

12

BELIEF AS TRUTH

KNOW YOURSELF TO KNOW GOD

Knowledge of the self perforce precedes knowledge of God. If I don't understand myself, I cannot understand the ultimate Being beyond myself. We learn this from the story of the prophet Balaam, who was asked by King Balak to curse the Jewish People.¹ As he was riding along, Balaam's donkey kept on stopping. Thinking that it was just the obstinacy of a donkey, he hit the animal.² But what was really happening was that the donkey was seeing an angel of God blocking his path—an angel that Balaam did not see.³

This is astonishing. Balaam was a prophet,⁴ matched only by Moses.⁵ He was the greatest and most honored of the non-Jews in his time.⁶ In fact, Moses was but the scribe to copy Balaam's prophecy into the

1 Numbers 22:9–11.

2 Ibid., v. 27.

3 Ibid., v. 23.

4 According to the *Ramban* (ibid., v. 31), Balaam's elevated level of prophecy was only for that particular episode.

5 In Deuteronomy 34:10, we read: "And there never arose another prophet in Israel like Moses who knew God face to face." The Sages (*Sifri* ad loc.) say, "In Israel [no such prophet] arose, but amongst the nations of the world, there did arise, i.e., Balaam."

6 Rabbi Meir Simchah of Dvinsk, *Meshech Chochmah*, Deuteronomy 34.

Torah.⁷ Yet, when God sent Balaam a message through his donkey, Balaam could not see.

The Sages ask: “How could Balaam claim to understand God if he could not even understand his own donkey?”⁸ But why does Balaam have to understand his donkey in order to understand God? Because Balaam’s donkey is a parable for his own physical self. In Hebrew, the word for donkey is *chamor* (חמור). The same letters make up the word *chomer* (חומר)—the material world. Balaam’s donkey—his body and materialistic self—were stronger than his soul. In the end, Balaam was so ravenously sensual that he could no longer understand even the wisdom of his own body. He was totally alienated from himself.

If we don’t first understand who we are—if we are so out of touch with our soul and our physical selves—we will not be able to connect to God. On the other hand, at a certain point we need to connect to God to fully appreciate ourselves. As someone once put it, “If you really believe there is no God, then you should believe that you are insignificant.”

THE REVELATION OF NATURE AND THE REVELATION OF TORAH

Abraham first discovered what I will call the God of the scientist. Everywhere he looked, he saw incredible order, demanding a higher intelligence overseeing and guiding the whole process.⁹ This is Einstein’s God, a God that “does not play dice,” a God of beauty and order, of wonderment at the astonishing complexity of the world. A world this complex with such order and beauty must surely be the handwork of God.¹⁰

Nature was the first of two revelations given to us; the other was the Torah.¹¹ The revelation of nature—the world of physics, genetics, or

7 Talmud, Tractate *Bava Batra* 14b: “And Moses wrote his own book and the portion of Balaam and the Book of *Iyov* (Job).” See *Ohr Gedalyahu*, beginning of *Parashat Balak*, for a deeper understanding.

8 Tractate *Berachot* 7.

9 *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis, beg. of *Parashat Lech Lecha* 39a.

10 Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*: “His [religious] beliefs seemed to arise from the sense of awe and transcendent order that he discovered through his scientific work.” On another occasion, Einstein stated, “What separates me from most so-called atheists is a feeling of utter humility toward the unattainable secrets of the harmony of the cosmos.”

11 Note at end of 18th letter in the *Nineteen Letters*.

anatomy—is a ladder that we can climb to reach the higher realms of Torah.¹² By discovering one, Abraham was able to reach the other.¹³

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch once commented: “What will I answer when asked, ‘Raphael, did you see my beautiful Alps?’” God wants us to experience the natural beauties of the world. He wants us to hear the birds sing, to see the trees blossom, and to be in awe.¹⁴ He wants us to see the mundane and sense the sublime. And He wants us to feel His guiding presence behind all of this. This kind of God-connection was Abraham’s first gift to the world.¹⁵

Two revelations are given to us—nature and the Torah.

