

Strengthening Our Belief in Hashem and His Beautiful Torah – Part One

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

It is of significant importance to reinforce the foundations of our Torah beliefs and lives. We need to be able to convince ourselves as well as the succeeding generations of Jews of the rational basis of our practices. Thus, I wish to share with readers of Kol Torah an extended discussion as to why I am completely convinced of the truth of Hashem and His Holy Torah. I wish to present a number of approaches that I have found exceedingly convincing. One should also consult other Rabbanim and discover other approaches should one not find my thoughts convincing. There are many portals to belief in Hashem and the divine origin of Torah. Not every approach is suitable for every individual. One should search for the Rav and approach that is the “right fit” for one’s mindset and personality. A good source of essays and presentations on this vitally important topic appear at www.simpletoremember.com. Rav Lawrence Kelemen’s “Permission to Believe” and “Permission to Receive” as well as Rav Shmuel Waldman’s book “Beyond a Reasonable Doubt” are good resources as well.

One methodological note - I follow the Rambam’s example from the introduction to his commentary to Pirkei Avot (called the Shemonah Perakim) and cite some ideas from outside our Tradition. The Rambam teaches us “to accept the truth whatever its source.”

Introduction

It is important to clarify that I do not seek to “prove” Hashem’s existence, because as modern philosophers have noted, this is not a productive exercise. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik in his classic essay *The Lonely Man of Faith* cites Soren Kierkegaard’s (a major mid-nineteenth century religious philosopher) reaction when hearing that the medieval philosopher Anselm of Canterbury engaged in prayer an entire evening beseeching God to help him formulate his celebrated Ontological Proof of God’s Existence. Kierkegaard, in turn, asked, does a bride in the embrace of her beloved bridegroom require proof of his existence? Kierkegaard argues that Anselm’s intense prayer constituted a more authentic “proof” of God than the Ontological Proof.

Moreover, modern philosophers (such as Descartes and Kant) have demonstrated that one can “prove” very little, if anything. Descartes notes that one cannot prove that other people exist, as perhaps it is merely an evil demon that is painting a false image on one’s brain to fool one into thinking that others exist. Despite the inability to prove the existence of others, I nevertheless am one hundred percent convinced of the existence of others. Similarly, I am thoroughly convinced of the Truth of Hashem and His Torah. Moreover, I believe that denying the existence of God and the divine origin of the Torah is as unreasonable and irrational as denying that other people exist.

As one who majored in philosophy and who did extensive graduate work in Jewish philosophy, I deeply respect to philosophic discourse. However, one does not use philosophic reasoning to arrive at the most important decisions in life such as choosing a spouse, career, place to live, physician or financial investment. Instead, one uses intuition, common sense and experience to make sound decisions. It is entirely unreasonable to abandon intuition, common sense and experience to arrive at the most important decision of all, the belief in Hashem and His Torah. Thus, in our discussions we will be using the tools of life – intuition, common sense and experience – and not the tools of pure theory, philosophic discourse, to arrive at a reasonable decision regarding Hashem and His Torah.

Rav Elchanan Wasserman – The Argument from Design

Rav Elchanan Wasserman (in his Kovetz Maamarim) argues that it is obvious that there is a God from the fact that we see order in this world. Common sense teaches that this is impossible for this to happen by itself and thus it is obvious that the world has a Creator. Regarding an exquisite painting, it is absurd to say that it was created by a long series of fortunate coincidences. It is just as absurd to say that something as intricate and accurate such as the human eye came about without a Creator. Philosophers have traditionally referred to this type of proof as the argument from design. Many earlier Jewish philosophers such as Rabbeinu Bachya espoused this argument for Hashem's existence.

Rav Elchanan takes this argument one step further arguing that it is also obvious that the Creator would provide a manual on how to function in the world He created. We may draw an analogy to a car manufacturer who provides a manual on how to operate the car he has created. So too, argues Rav Elchanan, common sense dictates that Hashem provided a manual, namely the Torah, for all human beings (both Jews and non-Jews) to know how to act.

Rambam on Ahavat Hashem

The Rambam (Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 2:2) writes that an appreciation of nature can draw one close to Hashem and love Him (Ahavat Hashem) and stand in awe of Him (Yirat Hashem). In our generation we are given an even greater opportunity to draw close to Hashem due to the magnificent scientific discoveries of the last hundred years. One who contemplates the magnificence even of the tiny e-Coli and certainly the intricacies of the human eye has the ability to profoundly enrich his Yirat Hashem and Ahavat Hashem. Far from undermining Torah, science has the potential for a reasonable person to draw inspiration to deepen our admiration of Hashem and the magnificence of His works.

Ramban and Kuzari – Mesorah

For the Ramban (commentary to Shemot 13:16) and the Kuzari the most persuasive argument for faith in Torah is Mesorah (tradition). As the Kuzari notes, the miracles associated with great events in Jewish history, Yetziat Mitzrayim and Maamad Har Sinai, were witnessed by millions of people who

