellectual drive for a deeper understanding. What is it then that indicates this particular generation is unable to receive the mesorah the old fashioned way?

R. Sapirman's concern is that many of today's youth are 'cynical and skeptical', so they won't accept what their parents and Rabbeim tell them.

He is perhaps entirely correct in his facts; there does seem to be a somewhat jaded attitude in an unfortunate number of young people. His conclusion of what follows from the facts, however, is astounding: One would think this would present the strongest argument *against* his approach, not for it. The absolute worst way of dealing with a cynical and skeptical person is to try to bring him around through rational, logical proofs. There is no rational argument in the world that will win over someone who chooses not to think rationally, nor is there a logical proof that can stand up to a well-placed shrug or "Yeah, yeah. Whatever."

For a cynical, skeptical child what good are R. Sapirman's carefully constructed arguments and airtight demonstrations? There are methods of dealing with these children's issues – mostly from a roundabout,

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<sup>21</sup> A word of caution in assessing the scope of the problem: Relying on media highlightings of anecdotes provides a very poor measure of the state of affairs amongst the general public. While these exposes may be useful in bringing to light a need for intervention on the fringe, sensationalist news stories do not represent the norm. If anything at all, the fact that these stories are newsworthy is a counter indicator of their prevalence – for all its banality it remains true that dog bites man is not news; man bites dog is.

emotion based direction. None are guaranteed to succeed, but few are as guaranteed to fail as a direct frontal confrontation based on evidence and reason.

Let us leave the cynical, skeptical ones for now. Is there evidence of a heightened prevalence of sincere inquiring youth, raised frum, yet find themselves unsure about the basics of Yiddishkeit?

Some have pointed to the tragic calamities of kids “at risk”, or Rachmana litzlan worse, as indicative of an Emunah crisis<sup>22</sup>. Some of these troubled teens are quoted as describing their situation to be a result of Emunah questions that were not satisfactorily answered, and a movement is born.

With all due empathy toward the terrible suffering endured by these poor tormented souls, is there a serious person out there who truly believes that we get an accurate assessment of the causes of their plight simply by asking them for one? Understandably, we all like to feel noble and high minded in our unfortunate life choices, but it would be the height of irresponsibility for us to use these post hoc justifications as a basis for drastic policy changes<sup>23</sup>.

When we actually take the time to look at these troubled youths, nothing about them gives any appearance of deep thinkers that on principle left the fold of a religion whose tenets they couldn't rationally justify. We see children in pain, sometimes caught in a death spiral of temptations spun out of control, other times unable to cope with scholastic pressures, still others for whatever reason socially uncomfortable. We see no indication of a crisis of faith, nor any reason to think that a curriculum of logic based Emunah proofs would have in any way addressed their problems<sup>24</sup>.

Not so, insist the pundits. They maintain that there is an ongoing issue of “innocent children with innocent questions” being stigmatized, punished, or even expelled, simply for sincerely requesting clarification in matters of faith. Rabbi Sapirman himself often underscores this point with a tale of a girl sent home from school for asking a question that, as her father pointed out, is actually discussed by the Ramban. In today's climate, he concludes, the Ramban himself would have been expelled from Yeshiva!

Such anecdotes may be good tools for inciting passion or righteous indignation, but they simply don't pass the smell test as accurate portrayals of the chinuch system. Is anyone truly aware of an instance where a

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<sup>22</sup> This approach, perhaps due to its emotional appeal, is a favorite amongst frum newspaper and magazine commentators.

<sup>23</sup> Much to his credit, Rabbi Sapirman himself does not harp on this particular line of reasoning. He doesn't claim that lack of Emunah is the cause of the problem, but rather he stresses that reinforced belief in Hashem's rewards and punishments would have prevented them from going off.

It is here that the nuanced conflation of concepts becomes significant, because even a subtle difference in defining the problem can have drastic ramifications in addressing it. *Knowledge* of reward and punishment rarely prevents anyone from falling for temptation. A most basic fact of human nature is that we consistently trade future happiness for immediate pleasure. When the dieter reaches for the second helping it's not because he denies the realities of heart disease and diabetes, or the fact that he's going to regret this in ten minutes. It's because he is lacking in self-control, is temporarily closing his mind to the consequences, and is convincing himself it's just one last cookie, the diet starts tomorrow, etc.

What Rabbi Sapirman presumably refers to is something more along the lines of Mussar, dveikus, hisorarus, or Chassidus, which help a person live with constant recognition of Hashem in their lives, and thus refrain from sin. These are indeed effective methods (though none are in and of themselves foolproof – such is the human condition), but are not related to – and do not provide justification for – Rabbi Sapirman's innovations.

<sup>24</sup> One of the most active mentors of kids at risk has been quoted as saying that in thirty years he's met perhaps five teenagers who were genuinely bothered by intellectual issues. When one comes in citing Aristotle and Kant, a few minutes of probing almost always reveals a much deeper problem. Virtually every child who goes off the derech has an emotional pain prompting them to do so.

child approached a Rebbe and sincerely asked for a fundamental of Yiddishkeit be explained to him, or requested guidance through a period of doubt, and was thrown out of school for his efforts? If you do know of such a case, I strongly urge you to publicize the name of the Yeshiva and Rebbe so we can all stay away from them in the future. However, these stories are almost certainly apocryphal, or – if they ever do occur – are extreme outliers that would not warrant upending the chinuch system for the general public<sup>25</sup>.

Much more likely, especially based on experience with both children and rumors, is that in the vast majority of these case examples a good deal of context, background, and details are missing from the retelling. When a particularly confrontational child insists on loudly belittling yesodei haTorah v'Yahadus, or derisively voicing his skepticism regarding ikrei hadus, then he may well be reprimanded and/or eventually asked to pasture elsewhere. On retelling, this story becomes indistinguishable from “I was thrown out of Yeshiva because I asked Emunah questions.” Perhaps so, but outspoken provocative letzanus is very different from ‘an innocent question from an innocent child’, is unsustainably hazardous to impressionable peers, and – most relevantly – is not responsive to rational logical proofs that Torah is min Hashamayim<sup>26</sup>.

By all means, encourage mechanchim to be vigilant and respond properly in all situations. But we must be unflinchingly honest in recognizing each case for what it is. To treat a broken arm by prescribing antibiotics is malpractice. It is likewise unhelpful and potentially harmful to misdiagnose the source or intent of an adolescent’s questions, and thereby treat them as something they are not.

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Ultimately, the evidence that R. Sapirman offers to the existence of the epidemic is his own considerable experience – he has personally met many youngsters with intellectual emunah struggles<sup>27</sup>. He therefore concludes that this is a society-wide problem, affecting not just a large number, but a critical percentage of our youth.

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<sup>25</sup> Obviously, even if it were a trend that wouldn’t call for the introduction of emunah training for children, but rather sensitivity training for mechanchim.

<sup>26</sup> One publication unwittingly drove this point home by repeating in scandalized tones a story of a boy who was censored for “wondering aloud during a halacha class why Mishna Berurah is important”. This is cited as “just one of many heartbreaking accounts of children who have been labeled, castigated, or even expelled... just for asking honest questions about basic tenets of Jewish thought”.