BELIEF THAT—BELIEF IN

To experience the revelation of God in nature is to reach the level of “belief that”—belief *that* God exists. Abraham does not rest with just that discovery. He moved from a level of “belief that” to a level of “belief in.” He provided a radically different model of how God acts and how we, in turn, must act toward Him. The gods of his contemporaries had no interest in lowly man, but Abraham concluded that this can’t be true. God’s whole purpose in creating man was to share His goodness—not only with mankind in general, but with each person in particular.¹⁶ And so, Abraham’s big discovery was that God is interested in each human—that God is happy to lower Himself, so to speak, into the nitty-gritty of man and his needs.¹⁷ And this must mean that God continuously challenges us to grow by tailor-making the universe

12 *Maharal, Netiv HaTorah*, chap. 14. The *Maharal* continues: “And from this we can conclude that we should study everything that can lead us to an underlying understanding of the nature of the world; [and indeed] one is obligated to do so, for all is the act of God, and through this understanding one will come to understand one’s Creator.”

13 Even though the Torah had yet to be given to mankind, Abraham discovered the entire Torah for himself through this method.

14 Psalms 148.

15 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Foundations of Torah 2:2.

16 *Ramchal, Daat Tevunot* 18.

17 Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur*, vol. 1, p. 307.

to perfectly fit the growth needs of every human at each and every moment. This is the principle of Divine Providence.¹⁸

God comes down to us because He wants to have a relationship with us. He wants to model behavior for us. He wants us to walk in His ways.¹⁹ The redemptive power of God is bound up in the personal mystery and journey of each one of us.

The Torah introduces Abraham when he is already seventy-five years old. God tells him to leave everything and go to an unknown destination. Abraham listens because his belief in God has led to trusting in Him. He has graduated from belief that—the God of the scientists—to belief in—the God of a relationship.²⁰

Judaism does not teach us about the God of the scientist—not because it is not important, but because it presumes we can get that information elsewhere. The Torah is a book that teaches us how to live; it is not a book of proofs. We don't need Torah to teach us the God of Einstein. We need it to teach us how to connect to Him.

FAITH VS. PROOF

Judaism never claimed to prove itself at the level demanded by the skeptic, for the skeptic often demands a level of proof that does not exist. The skeptic asks that Judaism be presented as the only possible explanation to its claims, but that is impossible. It is always possible to give another explanation for a given set of phenomena. What we can conclude, though, is that God and His Torah is the best possible explanation for the world we see amongst all the competing alternatives. No scientist can do better than that—or claims to—when proposing any scientific theory.²¹

Judaism does have back up, lots of it. Archeology, internal logic, codes, rational arguments, and the sheer profundity and relevance

18 This idea is included in Principles Nine and Ten of the Thirteen Principles of Faith.

19 Talmud, Tractate *Shabbat* 133b.

20 See next chapter.

21 In fact, according to Sir Karl Popper (*The Open Society and Its Enemies*), the best a scientific proof can do is to claim that it has not yet been disproven. Quantum physics goes much further in claiming the essential unknowability of the world.

of the Torah—they all add up to a remarkable claim of Judaism’s authenticity. There is no religion that even begins to make a claim of an involved God who gave His laws to an entire people. There simply is no competing explanation that comes close to accounting for the entire sweep of what Judaism is claiming.

At some point, the cumulative observations and experiences of a person lead to an internal resonance with the Torah. The faith of the Jew is but a rational extension of what he can see and test. His faith is but a stretching of his spiritual self to the horizon that he can see and beyond.

As with the individual, so with the nation. When Moses sent the spies into the land of Israel, ten of them returned reporting that the Jewish People didn’t stand a chance against the well-armed and fortified Canaanites.²² Caleb and Joshua, the other two spies, stood in opposition.²³ Caleb pointed the Jewish People to a faith in God that places the Jewish People above the normal laws of history.²⁴ This is not to be irrational; it is to transcend oneself.²⁵

God revealed to Elijah one of the secrets of how to do this: God tells Elijah that He is not found in the mighty wind nor the raging fire, but rather in the soft, thin voice.²⁶

There are people—entire generations—who will not find God through dramatic proofs and loud noises declaring the truth of the Torah, but they will respond to the still, quiet voice of exemplary figures modeling the Torah personality. They will respond to the flavor of its festivals, and to the intellectual challenge of its wisdom. Judaism is not a loud religion. It does not solicit converts (though it welcomes them). It is not a religion whose legitimacy rests in the numbers of its adherents.²⁷ It is found in the still, quiet voice.

22 Numbers 13:27–29.

23 Ibid., v. 30; 14:6–9.

24 Ibid. 14:9.

25 *Aish Kodesh, Parashat Shekalim.*

26 Kings I 19:11–12.

27 The current world Jewish population is in the region of 14.5 million.