passed this information to their descendants year after year at their Seders. This is unlike the miracles claimed by other religions that are described as having occurred before a very limited number of people. In addition, it is important to emphasize that we are the only religion to believe in a mass revelation that has been passed down in an unbroken chain from generation to generation. Indeed, most Jews today are the biological descendents of the people who experienced the mass revelation (for DNA evidence that Jews today constitute one nation despite their dispersion throughout the globe, see Dr. Karen Bacon, The Torah U-Madda Journal 3:1-7; there have been further DNA studies demonstrating that Sephardic, Ashkenzaic and Yemenite Jews share a common Middle Eastern ancestry). For further elaboration on this idea see Rav Lawrence Kelemen's "Permission to Believe" and "Permission to Receive" as well as his video presentation "A Rational Approach to the Torah's Divine Origin" which may be accessed at www.simpletoremember.org Rav Kelemen stresses that we are the only religion-people in the entire world who make claim mass revelation and are the descendents of the witnesses to these events as stated in Devarim 4:32-36, especially Pasuk 33 "Has a **people** ever heard the voice of God speaking". Pasuk 32 notes "Has there been anything like this great event or has anything like it been heard". No else makes a claim of mass revelation since it can be verified as a lie. Only we make this claim because only our claim is true. One might argue that Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah because they were a docile and gullible people who accepted anything and everything that Moshe Rabbeinu told them, because of his seductive and persuasive oratory. However, this is hardly true as Bnei Yisrael regrettably were constantly bickering and disobeying Moshe Rabbeinu. Moreover, Moshe Rabbeinu was a very poor speaker. Virtually the only time we were unified was at Har Sinai (see Rashi Shemot 19:1). The reason we united at Sinai was that the authenticity of the Har Sinai experience was profoundly compelling and unquestionably persuasive. Similarly, we find in every generation that observant Jews are not passive and gullible people who are accepting of everything. Every significant Talmudic and Halachic issue is carefully examined by both great experts and laypeople who vigorously and rigorously analyze every new and old opinion. Despite these many disputes, observant Jews agree upon core values and beliefs such as the divine authorship of the Torah. The Rambam (Hilchot Mamrim 1:3) indicates that if there is no dispute regarding a particular law then this law must originate as a tradition from Sinai. Examples of such laws are the Halacha that our Tefillin must be colored black and that our Mezuzot contain only the two Parshiot of Shema and Vihaya Im Shamo'a. I surmise that most undisputed matters must be of heavenly origin; otherwise, we would be fighting rigorously about these laws in the manner we do about so many other Halachot. Incidentally, it seems that this is the reason why the Sefer HaChinuch (21) rules that women are obligated in the Mitzvah of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim (recounting the story of our Exodus from Egypt) even though it is a positive and time bound Mitzvah from which women are normally excused (see the Minchat Chinuch's criticism of the Chinuch's ruling). The essence of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim is the transmittal of faith from one generation to another by recounting and

authenticating the Exodus story. Women are thus certainly included in this Mitzvah. This also explains why grandparents play such an important role to in Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim (see Shemot 10:2 and the comments of the Oznayim LaTorah ad. loc.). Torah Academy of Bergen County graduate Josh Strobel uses a similar argument to explain the Ramban's opinion (Kiddushin 34a) that women are obligated to count the Omer, despite the fact that it is a positive and time bound Mitzvah. Josh notes that Sefirat Haomer serves as the link between the Exodus story and the Sinai revelation, the two pillars of our Emunah (see TABC's Bikkurei Sukkah section 60).

A Culture of Brilliant Argumentativeness that Believes in Revelation

Indeed, Amos Oz (a prominent Israeli author) is cited in "Start-Up Nation" (page 51) as commenting

"Judaism and Israel have always cultivated a culture of doubt and argument, an open-ended game of interpretations, counter-interpretations, reinterpretations, opposing interpretations. From the beginning of the existence of Jewish civilization, it was recognized by its argumentativeness".

Mr. Oz, an avowed secularist, is correct regarding this point. Nearly every page of Gemara is filled with arguments. The intense arguments persist with great vigor throughout the period of the Rishonim and continue with the myriad of debate concerning the Rambam and the Shulchan Aruch. Until this very day an excellent Shiur and Yeshiva are distinguished by intense debate and argument. The Gemara (Bava Metzia 84a) relates how Rabi Yochanan experienced severe depression because his students were not challenging him after the death of Reish Lakish. Rabi Yochanan longed for the time when Reish Lakish's persistent questioning allowed for the refining of his Torah thoughts and approaches.

One could argue that it is for this reason Hashem chose the Jewish People, the stiff-necked people, to be His witnesses (Yeshayahu 43:10). If such an argumentative and contentious people report on the veracity of the Sinai revelation despite the extensive demands it makes upon its adherents, then it certainly must be true.

In addition, it is inaccurate to state that Orthodox individuals who remain steadfast in their belief in the Sinai revelation are docile and gullible personalities. Nothing could be further from the truth. Today, while there is some variety within non-Orthodox versions of Judaism, they are essentially variations on the same theme. To experience traditional Jewish argumentativeness one must encounter the dizzying array of varieties of Orthodoxy. Sephardic, Yemenite, Ashkenazic, Chassidic and Modern Orthodox are only a basic outline of the groups of which there exist dozens of sub-groups. Orthodox Jews vigorously debate thousands of Halachic and Hashkafic issues. The contentious nature of contemporary

Orthodox Jewry becomes abundantly clear when purchasing a kosher food item that bears the certification of no less than four different kashrut agencies. Yet, what unites all of the myriad subdivisions within Orthodoxy is the belief in the Sinai revelation and the other pillars of Orthodox faith.

In addition, the Jewish people have contributed an unparalleled proportion of Noble Prize winners. As a nation we are an extraordinarily intelligent people. No one can deny the genius of the Talmud and its commentaries. Hashem seems to have chosen a most argumentative and brilliant people to serve as His witnesses for the simple reason that if we were convinced of revelation then it must have been true. The difficulty of many of the Torah's laws, such as Brit Milah, Shemittah and Aliyah L'Regel further clinch this point. A brilliant, argumentative and contentious nation could not have been convinced to accept the Torah as the binding command of God had they not been thoroughly convinced of its divine origins.

In the coming issues (available at www.koltorah.org) we shall continue with more common sense reasons for why I am thoroughly convinced of the truth of Hashem and His Torah.

Strengthening Our Belief in Hashem and His Beautiful Torah – Part Two

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

In our last issue we began outlining some of the reasons for my steadfast belief in Hashem and the divine origin of the Torah. We discussed the argument from design and the argument from an unparalleled mass revelation whose contents has been passed down in an unbroken chain of tradition from the millions of witnesses to their biological descendents who are alive until this very day. We continue this week with approaches based on Jewish History, Halacha and Tanach.

The Argument from Jewish History – The Aruch Hashulchan

The Aruch Hashulchan (Orach Chaim 1:10) wrote (in 1903):

“There is no greater sign and proof than our survival of nearly two thousand years of Exile. The only reason for our survival is because of Hashem's Hashgachah (divine providence) that is not removed from us even for a moment like a father who watches over his only child and chastises him for the latter's benefit.”