The journalist no doubt means well, but clearly spends little time with children, nor has he ever followed a train of broken telephone from the classroom, through the student to his parents, and from there to Mom’s bungalow colony friends. Anyone who has can instantly recognize that the anecdote as repeated – in the absolute best case scenario – translates as a disinterested child blurting from the back of the room “Who needs this stupid stuff anyways?”. It takes a shocking naiveté to suggest that the appropriate response to this child’s issues would be a reasoned discussion on the nature of the Halachic process and the Mishna Berurah’s placement therein.

These scintillating allegations may help sell magazines, but as social commentary they are shallow, as advocacy for educational reform they are irresponsible, and – let it be said – as a portrayal of our mechanchim they are slanderous.

<sup>27</sup> At risk of repeating ourselves, we must stress again that it is only genuine intellectual curiosity that is relevant to the present discussion – because that is the only kind of issue that Rabbi Sapirman’s approach will solve. When the ‘questions’ are not questions at all, but rather excuses or expressions of frustration, that cannot be dealt with by pointing out that if the Torah was written by men they wouldn’t have known that only three cud chewers don’t have split hooves, or so forth.

There are ways of dealing with these types of issues, and there are professionals who do so. But their existence does not provide support for the need to add Rabbi Sapirman’s curriculum ideas to our classrooms.

Again, this contention is difficult to believe, because it just does not fit anything else we know about today's society. What is also incredible is that so many mechanchim frankly have no idea what on earth he's talking about. I've spoken with Rabbeim, menaholim, and mentors of children from seventh grade level through high school and beis medrash. Almost to the man, they not only deny the scope of the epidemic, they flatly state that it simply does not exist<sup>28</sup>. They are alert to the many terrible nisyons facing today's youth, but in their experience, genuine emunah questioning is not one of them. Certainly there's an individual incident here or there, but in general this is just not a major issue of concern amongst their charges. A well respected therapist who has been working with frum teens for decades reported a similar impression.

The activists argue that the mechanchim's ignorance is just a result of the atmosphere of intimidation and suppression that allegedly pervades our institutions. For those of us who don't buy into the hyperbole<sup>29</sup> it seems much more likely that Rabbi Sapirman may be somewhat misinterpreting both the numbers and the facts.

The bagel store cashier once wondered why, with all the culinary variation out there, everyone just seems to want bagels. What he clearly doesn't realize is that it's not that everyone wants bagels; it's just everyone who comes into his store that wants bagels. Those who want sushi go to the Japanese restaurant down the block. Is it similarly possible that R. Sapirman and other professionals have a somewhat skewed view of the problem's pervasiveness, being that so many who suffer from these issues seek them out? Presumably, as one of the best known in the field, R. Sapirman is consulted by many who either doubt or are dealing with someone who does. Ashrei chelko for his hishtadlus, but is it possible that it is this constant exposure that gives him the impression that it is everyone, not just individuals, that are struggling?

His interpretation of the actual data also seems somewhat slanted toward confirmation bias. We've already discussed the fallacy of taking the frustrated adolescent's angry outburst as a genuine emunah question. There are other kinds of questions as well that R. Sapirman takes as indication of an epidemic, but which don't seem to stand to scrutiny.

A large portion of his contention, for example, is based on the "floods of questions" that he inevitably receives whenever he presents to teenagers. To him this confirms that they have been harboring deep doubts on the authenticity of Yiddishkeit until he provided them the safe space to air their concerns<sup>30</sup>.

Interestingly, many other Rabbeim also have had opportunity to field 'floods of questions'. Whenever classroom discussion turns to any issue of compelling interest, the boys perk up and ask until we either run out of information or decide to cut the topic short. Discussions of Mashiach and tichiyas hameisim, Zionism, gilgulei neshamos, Jewish history, sheidim, most areas of hashkafa, etc., etc., all elicit dozens of questions and rapt attention. Are we to conclude that the boys have been walking around battling doubts

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<sup>28</sup> One notable example: Rabbi Yosef Elefant of Mir Yerushalayim has personally mentored thousands of bachurim from a cross section of American yeshivos. He told me (and permitted me to quote him here) that he has almost never encountered a bachur who's problems indicate an emunah crisis. This statement was echoed by virtually every mechanech I've spoken to.

<sup>29</sup> Many mechanchim are known for building strong relationships with the students. The students confide in their rabbeim their deepest feelings and struggles, some of which are at least as personal and sensitive as emunah issues would be. It strains credulity that an epidemic of the alleged proportions would fly so completely under the radar of so many mechanchim.

<sup>30</sup> The real truth is that the floods of questions are not even predominately questions of faith. When R. Sapirman specifies what the questions actually are, it turns out that many or most are along the lines of, "Why do we have to be shomer negia?" and so forth. This is once again his peculiarity of labeling any Yiddishkeit related question as an "emunah" question.

on these issues as well? Or is it more likely that interesting topics tend to pique student's curiosity, and when skillful presenters such as Rabbis Sapirman or Jung offer to respond to any question they'd like, the conversation can go on for hours<sup>31</sup>?

To be very clear: We don't doubt there are some youngsters in need of intervention in areas of emunah. We are extremely grateful to R. Sapirman for providing Rabbeim with the resources to be 'first responders' in crisis, and making himself available to help when necessary.

For this to justify a revolutionary educational innovation, however, two basic facts must be established. Firstly, it would have to be demonstrated to be a universal problem; if it just affects individuals it should be dealt with privately. Second, the questions must be of the sort that the suggested curriculum actually addresses, not something coming from a different angle altogether.

Raiyas einchem, a feel for the issues of today's society, and a closer look at the presented evidence reveal both of these criteria to be far from met.

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R. Sapirman's second point is that his approach is beneficial for everyone, not just those with emunah doubts.

"Substantiating emunah with one's own seichel offers an advantage not available through kabbalas avos. It provides an excitement – a passion and enthusiasm that make emunah alive and vibrant." (RC pg. 31)

This he sees as the solution to our generation's problem of just being Jewish by rote, without any feeling or conviction.

"Someone without clarity of conviction is unlikely to daven with great kavanah." (RC pg. 17)

"[If we implement these suggestions] we will have Yidden who are excited and passionate about their Yiddishkeit, ready to sacrifice for it, and prepared to resist all tests." (Essay – The Case for Teaching Emunah)

There's an expression that when you walk around with a hammer, all of your problems suddenly start to look like nails.

R. Sapirman is undoubtedly correct that lack of passion is a tremendous issue. Excitement for learning and mitzvos, a feeling of connection through davening, enthusiasm for a living a Yiddisheh lifestyle, all are crucial for a child's development b'derech Yisroel Sabah.

These are generations old ideals in education, and there are many methods to promote them. Learning biur Tefilla, stories with a yiddesheh ta'am, a leibidikeh chagigah or meaningful kumzitz, mussar,

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<sup>31</sup> Especially in an area like this one, where every answer to a "How do you know?" almost automatically prompts a follow up "Yeah, but that doesn't fully prove it because ---". When a visiting lecturer informs a group that they never really believed until now but he's going to tell them how to know for sure it's all true, it stands to reason that they will point out every flaw they can possibly find in his presentation. The one time I personally attended one of these lectures, none of my follow up questions were about the existence of G-d (disclosure: I believed already). They all were about the logical soundness of the lecturer's arguments.

machshava, or chassidus, above all passionate Torahdikeh Rabbeim and a genuine atmosphere of chashivus for Yiddishkeit<sup>32</sup>.