Indeed, one who ponders the wonders of Jewish history, unparalleled in any other world culture, realizes that logically we should have disappeared long ago. Our survival attests to the fact that Hashem watches over His special people. Indeed, the stories of Am Yisrael's close encounters with extinction in the Tanach (such as the infertility of Avraham Avinu and Sarah Imeinu as well as Yitzchak Avinu and Rivkah Imeinu, the Exodus from Mitzrayim and the parting of the Yam Suf, and being saved from Haman) have been repeated in our time.

The Jewish People seemed to have been lost and finished as a nation after

World War II. Yet we managed to establish Medinat Yisrael in 1948 despite overwhelming odds. Rav Yehuda Amital (Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion) often commented that some future historians will likely cast grave doubts on the authenticity of the story of a downtrodden people, who lost a third of its people within six years, who, three years later, managed to reestablish its homeland by winning a war fought on multiple fronts which at times even was won by throwing seltzer bottles from planes and firing fake cannons (such as the Davidka).

Similarly, one who reads Michael Oren's "Six Days of War" can only be amazed at how a desperate situation for the Jewish State shockingly turned into a stunning victory for Israel. For example, one is amazed at the irrational behavior of Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian who prematurely retreated at their respective positions of battle, thereby enabling Israel to take over so much territory. One can only conclude, as even Moshe Dayan did at the conclusion of this war, that this is another example of Hashem sustaining His people. One who studies the Yom Kippur War will also discover that Israel's surviving this war was an incredible feat. The Arab armies were well prepared for battle (unlike 1967) and Israel was devastatingly unprepared. Despite this fact and the need to fight on two fronts, Israel emerged badly bruised, but intact.

In the United States, as well as in Israel, sociologists in the 1950's predicted that Orthodox Judaism would soon disappear. Look Magazine in 1964 ran a famous cover story entitled "The Vanishing Orthodox Jew." Baruch Hashem, at this point, there are (Bli Ayin Hara) more than two million Orthodox Jews worldwide (including Chareidi and Modern Orthodox Jews) and the once popular Look Magazine has vanished. Moreover, Orthodox Jewry is the only Jewish religious group that is, with Hashem's help, increasing in numbers.

Interestingly, Torah Academy of Bergen County graduate Akiva Weiss has suggested (also see Rav Soloveitchik's Kol Dodi Dofeik) that the reason that this generation is the one that Hashem has decided to create Medinat Yisrael, is that this was necessary to facilitate the continuation of our faith in Torah after the Holocaust. Indeed, Rav Soloveitchik recalled that when he traveled from Boston to New York to give Shiur at Yeshiva University during the Second World War, he constantly encountered missionaries who argued that the Holocaust was "proof" that Hashem had abandoned the Jewish People. The establishment of Medinat Yisrael undermined this argument that was used against us.

Mark Twain's famous words regarding the Jews help clinch the Aruch Hashulchan's argument:

"If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion

to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in the world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

We religious Jews understand very well that divine providence is the secret of his immortality. Indeed Rav Yaakov Emden said in the introduction to his Siddur - "By the life of my head," the greatest miracle is the continued survival of the Jewish people. Rav Emden asserts that the miracle of Jewish survival is even greater than the miracle of the splitting of the Yam Suf.

Rav Soloveitchik – The Argument from Halacha

Rav Soloveitchik writes in his classic essay, *The Ish Hahalacha*, that the Halacha is the most compelling proof for the truth of Torah. I understand this to mean that the scholar (or student guided by a competent teacher) who plumbs the depths of the Halachic system will be overwhelmed with its beauty and majesty to the point that he is left with no other option than to accept the divine origin of this system. It also might mean that one who spends a lifetime dedicated to abiding by the Halachic system will conclude that it is indeed the finest prescription for leading a fulfilling and content life. He will also comprehend why a recurring theme in Sefer Devarim that the Torah's rules are "Litov Lach," serve our best interest. This idea is best expressed by the Yeushalmi (Chagigah 1:10) that the light of Torah will draw people close to Hashem.

One striking example of the benefit of a Torah lifestyle is the dramatically lower incidence of divorce among observant Jews than among non-observant Jews. A Torah lifestyle which include adherence to the discipline of Taharat Hamishpachah and "forced vacations" on Shabbat and Yom Tov is most conducive to creating a content married and family life. Considering that most of life's happiness or misery hinges on the success of one's marriage, Orthodox Jewry's far lower incidence of divorce is a fact of monumental importance.

Another meaning of Rav Soloveitchik's assertion appears to be the incredible enterprise of applying the ancient Halacha to the contemporary situation. The world in general and the Jewish People specifically in the last hundred years have undergone a dramatic and unprecedented degree of change in all area ranging from technology to sociology and political reality. Nonetheless, Poskim have readily applied the venerated concepts of the Gemara to modern circumstances. Amazingly, Poskim find a precedent in the Gemara for virtually

every new phenomenon that emerges in society. The Halacha is a fully functional and sophisticated system despite the inability to create new rules in most areas. It functions beautifully on almost entirely a precedent based system. This is because of the miraculous existence of a precedent in the Tanach or Gemara for every new phenomenon that emerges.

For example, precedents exist in the Gemara for electricity (see Sanhedrin 77), in vitro fertilization (see Chullin 70), and Jews who deviate from Halacha who are psychologically unable to grasp their error (Sanhedrin 26). A perusal of every issue of the Israeli Torah journal "Techumin" and the "American Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society" demonstrates the ability of Halacha to be applied to the contemporary situation in Medinat Yisrael despite the fact that we had not enjoyed political independence for nearly two thousand years.

A comparison with the United States constitution, an extraordinary document created by human hands, is helpful. It has succeeded far beyond the expectations of its authors. However, critics have recently noted its shortcomings in that it does not adequately address the many new technological and social phenomena that could not have possibly been anticipated by its human authors. The fact that the Torah contains precedents for every new phenomenon leads me to the inescapable conclusion that the Torah is of divine origin and that the Talmud and its commentaries are the result of pronounced divine assistance. There exists no parallel in any other culture in the world. Natural occurrences as a rule are not unique and reoccur throughout history. A unique occurrence point to a supernatural phenomenon.