Indifference and lethargy are not cured by 'emunah classes'. Like all of us, the children know full well that Hashem exists, and yet breeding passion remains a lifelong avodah. One does not instill passion and kavanah by discussing why Christianity is wrong, showing how nonsensical evolution is, or demonstrating that the Torah couldn't have been written by man because who would have done it and what would the motive have been.

In fact, it's very hard to see basis for this assumption that logic based emunah classes give over a passionate Yiddishkeit "not available through kabbalas avos". When emunah is an axiomatic fact of life, the Eibershter is an integral part of our lives; we know him and relate to him. It's hard to imagine that the relationship and connection would be of *more* intensity when emunah is reduced to being just the best possible answer to a series of questions.

Indeed, by all impressions the communities most associated with exclusive emunah pshuta are the ones in which passion and dveikus are stereotypically most intense. Perhaps we can debate whether or not this relationship is causative, but it's difficult to fathom where anybody sees evidence of a *negative* correlation.

R. Sapirman begins his pamphlet EHC by laying out the unique need for an emunah curriculum in our times. Every generation has its own special nisayon where the yetzer hara is strongest. A century ago, for example, the big issue was communism. Unbelievable as it seems in hindsight, this false ideology snared countless numbers of our youth.

Emunah doubts are the unique nisayon of our generation, he tells us, and it is our responsibility to confront it.

This is an astonishing proclamation. Not just because it does not seem to be supported by evidence, but because the actual nisyonos of our generation should be no mystery to anyone. We have the Satan merakeid beineinu like never before in history, both in the form of technological temptation and of a host society that has jettisoned every moral norm or constraint. We live integrated with perhaps the most shallow, frivolous, and hedonistic culture in history, and we are unfortunately not immune to the assosiatie effects. In addition, the incredible chesed elyon of unprecedented tranquility and affluence can carry the side effects of complacency and religious apathy.

Perhaps an extreme ramification of these nisyonos can be someone rejecting his beliefs (or saying he does). But treating the symptom as if it were the epidemic does little good for anyone. It diverts attention from the real battle, and it leads to policy implementations that cannot justify their negative side effects.

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<sup>32</sup> Of course, the only real way to give over passion for Yiddishkeit is by example. Children pick up from their surroundings what is important and worthy of emotional investment. A Rebbe is limited in what he can accomplish from a standing start. He can build off, and help channel or develop the passion instilled in a child. If your child grows up seeing Abba get excited only for sporting events or presidential elections, or in an environment where 'quality time' means sharing the latest inane video clip (even from a "frum" website), or if the primary Yiddishkeit related hashkafa is the making fun of 'frummaks', it will be difficult for the Rebbe to inspire him with Torah and Yahadus. A main focus of the passion discussion must be geared toward parents. To you it may seem out-modish or corny to express enthusiasm for a dvar Torah, excitement over seeing an adam gadol, or verbal disgust about something that runs counter to Yiddisheh hashkafa. To your child, however, your expressiveness can spell the difference of his entire self-definition.

Rabbi Sapirman often warns us against fighting today's battles with yesterday's weapons. However, achar bakashas mechilla, it does not appear that he is fighting today's battle at all. Two hundred, one hundred, maybe even seventy years ago the battle was against intellectual ideologies<sup>33</sup>. Today's problems are clear, they are terrifying, and they must be addressed. But they have little to do with emunah, and they won't be solved by yet another demonstration that the fossil record was falsified.

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A separate major aspect of Rabbi Sapirman's advocacy is proactive rather than reactive. He argues that without being taught rational emunah, our students cannot be considered real maaminim, regardless of whether or not they have questions. Belief without logical proof is inauthentic belief. In his view, someone who says he believes in Hashem just because that's how he was brought up, is simply 'accepting the frum package' because he does not know anything else. This is a watered down version of emunah; even if he says that he believes in Yiddishkeit, and even really means it, it's not more than blind faith at best. (See RC pg. 35 and EHC pg. 22)

In EHC pg. 25-26, R' Sapirman describes a possible meeting between such a youngster (whom he dubs "the Clueless") and a hypothetical Robert, an assimilated youth of the same age. Robert inundates the bachur with questions about Yiddishkeit and how he knows all to be true. The bachur finds himself unable to respond.

"Unless our bachur is unusually well informed he will already have exhausted his emunah repertoire. Although he may be a metzuyan in Yeshiva, and have recently made a siyum on Bava Kama, he will have nothing to say. The answers to that question are not dealt with in that Mesechta. **He has no choice but to admit that he can't really respond to Robert's questions. His parents and teachers have told him that this is the way it is, and that is the end of it. He never really gave it much thought and can't quite explain why he believes**<sup>34</sup>. Will Robert be happy with this answer? Of course not! Much more significantly, however, do you think that our bachur himself, when finally confronted by the questions, is happy with such an answer?

This, then, is the student who is basically clueless when it comes to emunah. He says he believes, but truthfully, **he neither believes or disbelieves**. He is simply moving along the conveyer belt which takes him from cradle to kollel. He goes through the motions, and may even be very happy doing so. But his lack of conviction permeates everything he does."<sup>35</sup>

As we've discussed, R. Sapirman could be entirely correct that full emunah is not reached without intellectual investigation, and even so it would still be a bad idea to introduce it in debate format in a classroom. But this is a crucial point in general and we feel it worth digressing from our theme to understand this a bit better.

In truth, this discussion cuts to the heart of the question of how to define knowledge. R. Sapirman apparently feels that unless you know *how* you know something, then you can't claim to really know it. In our first section we've pointed out that this line of reasoning becomes irrelevant to someone who understands emunah to be experientially based. It bears noting, however, that even in the view that prefers an intellectual based emunah, it's just not the case that knowledge is defined by one's ability to prove the information. Almost none of the knowledge you currently possess fulfills that criteria.

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<sup>33</sup> Even those weren't necessarily Emunah issues per se, but that's a conversation for a different time.

<sup>34</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> Rabbi Sapirman also begins his emunah lecture CDs with this argument for their necessity.

You 'know', for example, that President Lincoln was assassinated. Can you explain how you know it to be true? Have you researched the archives for first person accounts, corroborated contemporary newspaper reports of the incident, or even ever been to the Lincoln Memorial? Of course not. If pressed to defend this knowledge, the best you'd be able to stammer out is that this is what you were taught when you were young, the information fits any other relevant data that you might have, and you've never had reason to doubt it. Yet, given the opportunity, you'd probably wager a lot of money on its veracity.

This is more or less how you know that c – a – t spells cat, that your mother is your mother, that broccoli is better for you than strawberry shortcake, and that it's a bad idea to put a plastic bag over your head. Despite your inability to identify the scientific, rationalistic, and philological proofs of these facts, you know them nonetheless.

Of course, the inevitable objection is that emunah is very different from the Lincoln assassination. Nobody denies that Lincoln was shot, but there are billions of people who don't think Yiddishkeit is true. If there was a strong contingent of historians who felt that John Wilkes Booth was a myth, our students would not be so confident in what they happened to have been taught in school.

This is where the Ramban in V'Eschanan (4:9) comes in. The Ramban explains that when a society gives over a communal experience to the next generation, there is an inherent acceptance of the facts as presented. Just as people are psychologically and emotionally built to accept as real something that they can touch, see, or logically prove, so too people accept something that is handed down to them as a national heritage<sup>36</sup>. The billions of detractors are no more disturbing to a child who received emunah as a mesorah than they are to someone who sees something as a logically incontrovertible fact<sup>37</sup>.

The intellectual emunah activists take this a step further. They feel that giving over emunah must therefore include proving the mesorah to our students based on this Ramban; unless we do so they don't know *why* they believe and are thus not true maaminim.

This interpretation brings to mind the newly married fellow who, after a spat with his wife, presented her with a bouquet of flowers saying, "Here. My rebbe said to give these to you and then you won't be angry at me anymore." Women are placated by flowers because they appreciate the caring gesture, not because we explain to them that this should cure your lingering indignation.

The Ramban too was never meant as a tool for *proving* emunah to our children – "Tatteleh, you have to believe me that Har Sinai happened, because the Ramban says I wouldn't lie to you." The Ramban is explaining how **emunah mesorah** works to give over knowledge: Children are hard wired to accept as fact what their parents and society present as such. So when what is presented is a communal revelation, the children will be a part of that revelation<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> Presumably the Ramban does not mean that a father would never lie to his son. The Ramban means that a son understands that his father would not pass on as a heritage – a life's definition – something he knows to be false. When the Yidden heard their fathers recount how Hashem Himself had revealed himself to me at Har Sinai and gave me this Torah, they understood that Tatty is not making this up. And when they passed it on with that conviction to their children, the next generation too understood it to be true.

<sup>37</sup> This is not some pie in the sky wishful thinking. It's a description of the facts on the ground. Even Rabbi Sapirman must be aware that through the generations there have been hundreds of thousands of frum children who accepted the truths of the mesorah as a matter of fact, despite being fully aware that almost the entire world thinks they're nuts. Either they indeed are crazy, or the Ramban knew a thing or two about knowledge acquisition.

<sup>38</sup> Here are the most relevant words of the Ramban, in close translation: "This is what it means 'And also in you they will always believe'. Because when we tell the thing over to our children they will know that it is the truth without a doubt, as if they had seen it themselves in each generation. Because we would not testify falsehood to our children, nor would we pass on as heritage something empty. And they will not doubt at all the testimony that we tell them,

Someone who was raised in a family and culture where Hashem is a basic fact of life knows Him and believes in Him. It unfortunately may sound a bit lame to Robert, but “I was raised this way, it fits everything I experience, and there’s no reason to think otherwise” actually *is* the correct answer to how this bachur knows Hashem exists. This probably will not convince Robert to become a ba’al teshuva, but let’s just hope that next time he’ll bump into a kiruv professional to ask his questions to, not a Yeshiva bachur concentrating on Bava Kama.

Of course, if a bachur *does* have serious doubts, then he is in Robert’s situation – it may prove beneficial to analyze the logic and evidence behind the assumptions. But to claim that no one really has emunah until he first thinks up all the reasons why Hashem might not exist and then debunks them is simply false.

Rabbi Sapirman is unquestionably correct about one thing: Growth in emunah doesn’t (or shouldn’t) end at age 15 with a simple decision to believe<sup>39</sup>. Even to one who accepts that there is a Ribbono Shel Olam, there’s a lifelong avodah ahead, with inevitable ups and downs, to recognize, realize, and live with the Him. There are many tools to facilitate this avodah – observing hashgachas Hashem and niflaos haborei, meaningful shmiras Shabbos and Moadim, Limud haTorah and reading about Gedolim, tefilla and chassidus, learning aggadata and machshava, etc. But there’s no reason why logic based debates about whether or not Yiddishkeit is actually true need be one of them. Other than in fringe cases of special necessity, this can certainly be established just by “being brought up frum and accepting the frum package”.

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rather they will certainly believe that we saw with our eyes what we are telling them.” No need for lectures on historical probability. No need for analysis of burden of proof. No need even *to teach them this Ramban!* (Not that it’s not important to learn – just not because of the reasons the activists claim, and therefore not in the context and style they advocate.) Simply pass on Yiddishkeit, the Mesorah, Chumash Parshas Yisro. They’ll accept it. Exactly as they have for the last three thousand years. The unraveling of today’s society has many causes, but it’s not because the basic concepts of Mesoras Hatorah have suddenly stopped working.

<sup>39</sup> We hope he recognizes that this would remain true even should we adopt his approach. A couple of lectures on proving the truth of the Torah and that evolution is illogical does not a fully developed ba’al emunah make.

### **Section III**

But can it hurt? Even if it's not a pressing need, wouldn't it still be a nice to introduce the proposed logical emunah curriculum into our schools? After all, what can be wrong with "substantiating our students' emunah in a way that appeals to the seichel"?

For one thing, we should take pause from the fact that it has never been done. Despite the many Gedolei Hadoros who stressed the importance of seichel for mature seekers looking to attain the fullest measure of emunah<sup>40</sup>, logical proofs have never been used as an *educational* method for young people or the hamon am in general<sup>41</sup>.

In fact, there are several fairly straightforward reasons why it is not a good idea. In this section we will outline five major objections to the method. In general, these issues did not originate with us. They've been said in various formulations by many educators. R. Sapirman has dealt with some of them in his writings and, where relevant, we will discuss his responses alongside the issue.

#### **1: These courses introduce doubts to students who never had any.**

By far the most obvious problem with lecturing to entire classes or schools on the answers to emunah questions is that many or most in the audience never had the problems to begin with. For those students you are shaking what was until now a pure faith, with the hopes that you can fix it up afterwards. Not only are you introducing them to questions that they never had, you are also introducing them to the concept of questioning, something that once planted in their psyche you have no control over where it will lead them. Even if the end result is not chalila dramatically life changing, you now have someone with niggling doubts in place of a pure simple maamin.

Nor is this mere conjecture. Teenagers have left such lectures expressing dismay at being gratuitously disoriented and confused<sup>42</sup>. This despite R. Sapirman claims to have only seen positive results from his approach, never negative (see EHC pg 63). Apparently, and understandably, those whom he inspires are

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<sup>40</sup> Such as those quoted by Dr. Ostroff.

<sup>41</sup> Dr. Ostroff turns this point on its head and uses it as a rationale *for* R. Sapirman's approach. Previous generations, he tells us, relied on emunah pshuta... and thousands fell prey to the false ideologies of haskalah and Zionism etc.

This line of reasoning is exactly as sensible as arguing that all Rabbeim should wear purple hats when they teach. After all, in Europe they did not employ this method and the youth left the fold in droves. Dr. Ostroff does not even bother trying to demonstrate that a stress on logical emunah proofs would have alleviated the terrible spiritual decline of that era, and for good reason: such a claim is historically ignorant.

Haskalah, the forerunner of all of these movements, was caused by the allure of enlightenment and the availability of increased opportunity in non-Jewish society. It was not a result of doubts in emunah; it was at its core a desire to remain Jewish yet still enjoy the benefits of secularism (to be "a Jew at home and a gentleman in the street"). To wit, none of the successful responses to haskalah focused on proofs of Yiddishkeit. R' Yisroel battled it with mussar, the Chassidim doubled down on dveikus, Rabbis Hirsch and Hildesheimer introduced Torah im derech eretz, and Rabbi Marcus Lehman reached out to the youth through Torahdikeh novels. The single most effective literary rejoinder to Haskalah – Rav Hirsch's Nineteen Letters and Horeb – does not attempt to *prove* Jewish belief but rather takes its veracity as a given and provides an intellectually appealing structure to its mission and tenets.