Similarly, I find it profoundly inspirational to study Tanach using and the Megadim Tanach journal and the Da'at Mikra commentary. They have used the sophisticated tools of modern literary analysis that Bible critics use to denigrate Torah, to provide stunningly profound insights into Tanach and Chazal. A perusal of every issue of Megadim contains breathtaking new insights into our holy Torah and Chazal. Indeed, Rav Mordechai Breuer observes (in an essay published in Herzog College's Esther Hee Haddassa p. 66) that just as the pole that Haman wished to hang Mordechai upon was used to hang Haman, the methodologies that Bible critics wish to use to disparage the Torah are used to bring glory to Torah and Chazal. Da'at Mikra is a late twentieth century commentary on the entire Tanach written by Orthodox scholars who have used the tools of archaeology, geography and knowledge of ancient Near Eastern languages to add invaluable insights to Torah knowledge. This work also thoroughly but subtly responds in a highly sophisticated and effective manner to the claims and accusations of Biblical Criticism.

In short, the developments of the last two centuries have hardly undermined the Torah. Just the opposite is true. Rav Hershel Schachter once observed that new challenges posed by technology and other novelties have literally forced Talmudic scholars to refine and define areas of Torah that were not addressed in

earlier generations. For example, issues of the precise definition of motherhood, paternity and fire have been formulated, intensely debated and refined by twentieth and twenty first century Poskim due to unprecedented developments in science and technology. The developments and discoveries have enriched the Torah to an extent far beyond any reasonable expectation.

Conclusion

In coming issues we shall continue this series with a discussion of how promises in the Torah have been fulfilled throughout history including our times, pragmatic theory of truth, archaeology and why Hashem makes a bit of a challenge.

Strengthening Our Belief in Hashem and His Beautiful Torah –Part Three: Fulfilled Prophecies

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

This week we continue our discussions supporting belief in Hashem and other traditional beliefs. This essay will focus on some examples of fulfilled promises of the Torah. We seek to show that the fulfillment of these promises demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt that the Torah is the product of a divine author. A human author could not have made such predictions which have been fulfilled against all reasonable expectations thousands of years after it was first recorded.

Netzach Yisrael

The Tanach (Shmuel I 15:29) refers to the Jewish People as “Eternal Israel”. We stressed the miraculous nature of Jewish survival throughout the ages in last week’s essay (archived at www.koltorah.org). Thus we already have one Biblical prediction that continues to be fulfilled against all odds. Leo Tolstoy (What is the Jew? quoted in The Final Resolution, pg. 189, printed in Jewish World periodical, 1908) expressed this point as follows:

“What is the Jew?...What kind of unique creature is this whom all the rulers of all the nations of the world have disgraced and crushed and expelled and destroyed; persecuted, burned and drowned, and who, despite their anger and their fury, continues to live and to flourish. What is this Jew whom they have never succeeded in enticing with all the enticements in the world, whose oppressors and persecutors only suggested that he deny (and disown) his religion and cast aside the faithfulness of his ancestors?!

The Jew - is the symbol of eternity. ... He is the one who for so long had guarded the prophetic message and transmitted it to all mankind. A people such

as this can never disappear. The Jew is eternal. He is the embodiment of eternity.”

Ki Lo Teeshachach Mipi Zaram

Moreover, the Torah (Devarim 31:21) states that Torah will never be forgotten amongst the Jews. As Rashi (ad. loc. quoting Shabbat 138b) explains, “This is a promise that the Torah will never be completely forgotten from amongst the Jews”. Indeed there always has remained a righteous remnant (see Yeshayahu 4:3 and 10:20-22) amongst the Jews despite the overwhelming difficulties and challenges in many situations in Jewish History. Indeed, Megillat Esther (9:28) makes the same bold prediction that the Purim story will always be remembered and observed by the Jews, leading the Gemara (Megillah 7a) to conclude from this Pasuk that the Megilah was written with divine inspiration.

This prediction is even more startling when one considers that many sociologists predicted the demise of Orthodox Judaism in the 1950's. Contrary to all expectations, it is the only form of Judaism that today is growing, vital and vigorous. We must emphasize that this is entirely counterintuitive. One would think the less demanding versions of Judaism that are more in harmony with contemporary values would thrive. Nonetheless, specifically the most demanding and most traditional version of Judaism is the most successful version of Judaism in the twenty first century.

The ancient world was governed by several different empires. At their height, several of them ruled the entire known civilized world. However, once conquered and deprived of political independence, those empires and their cultures all disappeared. Are today's Egyptians the descendents of the Pharaohs and their nation? Are today's Italians the offspring of the Romans who ruled the world for hundreds of years? The ancient cultures are certainly not maintained. The Jews as well are an ancient people. And it wasn't just once that they were conquered and dispersed (and often slaughtered as well). Almost every European and near-eastern country that grew powerful eventually turned on its outnumbered and defenseless Jews and oppressed them - to greater or lesser degrees. Yet, the Jews endure to this day as an identifiable entity. And they are as vibrant and critical a force in the world as ever. This is God's miracle!

Rav Yaakov Emden (1697-1776) writes (in his introduction to his commentary to the Siddur): The Jews of his time were studying the very same words of the Torah that their immediate ancestors did. Those ancestors studied the same words that their forefathers did, and so it continues. Each generation studied the exact same texts the previous generation did, extending back in an unbroken chain for thousands of years.

Amazingly, this took place over centuries during which the Jews were exiled from country-to-country-to-country. And the persecutions they suffered often included

the confiscation and burning of their Torah Scrolls and Books of the Talmud. Furthermore, they were dispersed throughout the world with very slow and minimal communication between their far-flung communities. Yet, every word of the Torah has survived intact.

Rav Emden concluded that (even back in his time) this phenomenon was a greater miracle than the splitting of the Yam Suf. That this phenomenon has endured into the 21st century is even more astonishing. What the Jews suffered - just between Rav Emden's time and the present - far exceeds what the citizens of any ancient empire endured. Most Sephardic Jews were driven from their different homelands, while the Germans displaced and then slaughtered most of Mainland Europe's Jews.

Yet, not one word of the Torah and Talmud texts that Jews delve into has been lost. In our times, more than a hundred thousand young Jews attend traditional yeshivot. There they study Tanach and Gemara - the identical words and explanations that their forefathers have been studying continuously for millennia. That every syllable of the Torah has survived intact and continues to be treasured and studied is perhaps the greatest Jewish-survival-miracle of all.

Veshamemu Aleha Oyveichem – Eretz Yisrael is Desolate while we are in Exile

The Ramban notes the fulfillment of the land of Israel being desolate after our Exile from the land (Vayikra 26:32-35, Devarim 29:13 and 24) as “publicizing to all nations the punishment from Hashem” we received as forewarned by the Torah if we do not honor our Torah obligations. Elsewhere (commentary to Vayikra 26:15) the Ramban, writing in the thirteenth century, explains the Torah's (ad. loc. Pasuk 32) informing us that if and when we are exiled, our enemies will fail in the land:

This is a great proof and promise to us, as there is nowhere else in the entire world a land that was beautiful and productive and was inhabited for so long and yet currently desolate. From the time we were forced out of the land it has accepted no nation and they all try to settle it but meet with no success.

This contrasts sharply with Josephus Flavius' (“The Jewish wars”) testimony regarding the abundance of Eretz Yisrael prior to the Roman exile: “...for it is an extremely fertile land, a land of pastures and many varieties of trees... The entire land is planted by her inhabitants and not one stretch of earth is left uncared for. Because the land is blessed with such goodness, the cities of the Galil and numerous villages are densely populated. Even the smallest of villages boasts of at least 15,000 inhabitants.”

Indeed, in the 1260's, the Ramban, writing to his son from Eretz Yisrael, gave a very different picture: “What shall I tell you concerning the condition of the Land... She is greatly forsaken and her desolation is great... That which is of greater

holiness is more desolate than that which is of lesser holiness. Yerushalyim is most desolate and destroyed.”

In 1867, the famous non-Jewish author Mark Twain makes a similar observation when he visited the land of Israel, in a stunning passage of his work “Innocents Abroad” (chapter 56):

Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince.

The hills are barren, they are dull of color, they are unpicturesque in shape. The valleys are unsightly deserts tinged with a feeble vegetation that has an expression about it of being sorrowful and despondent. The Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee sleep in the midst of a vast stretch of hill and plain wherein the eye rests upon no pleasant tint, no striking object, no soft picture dreaming in a purple haze or mottled with the shadows of the clouds. Every outline is harsh, every feature is distinct, there is no perspective – distance works no enchantment here. It is a hopeless, dreary, heart-broken land”.

Compare this quasi-post-nuclear scene with the Torah’s dire warning:

“...and the foreigner who will come from a distant land — when they will see the plagues of the Land and the illnesses with which G-d has inflicted it; sulfur and salt, a conflagration of the entire Land, it cannot be sown and it cannot sprout, and no grass shall rise up on it... And all the nations will say ‘For what reason did G-d do so to this Land?’” (Devarim 29:21).

Since the 1880’s with Hashem’s blessing and help we have seen Eretz Yisrael wake up. The Eretz Yisrael we see today is totally different than what Mark Twain saw. On display for the entire world to see is how the land of Israel remains faithful to the Jewish People (using a phrase I heard from Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik) as it is productive for us and desolate for others. For example, the Jewish inhabited sections of the Gaza Strip were so productive that its produce was sought after throughout the world (even in mainstream supermarkets here in the United States) on the one hand, and yet the Arab controlled Gaza Strip has emerged as one of the poorest places on earth.

Hashem does not perform open miracles in every generation. However, Hashem makes certain “quasi-open miracles” as ample evidence of the divine source of our holy Torah. Moreover, in the past one hundred and thirty years He has magnified the quasi-open miracle of Eretz Yisrael’s loyalty to the Jews and made the quasi-open miracle of the establishment and maintenance of Jewish sovereignty over portions of Eretz Yisrael.

Conclusion

Next week we conclude our discussion with even more startling of biblical prophecies.

Strengthening Our Belief in Hashem and His Beautiful Torah –Part Four: Fulfilled Prophecies

Last week we presented three astonishing fulfillments of Biblical prophecies that demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt that the Torah constitutes the word of Hashem. In this essay we present more prophecies many of which we witness its fulfillment in the past number of decades.

Hein Am Levadad Yishkon

The Torah (Bemidbar 23:9 and Devarim 33:28) describes the Jewish people as “dwelling alone”. This Pasuk accurately portrays our destiny as being always being at least somewhat isolated from the rest of humanity. Indeed, secular Zionists, as brilliant and talented as they were in laying the foundations for a Jewish State, mistakenly thought that the Jewish people would cease dwelling alone once the Jewish State was established. They thought a Jewish State would bring an end to anti-Semitism, which they thought stemmed from our being a nation like no other, which possesses no land of its own.

In fact, Israeli ambassador Yehuda Avner (“The Prime Ministers” page 396) reports that Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir remarked how lonely she invariably felt when she attended a session at the United Nations. “We have no family there” she said. “Israel is entirely alone there. But why should that be?” Golda Meir, who was thoroughly secular, did not bother answering her momentous question.

However, an Israeli leader of a much more traditional bent, Menachem Begin, understood fully that this phenomenon is due to the Torah’s prediction. Prime Minister Begin stated (ibid.):

“One does not have to be a mystic for the imagination to be stirred by such an improbable vision of a nation forever dwelling alone. Is it not a startlingly accurate prophecy of our Jewish people’s experience in all of history?”

In contrast with secular Zionists, religious Zionist Yaakov Herzog writes in his work “A People that Dwells Alone” page 52

“The theory of classic Zionism was national normalization. What was wrong with the theory? It was the belief that the idea of a ‘people that dwells alone’ is an abnormal concept, when actually a ‘people that dwells alone’ is the natural concept of the Jewish people. That is why this one

phrase still describes the totality of the extraordinary phenomenon of Israel's revival. If one asks how the ingathering of the exiles, which no one could have imagined in his wildest dreams, came about, or how the State of Israel could endure such severe security challenges, or how it has built up such a flourishing economy, or how the unity of the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora has been preserved, one must come back to the primary idea that this is 'a people that dwells alone'. More than that, one must invoke this phrase not only to understand how the Jews have existed for so long; one must invoke it as a testimony to the Jewish right to exist at all in the land of their rebirth".