The real lesson for us from the Haskalah battle is the necessity of tailoring the response to the root of the problem, and not to get sidetracked by topics that, while possibly important, do not address the issue at hand.

<sup>42</sup> As relayed to this author by a mechaneches with such experiences. Another individual who works with Yeshiva bachurim told me that he has had occasion to have to "clean up the mess" made by emunah lecturers who proved unconvincing. In another case, a mature Ben Torah confided that only on hearing the lectures did he begin to have doubts.

It is highly doubtful that in any of these cases does the negative feedback make its way back to the lecturer.

more likely to approach him with their enthusiastic feedback than the ones who feel harmed are to share with him their negative impression.

In EHC pgs. 60 - 63 R. Sapirman addresses this problem and provides three rebuttals<sup>43</sup>.

His first response is that the mechanchim will provide compelling answers to the questions raised, so no harm done. This idea represents a running theme throughout much of his advocacy. He clearly is a very sichli oriented person, and he can't imagine that anyone presented with airtight rational arguments wouldn't be thoroughly convinced. Unfortunately, this simply is not how people operate.

Just listen to any talk show, or even a casual conversation between two people. Or try throwing out a choshen mishpat shaila to a group. Not always or even often does logic rule the day. The most airtight of arguments can be brushed aside, misinterpreted, or just completely ignored, in favor of some flimsy emotion based response. The fact is that people often don't automatically accept a logical construct even when it should be compelling<sup>44</sup>.

Why is this so? Apparently, people aren't necessarily hardwired to always think exclusively rationally. There are probably many emotional and sociological reasons for this, which we'll leave for the scholars of human nature. The fact remains that it is so, and to shake the faith of a classroom of teenagers on the confident assumption that you can convince them back is dangerously naïve<sup>45</sup>.

This problem is exacerbated even more by the fact that R. Sapirman acknowledges that we won't be able to answer every question that comes up. As he quotes from the Maharsha (Brochos 17a), some more esoteric concepts will inevitably be beyond our grasp<sup>46</sup>. A good many open classroom discussions inevitably end with a student finally "besting" the Rebbe by coming up with a question that he can't answer. R. Sapirman is not concerned by this either. He explains that once the student sees that you have the answers to many of his questions, he won't be troubled by the unanswerable ones.

Perhaps. Then again, perhaps not. What on earth gives us the right to play games with our children's emunah, on the hopes that they'll be so psychologically accommodating?

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R. Sapirman's second response is that we cannot expect to shelter our children forever at any rate. "How long do you think that talmidim will remain ignorant of the most simple and obvious questions? Won't they find out tomorrow if not sooner that most of the world no longer believes in G-d, or at least doesn't take him seriously?" Isn't it better that we introduce the discussion to them ourselves, and teach them the way through it?

The problem with this answer is that it misunderstands the question. The objection never was that our youngsters can't ever handle hearing a question about Yiddishkeit. The objection was that having these

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<sup>43</sup> He also adds a fourth – something along the lines of children with questions not looking for an out but sincerely wanting to believe. This may or may not be true but it does not seem to address the present issue at all.

<sup>44</sup> In truth all you really have to do to recognize this is try to explain a piece of Gemara to a teenager. Sometimes they get it... and sometimes they don't. Why is anyone to assume that rational emunah proofs are always fully comprehended by all?

<sup>45</sup> Nor do the advocates limit themselves to raising questions only when a competent professional is on hand. Pre-Pesach full page ads announce to adults and children alike that parents don't really know why the mesorah is true. In general, the activists don't seem to recognize the detrimental effects on the hamon am that result from making emunah questions a front and center popular discourse.

<sup>46</sup> Dr. Ostroff (pg. 128) inexplicably quotes – but does not translate – this Maharsha as part of his argument that every question *does* have an answer that can be explained to a child. We have been unable to fathom his reading of the text.

questions presented as part of their school education legitimizes them and forces the student to focus on them in a way he never would have otherwise. It trains the student to question, and to not accept emunah unless it can be made rationally convincing to the adolescent mind. At this point it is out of the educator's hands – you've shaken his emunah pshuta, and heaven knows if you'll be able to bring him around with emunas seichel.

In general, a healthy frum person is not overly perturbed by the knowledge that kofrim present heretical theories about the world's creation, or alternative ideologies to mesoras haTorah. Perhaps it's because of the Steipler's experiential emunah, or the Ramban's naturally imbedded filial trust. Or perhaps it's just that a standard non-philosophical person is comfortable just assuming that the Vilna Gaon's conclusions are more reliable than those of the morally bankrupt and intellectually irresponsible challengers. Whatever the reason, mesorah overwhelmingly works<sup>47</sup>.

It is when the child is educated *not* to think this way, and rather to only accept if it appeals to him personally, that these mechanisms are negated. And that's where the real problems can chas v'shalom begin.

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Lastly, R. Sapirman deflects the objection by pointing out that it's based on a flawed assumption – that there are children who don't have doubts. In reality, he writes, you can be certain that those with questions share them with their friends, and all are already perturbed by these points. As a girl whom he helped once told him in confidence, "All the girls have questions."

It is difficult to overstate how incredible this assertion is. We've gone from a claim of a large scale problem to assumptions of such universality of the issue that there is no negative fallout to be reckoned with. As someone who was a bachur at the time this claim was originally made, and who has had many close relationships with many bachurim of all ages for many years, I can tell you it is simply false. If there is an emunah crisis – and see section II where we analyze the evidence for even that – it affects perhaps an average of one or two students per class. The rest have much to lose from these courses. With apologies, we can't take the hyperbolic chatter of a high school girl as an authoritative assessment of the state of affairs, and use it as an excuse to ignore a very real side effect to his proposed system.

## **2: Emunah rationalization will not produce desirable results in a classroom chinuch format.**

R. Sapirman ends off his book with an appeal to the reader: "In the meanwhile, keep thinking about the thoughts presented here. Let them continue circulating in your mind, until you get a solid grip on the emunah by which your people have lived, and for which they have died, for over three thousand years."

This appeal stems from his recognition that one does not convince oneself of a profound truth by taking a course in the subject and moving on. In order for the idea even to begin to take hold, the logical construct has to be turned over and over, analyzed from all angles, and digested.

Unfortunately, this does not happen in school. School is a place where students are instructed in information that they then attempt to hold onto a large enough sample of for a long enough time to pass a test. The information is then mostly shunted aside and the focus becomes on the new set of information.

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<sup>47</sup> Of course, there will always be the deep thinking type who will insist on investigating these topics to the end. By all means, that's why we have generations worth of seforim to help them in their research.

You'll note that this point and the previous one complement each other perfectly. It is a certain type of intellectual sichli oriented personality that's most likely to feel unsatisfied without examining the evidence, and it is they who are most able to appreciate the logic based rational discussions. So let us make material available for these intellectuals to delve deeper, and let the hamon continue with emunah pshuta. Indeed, this is more or less what was going on before the whole 'let's teach emunah' campaign began.

It would be wonderful if every student was gifted, focused, and studious, but that's not the case. For the average and certainly for the weaker students, classroom subjects are not something one walks around for months afterwards "circulating in their minds until they get a solid grip" on. Much of it is not fully clear to begin with, and most of it is forgotten shortly thereafter<sup>48</sup>.

This is not a dire indictment of our chinuch system. This is the reality of what school has always been, and there's no shame in it. The success of education is not judged by the particular bits of information the student retains indefinitely. Rather, the goal is for the student to absorb foundations and to develop intellectual skills. The student may have been tuned out as the teacher outlined the finer details of Hilchos Boreir, but he'll nevertheless walk away with the basic concept of the melacha to be later built on (or at the very least he'll know when to ask a shaila). He may forget within a matter of weeks what Tosfos asked and answered, or even that there was a Tosfos on a particular topic, but the accumulative skills gained from learning and forgetting dozens of Tosfosin is what eventually enables him to really shteig. And so on and so forth.

This is all fine and well when education is focused on imparting concepts, skills, and values. *Proving* the truth of a claim is a fundamentally different matter. There's an element of pass/fail to the endeavor; if you don't shoot the student past a certain threshold the result is disaster<sup>49</sup>.

There's no such thing as half a proof. If the student was distracted as the teacher drove home the point, or if the logical construct was foggy or simply over his head, what you have is no proof at all. Even if he heard the general idea at the time, but failed to give it the necessary attention of having it circulate in his mind until he could really absorb it, he walks away with nothing. And when a youth is told that *this* is why we believe, and the 'this' for whatever reason doesn't do the job for him, then you have just seriously harmed a Yiddisheh neshama.

There's another major distinction between self-motivated research and teacher initiated emunah education. When someone is doing his own research, the focus is on determining the most rational conclusion from the body of evidence. On the other hand, when someone is informed, "I will now prove to you that X is true", often the natural reaction is to enter into debate mode. He will parry each piece of evidence as it is presented, looking for the holes in the reasoning or the possible alternative conclusions.

This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, as we've discussed, it's extremely unhealthy to cause a child to play devil's advocate to ikrei emunah even when you can fully answer his questions. Equally dangerous, however, is that the presenters often offer up flawed evidence as well, and to someone already in debate mode the mind can seize on these unsatisfying arguments as a reason to suspect the whole thesis being debated.

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<sup>48</sup> Imagine an 18 year old high school graduate sitting next to someone on a plane who demands to be taught the basics of 10<sup>th</sup> grade algebra. Or to be informed of the details of some lecture on hilchos shatnez that the student had once attended. It's safe to say that a fair majority of students would not be able to satisfy the questioner. This even if they had passed the finals at the time or expressed enthusiasm after hearing the lecture. There's no reason to believe emunah education produces different results.

<sup>49</sup> This is one major reason for the phenomenon we mentioned earlier – that education in all areas has traditionally focused on teaching the subject rather than debating its veracity. The one notable exception is in the field of morals and values. The trend in secular progressive education has been to present their ideals as open ended points of debate, to be accepted by the free thinking youth only after it appeals to their intellect. Alas, the underdeveloped mind of a teenager is not always up to the task of constructing moral clarity on its own; the unsurprising result has been a complete failure in transmitting wisdom from one generation to the next.

From a purely logical standpoint, all you need is one solid proof to establish an idea as true; once you have that the addition of poor proofs does not detract from the truth value of the subject<sup>50</sup>. However, in a debate or teaching situation, your persuasiveness is often reduced to the level of your least convincing argument. And these books and presentations invariably contain many weak, unconvincing, and sometimes just simply untrue points.

Sometimes the flawed arguments are the result of the writer taking logical liberties to present contrived “proofs” that just happen not to demonstrate anything. An example of this would be where R. Sapirman proves the Torah’s advanced knowledge of historical events from the prediction *v’haya nivlascha l’maachal l’chol oif hashamayim* etc. Amazingly, he says, this came true centuries later with the harugei Beitar whose bodies were left in the field. Indeed. And in Darfur as well. And at the Marne. There’s nothing unusual in the annals of history to have carnage spread out over the fields. Although we who know the truth of the Torah may recognize a connection between the tochacha and the story of Beitar, as a *proof* of the Torah’s truth this is useless.

Another example would be his proof of the sages’ advanced scientific knowledge from the Zohar that states the world is round like a ball. This was written at a time, he tells us, when most everyone thought the world was flat, some postulating it was supported on the back of three giant elephants. Only when Columbus sailed west and didn’t fall off the edge was the world’s roundness recognized.

Unfortunately this straw man is simply inaccurate; the Greeks and most educated people were always aware that the world is round. In addition, the idea of taking as literal this one statement from a sefer in which almost nothing can be understood literally will certainly come back to bite as well. What would he respond when a student then asks for an explanation of the Chazal that the earth stands on one pillar called Tzaddik? To the skeptical listener – the one you have set out to impress – this surely smacks of self-serving data mining.

There are quite a few other similar examples. Again our point here is not to say his book doesn’t do a good job – it does. On the whole it is an excellent presentation of the rationales of belief. To a sincerely searching reader it will undoubtedly be very beneficial, and the relatively few non-sequiturs or inaccuracies will be brushed over<sup>51</sup>. However they present a terrible problem when you take the initiative to *convince* someone with this material. All you need is a few of these shallow arguments to be taken as a straw man representation of your position, and the overall result is much more harm done than good<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> In fact it’s not really fair to assess a contention by the fact that any one particular piece of evidence is not completely airtight. ‘Evidence’ does not mean the same thing as ‘proof’, nor does it have to. When we try to establish some fact based on gathering evidence it’s very possible that each piece can have an alternative explanation. What we mean that we have established the fact is that we’ve gathered enough evidence as to make it highly improbable to have every single one of them explained by the less likely alternative rather than have them all explained in one fell swoop by accepting our thesis.

The problem is that this philosophy is lost on someone in devil’s advocate’s mode, looking for flaws in the line of reasoning that a teacher is authoritatively pressing on him. In debate, people tend to hone in on individual weaknesses in their opponent’s arguments, and emphasize them as if they represent an entirely flawed position. Just observe to any two people debate any topic, and watch it happen.

This is why it is so crucial not to turn emunah investigation into emunah debates. What would constitute an impressive body of evidence to a motivated youth researching on his own can be reduced to a pile of strained apologetics by a student being challenged to submit to this approach.

<sup>51</sup> Though that certainly doesn’t excuse their being there.

<sup>52</sup> It should also be stressed that the negative effects of a flawed emunah proof are not always immediately visible. The student may very well express initial enthusiasm, and only later become disillusioned r’l when he recognizes the shallowness.

The most difficult part of the book to justify is the 60 page section (about 30% of the entire book) discussing and disproving the theory of evolution. Not because his arguments there are weak, on the contrary he puts together a terrific presentation. The problem is that a student would have to be extremely shallow minded to be introduced to the topic for the very first time (at least the first time hearing about it in any detail and depth) by someone who's goal is to disprove it, and take the presentation at face value. Once again, someone who is involved in these topics would find it beneficial, but it smacks of frivolousness to announce to students that I'm now going to teach you the theory of evolution and then debunk it all in one shot. Even if he is entirely accurate in presenting the opposing view, there's no way for the student to know that. To the listener the whole exercise comes across as almost childish.