A Tiny Nation that brings a Blessing to the World

Hashem's promise to Avraham Avinu (Breishit 12:3) that his descendants will bring blessing to the world has been fulfilled by the Jewish people as a whole and individuals. Yet the Torah (Devarim 4:27) predicts that Jewish people will remain small in number during their exile. Yet, the basic noble values of western society such as kindness to the weakest members of society, honoring parents and a day of rest all emanate from the teachings of the Torah. The Jewish people produced Nobel Prize winners far beyond their proportion (between 1901 and 2008, more than 750 Nobel Prizes were handed out; of these, at least 163 are Jews). The State of Israel contributes breakthroughs in technology, medicine and science far beyond what would be expected from a country with a relatively small population.

Paul Johnson (a Christian historian, author of A History of the Jews and A History of Christianity) expressed this point as follows:

"Certainly, the world without the Jews would have been a radically different place. Humanity might have eventually stumbled upon all the Jewish insights. But we cannot be sure. All the great conceptual discoveries of the human intellect seem obvious and inescapable once they had been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jews had this gift. To them we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of human person; of the individual conscience and so a personal redemption; of collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without Jews it might have been a much emptier place."

Anti-Semitism

Devarim (28:37) warns that if we are exiled as a result of sin "You will be a source of astonishment, a parable and a conversation piece, among all the peoples where Hashem will lead us". From one country to another, from one culture to another, from one religion to another -- although lifestyles,

philosophies, and so forth are extremely different, there is one thing all of the peoples of the world which encountered Jews had in common: They all, at one point or another, included individuals, and even large segments of their populations, who did not like Jews. The universality and persistence of Anti-Semitism has puzzled many thinking individuals. Former British Prime Minister Lloyd George stated in 1923:

“Of all the extreme fanaticism which plays havoc in man’s nature, there is not one as irrational as anti-Semitism. ... If the Jews are rich [these fanatics claim they] are victims of theft. If they are poor, they are victims of ridicule. If they take sides in a war, it is because they wish to take advantage from the spilling of non-Jewish blood. If they espouse peace, it is because they are scared by their natures or traitors. If the Jew dwells in a foreign land he is persecuted and expelled. If he wishes to return to his own land, he is prevented from doing so.”

In a speech about the irrationality of anti-Semitism professor Michael Curtis, of Rutgers University, in 1987 stated:

"The uniqueness of anti-Semitism lies in the fact that no other people in the world have ever been charged simultaneously with alienation from society and with cosmopolitanism, with being capitalistic exploiters and also revolutionary communist advocators. The Jews were accused of having an imperious mentality, at the same time they're a people of the book. They're accused of being militant aggressors, at the same time as being cowardly pacifists. With being a Chosen people, and also having an inferior human nature. With both arrogance and timidity. With both extreme individualism and community adherence. With being guilty of the crucifixion of Jesus and at the same time held to account for the invention of Christianity."

There is no explanation, independent of Biblical prophecy, which fully explains the phenomenon of anti-Semitism. One may begin to outline a rational explanation based on an understanding that it is the fulfillment of the aforementioned punishment outlined in Devarim 28:37 that specifically states that we will be scorned in all of the nations in which we reside. The Gemara (Shabbat 89b) that states that hatred for the Jews stems from the giving of the Torah at Sinai also contributes to understanding anti-Semitism. However, absent Torah prophecy and insight one cannot even begin to offer a proper explanation for anti-Semitism.

Other Examples of Fulfilled Prophecies – Mass Revelation, Exile and Return

The Torah (Devarim 4:32-33) prods later generations to consider whether there has ever been a nation that makes a claim of revelation before an entire

nation and an entire nation removed from the midst of another nation with great miracles. Indeed, no other nation makes this claim, as we discussed in an earlier essay.

Devarim 4:27-30 records that we will be dispersed among the nations and that subsequently we will return to Hashem. This is an astonishing prediction and runs counter to any rational expectation. There is no other nation in the world that has been without a land for so many years, whose members do not speak the same language and are culturally divided (e.g. the everyday culture – such as food - of Moroccan Jews is quite distinct from the everyday culture of German Jews) and yet retain essentially the same religious lifestyle (the core of Sephardic, Ashkenazic and Yemenite culture is identical).

Promises in Rabbinic Literature

The promise of Chazal (Shemot Rabbah 2:2) that Hashem's presence will not leave the Western Wall has been fulfilled despite the many wars in Jerusalem throughout the centuries. Sadly, the Hagaddah's statement that in every generation they try to destroy us (and Hashem prevents our total destruction) has been fulfilled as well. The Gemara (Taanit 29a) states that Hashem sets aside Tisha B'av as a day for punishment. Rashi ad. loc. s.v. V'chovah Al Yedei Yom Chayav) explains that "it is frequent for bad events to occur on that day". Even the Rambam, who is inclined to offering rational explanations for Torah, writes (Hilchot Ta'anit 5:3) "Tisha B'av is a day set aside for sorrows".

We find, sadly, the Gemara's assertion to be historically accurate: The First Crusade was declared by Pope Urban II on July 20, 1095 (in Jewish Calendar Av 9, 4855), killing 10,000 Jews in its first month and destroying Jewish communities in France and the Rhineland. Jews were expelled from England on July 25, 1290 (Av 9, 5050 in Jewish Calendar). Jews were expelled from Spain on August 11, 1492 (Av 9, 5252 in Jewish Calendar). On Tisha B'Av 5674 (August 1, 1914), World War I broke out, causing unprecedented devastation across Europe and setting the stage for World War II and the Holocaust.

Conclusion

Only a divinely authored text could accurately predict the future destiny of the Jewish People – that we would live forever, there will always remain Jews who faithfully adhere to the Torah, the Land of Israel will remain faithful to the Jewish people, that the Jews will always be a nation apart from the rest of the family of nations and the other predictions we have discussed.

Moreover none of the Torah's prophecies have been contradicted. Some remain unfulfilled and we wait their fulfillment but none have been contradicted. Our great great grandparents would have been shocked if told in 5673 (1913) that within a century nearly a majority of the Jewish people will be living in a Jewish

State in Eretz Yisrael, that Israel would have one of the world's mightiest armies, it would be a great center of Torah study and it would be called "Start-Up Nation" due to its incredible development of innovative ideas and products. The believer of 5673 has been proven correct. The believers in 5772 in the Final Redemption will be proven correct as well.