A true tale from the trenches: An 8<sup>th</sup> grade Rebbe I know well was teaching Parshas Noach when a boy raised the issue of if the mabul could be what artificially aged fossils. The Rebbe, being somewhat proficient in the topic (having read R. Sapirman's book amongst many others) took the opportunity to discuss the tactics and limitations of paleontology in general. The boys seemed duly impressed until one student looked up with an incredulous half smile and said, "Rebbe, it sounds good. But I'm not a scientist, you're not a scientist, and there's no scientist in the room now to answer you. I'm sure if there would be a scientist here right now this conversation would sound very different". The Rebbe reported that the discussion eventually ended in a tie, about half the boys still appreciating Rebbe's side, but the other half siding with the questioner that it's silly to assume that a real scientist wouldn't have valid responses to the raised points.

### **3: Emunah presented by anyone not eminently qualified is a recipe for disaster.**

R. Sapirman acknowledges that teaching emunah is not for everybody. In his words – "Just like not every Gemara Rebbe is adept at teaching Tanach, so too not every mechanech is cut out for teaching Emunah." (EHC pg. 79) Of course, even that comparison doesn't fully cover it because while a poor Tanach shiur may be uninformative and boring, a poor emunah lesson will almost certainly be spiritually destructive.

In reality, however, the popularization of emunah education, along with quick fix workshops that make anyone a professional, almost guarantee that our students will at some point be taught rational emunah in a deficient manner. The hashkafic, historical, and scientific knowledge necessary to prove emunah are specialty interests. Individuals who feel drawn to this read and study them over periods of years. The Ani Maamin Foundation trains you up in twelve hours and sends you out to teach a semester long course on the topic.

The problem with overnight experts teaching these things is that students rarely sit and nod as you repeat the neatly structured proofs that you've been taught. As R. Sapirman tells us often, they ask follow up questions and point out the holes in the theory. A teacher can only do it well if he has the knowledge and experience to be able to answer perceived flaws with his approach, reexplain from new angles, and provide an extra mashul here or an added layer of nuance there.

A teacher who informs the class that he has just demonstrated how we know our Mesorah is true, but when asked to clarify or elaborate responds, "I don't know, let's ask a professional", hasn't just provided an incomplete lesson. He's provided a detrimental lesson. This is not halacha class where you give over the basic rules and refer the complicated shailos to a Rav. This is 'proof' class. If your presentation doesn't stand the test of probing then you have proven nothing, and you've made Mesorah look shallow to boot.

Even a teacher who knows the information well but is not adroit at delivering convincing presentations is likely to do harm. Remember, the art of intellectual persuasion is not a related talent to the warmth, classroom management skills, and passion that make someone into a good mechanech.

As bad as an unconvincing presentation is an untrue one. If the “proofs” are actually only superficial, or if they are based on misrepresenting historical, scientific, and especially Torah concepts, the entire exercise is inexcusable. In this case the effects are not even knowable, because the student may express enthusiasm on hearing the lecture, and only later become disillusioned on recognizing the shallowness of the presented evidence.

Even without such dire consequences there’s certainly no justification for teaching falsehood as Torah fact. We have no right to build our children’s Yiddishkeit on mistaken or silly foundations. Unfortunately, it’s not uncommon for someone who lacks the necessary clarity and knowledge to put out a shingle as an emunah lecturer or writer. As Emunah discourse becomes more popular any earnest individual with something to say on the subject becomes mainstreamed. Even the experts have shown little interest in differentiating between the real and the ridiculous: the AMF website recommends amongst “books that enhance emunah” a work which demonstrates the existence of G-d from alien sightings and claims of ESP.

#### **4: Instilling Emunah through logic necessarily gives over a conditional and incomplete form of Emunah.**

Even more worrisome than the inevitable fallout of the approach is the actual quality of the results even when successful. Remember, we are discussing the method of how to introduce our children to the Ribbono Shel Olam. The old fashioned way is to simply inform the child of Hashem’s existence as a point of fact, and let that guide everything we do and teach to build on that<sup>53</sup>. At a young age that means constantly referencing and pointing out the Eibershter (“Let’s thank Hashem for this yummy food”, “Hashem makes it dark at night so we can go to sleep”, etc. etc. etc.). As the child grows, the relationship gets more sophisticated as he learns to recognize Hashem through a blat Gemara, relate to Him through davening, and serve Him through asiyas hamitzvos. Throughout, the actual existence of the Eibershter and truth of Mesoras HaTorah is assumed as a given. The focus of education is on stressing Yiddisheh Hashkafa and relating to Hashem, rather than analyzing the point of whether or not Yiddishkeit is actually true in the first place. Ideally, the student also takes the facts of the matter for granted, and slowly embarks on the lifelong avodah of drawing close to Hashem<sup>54</sup>.

Someone raised in such an environment simply assumes the truth of the mesorah as fact and builds from there. Along the way he certainly corroborates this assumption through his experiences. Observing or reading about anashim gedolim solidifies the impression that the lives that they lead represents reality. A compelling elucidation of a difficult sugya or profound machshaviv interpretation of a story in Tanach reinforces the clarity that this could not be contrived. And yes, when he encounters the Ramban about how Ma’amad Har Sinai was experienced by all of his Zaidas and passed on since then, it stands as an additional nikarin divrei emes. Or when he observes the wonders of niflaos haborei it reinforces his subconscious assumption that this all must have a creator.

Compare with the new approach. The Eibershter’s existence is not taken as a given, rather the student is informed that we will now demonstrate to you that He must exist. Immediately, we’ve limited the strength of this child’s emunah to the level of his acceptance of our proofs. And a proof’s power of persuasion doesn’t depend only on the listener’s inability to disprove it. It also depends on the listener’s confidence that if there would be a flaw in the proof he would be able to identify it. To whatever extent he is less

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<sup>53</sup> This is not called ‘brainwashing’. This is called education. The adult is aware of the truth and gives it over to the child in the way he is most able to accept it.

<sup>54</sup> Of course not every case works out ideally, and that’s where intervention plays a role. By the same token, intellectual Emunah advocates don’t (or shouldn’t) either claim a 100% success rate. What we’re comparing here is best case scenarios – the relative benefits of each approach when they actually work as advertised. Whether or not there’s any reason to believe that emunah pshuta mesorah has stopped working on a general level was the subject of Section II.

than fully confident in this – and a young student would be most prudent not to feel fully confident – he has merely been silenced, not convinced. And a grudging silence is a terrible substitute for emunah pshuta.

Eemunah education is not about just slipping in the Ramban or occasionally pointing out niflaos haborei. If that would be all it was we would not have written this essay. Emunah education is about defining to the child *why* he believes. At that point his emunah is reduced from being axiomatic knowledge to the level of how compelling he finds your particular demonstration. Even if you do convince him, you have replaced what was a basic assumption with a logical argument.

At the time of the Spanish Expulsion, the Chassid Yaavitz observed that those who had arrived at emunah through mechkar were much less likely to be moser nefesh. Granted, what the emunah educators do is not technically mechkar, but the point remains the same. Knowledge arrived at through a logical construct is very easy to work around; there's always another way to look at things if one is truly motivated. Knowledge that is a simple fact of life is much more difficult to discard.

This is crucial, not only in situations that require outright mesiras nefesh. It reveals a shallowness in the emunah itself when reduced to how well you accept this or that proof. Rachmana litzlan on a dor that relates to Hashem Elokei Yisroel as a most likely hypotheses.

This problem doesn't magically disappear when we insist that we're really giving over emunah through kabbalas avos, and just 'substantiating' it with rational proofs. The question is not how the educator chooses to label what he is doing. The question is what impression is being made on the mind of the child. Perhaps a gifted youngster doing extracurricular reading or talking things over with a well-rounded Talmid Chacham can – when done correctly – be called 'substantiation'. Teaching a high school course based on R. Sapirman's book, or bringing professionals to school to present the rationale behind our faith, is not substantiation; it's emunah education. To a sixteen year old being instructed in emunah in this way by his Rabbeim or school this becomes the definitive reason why we believe. And his belief will not be any stronger than his acceptance of the proofs<sup>55</sup>.

##### **5: The kofrim and letzunim have answers to every single one of R. Sapirman's arguments.**

R. Sapirman and other emunah experts have many powerful arguments against the claims of those who don't accept the Torah. Unfortunately however, the other side has not thrown in the towel after one rebuttal. Their literature and websites are full of responses to all of these points. Of course, the responses are as fallacious and baseless as their original claims were. Even so, they are proclaimed with confidence and authority, or with the sneering condescendence so often used to lend the aura of obvious truth to pure wind. Certainly, the standard student cannot be expected to recognize on his own the point of disingenuousness.

R. Sapirman is very concerned about the emunah pshuta youngster who sits next to Robert on the plane and finds himself unable to articulate the rationale for his beliefs. We, on the other hand, wonder what happens to the logical emunah student when he sits next to someone who can issue a swift rejoinder to the proofs he'd been taught. Or when he stumbles across the wrong website, or picks up a sophisticated sounding textbook, which deftly belittle the "ignorant science deniers". (R. Sapirman actually encourages, over and over, students to do this research. This is undoubtedly the single most irresponsible piece of educating that we've seen in a very long time).

In this instance the emunah pshuta individual is infinitely better off. He responds, as he always has, "I am not a philosopher. I received my heritage from my parents and teachers and I accept it (such is the power

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<sup>55</sup> R. Sapirman actually recommends starting this approach as early as seventh grade(!). It defies all reason to suggest that a preteen elementary school student is clear in his faith to the point where all further education on the topic will be accepted as substantiation rather than a redefinition of his Emunah itself.

of mesorah, as explained by the Ramban). I don't know how to answer this guy's point. But I'm sure that some yodel on the internet did not just come up with an argument that the Chazon Ish, R' Avigdor Miller, R' Moshe Shapiro, or even my brilliant intellectual friend who's into this stuff wouldn't be able to answer in no time flat. I'm not concerned."

What, however, of our good graduate of logical emunah school? He proudly does not rely on "blind, senseless, magical leaps of faith", but rather believes, as he has been trained, because of the compelling logic of emunah. What happens when his neatly packaged proofs are swept aside by the power of *letzanus achas docheh maiyah tochachos*? Where does he find himself if 'Robert' knows enough to ask some tough follow up questions to the tidbits that have until now served as the justification of his emunah? Rachmana litzlan from the confusion and disillusionment.

This is most probably the reason that intellectual emunah investigation has for doros been left to the individuals with the capabilities and inclination to go all the way through to the end. The hamon am has prudently left it to the specialists, and have instead recognized Hashem through the mesorah and the koach of connection that exists in every Yiddisheh neshama. We depart from this derech of our fathers at our own peril.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the activists advocate for three main things:

**1 – To educate Rabbeim to be vigilant in recognizing emunah crises, give them the basic tools to respond in such instances, and direct them to refer the students to more experienced professionals.**

We find highly suspect the claims of an intellectual emunah epidemic<sup>56</sup> (as opposed to other issues that may carry the symptoms of emunah questioning, but must be dealt with for what they truly are), but if they have good advice for Rabbeim about how to deal with the cases that do come up, then by all means let them share it.

**2 – To have chinuch place a stress on the basic yesodos of Yahadus and avodas Hashem – the Ikrim, biur tefilla, etc.**

This is not an innovation to our chinuch system, but it may very well be something that can use chizuk. If so, more power to them for encouraging and providing materials for it. Aside for perhaps some difference of opinion in the details, few would object to this.

Alongside this they advocates for focusing on breeding passion and excitement for Yiddishkeit. Again, in theory this is a wonderful idea. However, we find the assumption that one instills passion by means of logical emunah classes extremely strange. Their efforts would be much better placed toward encouraging the breeding of passion through the many tried and true methods that are available.

**3 – The proactive introduction of courses and lectures into the general curriculum geared at raising and answering questions about evidence of the existence of the Borei Olam and the truths of the Torah.**

This truly is a serious departure from the traditional methods of transmitting our mesorah. It is this that many find controversial, and this is what all the furor is about.

In this essay we feel we have demonstrated that:

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<sup>56</sup> And we certainly assume the allegations of an epidemic of mechanchim yelling at, ostracizing, and expelling 'innocent children with innocent questions' to be fantasy.

- a) Most of the proffered defenses of the approach are really on examination arguments in favor of one of the other two aspects of their advocacy, and do not support the emunah curriculum innovation.
- b) The claim of a unique intellectual crisis plaguing our generation is unsupported by observation or evidence; the arguments for the necessity of this approach even in absence of such a crisis are pedagogically unsound.
- c) The advocated innovations present severe dangers, few of which do the activists address satisfactorily.

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At the heart the matter, we all desire just one thing for our children. We want them to live with the Ribbono Shel Olam daily, and to be shomerei Toraso. We want Yiddishkeit to be not just something they do, but the definition of their very existence.

Deep down we realize that there's only one way to get there. For our children to identify in that way with Yiddishkeit, they must be brought up in an atmosphere defined by Yiddishkeit. If they are to be passionate about the Eibershter, both the home and school environment must be saturated with excitement and connection to the Eibershter<sup>57</sup>.

This may require some serious lifestyle changes and reevaluation of priorities, and those are never comfortable. It's tempting to pretend that the introduction of some new school curriculum will do the job for us. After all, aren't the schools there to educate? So, somewhere between halacha class and biology class, let them insert a "Yushka's a fraud and Darwin's a fool, so now we have a deep meaningful relationship with the Eibershter" class. Unfortunately, that's not the answer, it won't work, it does not address the problem, and it brings along a whole peckel new problems of its own.

Like someone trying to energize a dull wedding by delivering a lecture on the meaning of happiness, we are completely missing the point. You've got to turn up the music a bit – and make sure it's a lively hora, not some doleful concerto played halfheartedly in D minor.

If we are serious about raising our children to be passionate and feel connected to Hashem, a revolution truly is in order. The activists should push for the radical innovation of staying the course: to strengthen ourselves in the lifestyle – or at least the ideology – that has kept Yiddishkeit alive and vibrant for three thousand years.

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<sup>57</sup> If it sounds like we're repeating tired clichés, it's because we are. These ideas are clichés by virtue of their obvious truth.