Strengthening Our Belief in Hashem and His Beautiful Torah – Part Five

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

We continue in our series of discussions intended to strengthen our Emunah in traditional Torah beliefs with a discussion of two important issues: How do we know Orthodox Judaism represents the authentic version of Judaism and the impact of Middle Eastern archaeology on religious belief.

Only Orthodox Judaism Withstands the Test of Time

Many have been presented with the evidence of the prior essays and respond that they now believe in the divine origin of the Torah. However, they wish to be presented with evidence that Orthodoxy is the proper manner of Torah interpretation and practice. One answer (Mishlei 12:19) is that truth withstands the test of time while lies do not. We stressed last week that the Jewish people on a whole have passed the test of time. We quoted Mark Twain who accurately observed that whereas all the great empires and cultures of the past have come and gone, only the Jewish people remain as vigorous as they were in ancient times.

Similarly, there have been many deviationist sects in Judaism since ancient times. These include the Northern Kingdom of Israel (of Sefer Melachim), Sadducees, Essenes, Samaritans and Karaites. Many of these groups were powerful, large and highly influential for very significant periods of time. However, each of these groups has either ceased to exist or is in its death throes. Only Orthodox Judaism withstands the test of time.

The same holds true today for non-Orthodox versions of Judaism. It is well known and documented that non-Orthodox versions of Judaism are in rapid

decline (or in the case of Reconstructionist Judaism, failing to gain any significant traction). This phenomenon is most stunningly documented in New Jersey's "Jewish Standard" of July 15, 2011, which reported that a 2010 professional study of Jews in Baltimore made an astounding discovery: Barely fourteen percent of non-Orthodox Jews between 18 and 34 want to be part of the Jewish community. In an essay distributed by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency in August 2011, Joel Alperon, a past national president campaign chair for the United Jewish Communities (who writes that he is not Orthodox) writes:

Non-Orthodox Judaism is confronted by rising levels of secularism that almost always lead to assimilation -- a trend that within a generation or two could render Reform and Conservative Judaism largely irrelevant in North America (and abroad as well). Non-Orthodox Jews' general discontent with and resulting departure from Jewish life, left alone, stands to bring Reform and Conservative Judaism to a state of obsolescence.

This prediction is neither original nor new. From studies about very high interfaith marriage rates to growing assimilation percentages, we should know by now that the non-Orthodox way of life is failing by just about every metric we have at our disposal.

By contrast, Orthodox communities are vigorous, vibrant and growing at a very high rate with many new institutions opening each year. As we emphasized in our last issue, this is entirely counterintuitive. One would think the less demanding versions of Judaism that are more in harmony with contemporary values would thrive. Nonetheless, specifically the most demanding and most traditional version of Judaism is the most successful version of Judaism in the twenty first century. Indeed, the enduring version of Judaism is the authentic form of Judaism.

Sadly, the reality in the State of Israel is not much different. Ideologically motivated secular Zionism, whose adherents made enormous sacrifices and contributions to create a Jewish State in Eretz Yisrael, has been in considerable decline for decades. The Zionists who remain steadfast in their devotion to Medinat Yisrael are the Religious Zionists. This is evidenced by reports that now nearly half of combat officers in the Israel Defense Forces are Orthodox Religious Zionists, although this group constitutes only about ten percent of the population of Israel. Religious Zionists also serve in highly disproportionate number in the most elite combat units in the IDF. The secular Zionist ideals clearly have continually waned in recent decades in its influence on the youth of Israel, whereas Religious Zionist commitment is stronger than ever.

The Gemara (Shabbat 104a) expresses the point very well. It states "The truth stands and lies do not". Indeed, when Orthodox Ashkenazic, Sephardic and Yemenite Jews interact they find that their Tefillot and observance of Mitzvot are essentially the same, with the differences lying primarily in style. This is because

each group of Jews has, incredibly, preserved the Mesorah (our ancient traditions) with a minimal amount of variety. Indeed, based on our observation, the only reason they survive as Jews is because they observe the Mesorah. Yirmiyahu (2:13) describes Hashem and the Torah as a “source of living waters” and bemoans those Jews who abandoned Torah for “broken cisterns that do not retain water”.

Archaeology

There has been extensive archaeological excavations conducted in the Middle East during the past two hundred years. There have been some stunning discoveries which support the accuracy of the Tanach. Examples abound in the Da'at Mikra commentary to Tanach. A specific example is the King Chizkiyahu (Hezekiah). Reliefs created by Assyrian artists depicting Sancheirev's conquest of Lachish, described in Melachim II 18:13-17, were discovered on the remains of Sancheirev's palace. They are currently on display in the British Museum in London (room 10).

Also on display in the British Museum (room 55) is Sancheirev's chronicle of many of his military campaigns including his campaign in Yehudah. Sancheirev's chronicle is replete with descriptions of his victories including in Yehuda as is recorded in Melachim II 18:13. However, Sancheirev boasts only that he set siege to Yerushalayim and that he trapped Chizkiyahu “like a bird in a cage”. However, unlike all his other campaigns where he always records conquests, Sancheirev does not mention that he conquered Yerushalayim. This fits perfectly with the Tanach record (Melachim II Perek 19) of Sancheirev setting siege to Yerushalayim, but failing to conquer it. Sancheirev's failure to record the miracle, recorded in Tanach (ibid. Pasuk 35) of the great smite where 185,000 Assyrian soldiers were smitten by an angel, is not problematic since in the ancient world, only the Jews recorded their defeats and their failures. Sancheirev, following this pattern, could record only that he surrounded Yerushalayim, but would not record his miraculous defeat in Yerushalayim¹. Finally, the tunnel dug by Chizkiyahu to bring water to Yerushalayim (Melachim II 20:20) has been discovered and available to visit on site in Yerushalayim and to view pictures on the internet (the Museum of the Living Torah in Brooklyn also has an artifact of Chizkiyahu).

Some draw conclusions negating the veracity of the Tanach text on the basis of the absence of archaeological evidence for certain events. A response to such assertions, is first to note the highly precarious approach of drawing conclusions from the absence of evidence. This is particularly true in archaeology where precious little from the ancient world has been preserved and precious little of what has been preserved has been excavated. Excavations of Tanach sites in

¹ The fact that Sancheirev placed an eight foot by eighty foot depiction of his conquest of Lachish and did not place a mural of a conquest of Yerushalayim, the capital city of Judea and seat of the Jewish Temple, also indicates that he did not conquer Yerushalayim.

Israel is an ongoing effort and new and sometimes very exciting discoveries are made every year. For example, David Dobkin (TABC '07) told me in August 2010 that he had recently participated in a Hebrew University excavation in Yerushalayim and they discovered huge piles of ashes which were scientifically dated to 586 B.C.E. the date of Churban Bayit Rishon (destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash).

The example regarding David haMelech demonstrates this point. In the words of National Geographic (secular) magazine "Until the 1993 discovery of a ninth-century B.C.[E.] stela (ancient monument) inscribed with 'House of David' there was no nonbiblical evidence that David actually existed. Few dispute it now". Prior to 1993 many secular scholars pointed to the absence of archaeological for David HaMelech as proof he never existed. The 1993 discovery should put to rest any conclusions rejecting the truth of a Tanach text based on the absence of nonbiblical evidence.

In regards to excavations which appear on a superficial level to contradict Tanach texts, the contradictions emerge from either inaccurate archaeology or inaccurate understanding of Tanach. An example of the first variety of error is the conclusion of some archaeologists that the battle of Ai described in Sefer Yehoshua did not occur, a conclusion based on excavations at Ai showing that the city was not inhabited at the time of Yehoshua's entry into Eretz Yisrael (Encyclopedia Judaica 2:471-472). However, Rav Yoel Bin Nun writes (Mechkerei Yehudah V'Shomron-Ariel, second conference, 5752, pp. 278-289) that he has proven that the wrong area had been excavated. He claims to have found the correct location of Ai, which, when subsequently excavated, yielded evidence that it was in fact inhabited during the time of Yehoshua's conquest.

Sefer Shofetim 4:2 in regards to the city of Chatzor is an example of an improperly understood Pasuk. Chatzor has been very extensively excavated (it has been designated as a UNESCO world heritage site) and shows evidence of its existence and burning during the time of Sefer Yehoshua (11:10-12) and Sefer Melachim (9:16). However, it is clear from the excavations that the city was not heavily populated during the time of Sefer Shofetim unlike the Tanach which seems to suggest that it was. However, a careful reading of the Pasuk (see the Radak and Da'at Mikra ad. loc.) reveals that the Tanach teaches specifically with the use of the past tense for ruling (Malach) that Chatzor was not a major center during the time of Sefer Shofetim.

Conclusion: Aristotle, Rambam and the Big Bang Theory

Jews who were exposed to philosophic and scientific thought were challenged for over two thousand years by Aristotle's assertion that the world was eternal and never created. For thousands of years Orthodox Jews steadfastly held to their belief in creation, repeated and emphasized every Friday night during Kiddush. The Rambam in his Moreh Nevuchim (Guide to the Perplexed) devotes much

attention to this issue in the second chapter. Lo and behold in the twentieth century with the emergence of evidence regarding Big Bang, the consensus in the scientific community changed and agreed that the world was created! Although it took two thousand years, those who did not deviate from Torah belief were proven correct.

Our experience with Aristotle and his theory of an eternal world serves as a powerful model for dealing with conflicts between Torah and science in general and archaeology specifically. In certain instances that the conflict emerges from an inaccurate or superficial understanding of Torah that appears to contradict scientific evidence. However, it may be that what is considered to be “true” by current academicians may emerge as false in later years. A friend of mine told me of his medical school graduation ceremony where the school president stated that half of what we have taught you is false. Science is an evolving endeavor with new developments regularly emerging. Thus, when considering conflicts between Torah and science one must consider the distinct possibility that the science is incorrect. This is most certainly true in the case of archaeology.

Strengthening Our Belief in Hashem and His Beautiful Torah – Part Six: How Megillat Esther and Sefer Shofetim Teach us to Find Hashem in Today’s World
by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

This week we conclude our series of discussions of Emunah with an explanation as to why some intelligent people are not convinced of the truth of Hashem’s existence and the divine origin of the Torah. Rav Elchanan Wasserman (Kovetz Maamarim) attributes lack of belief to people seeking to justify satisfy their passions. He cites as proof the Pasuk in Tehillim (14:1) that states “a degenerate states in his heart that there is no God.”

Another explanation for this phenomenon emerges from Megillat Esther. Megillat Esther at first glance seems quite secular. For example, it contains no mention of God and even seems to deliberately omit mentioning Hashem’s name (see, for example, Esther 4:14-16). One has to look behind the superficial presentation of events in Megillat Esther to discover Hashem, such as why Esther among all the beautiful women of the Persian Empire was chosen as queen, why Mordechai foiled a plot to kill Achashveirosh, and why Achashveirosh was sleepless and reading about Mordechai’s actions the night that Haman came to ask permission to execute Mordechai.

Similarly, the world functions today as it is depicted in Megillat Esther. Hashem has placed a secular veneer upon the world and we must use our common sense to peel back this secular layer in order to be able to find Hashem. Hashem, in the

words of Shir Hashirim 2:9, “watches from behind the windows and peers through the latticework”. Those who do not believe in Hashem and his Torah have not exercised their common sense and have not made an effort to see beyond the secular surface of our world, the “window and latticework” of Shir Hashirim.

A renowned atheist was asked what he will respond if after he dies he meets God and He will judge him for his lack of belief. He responded that he would ask God, why did You not provide sufficient evidence of Your existence. Hashem might respond, why didn't you exercise your common sense and look beyond the secular surface of the world, and see the overwhelming evidence of My existence and of My Holy Torah.

Piercing the Secular Veil in Megillat Esther and Sefer Shofetim

Megillat Esther presents three manners how to “pierce the world's secular veil” and discover Hashem's presence in the world as it functions in our time. One manner that Hashem reveals Himself is through situations where things happen against all odds, such as Esther being chosen to serve as queen (adding to the extraordinary odds was Esther's refusal to reveal her nationality – it is a monumental security breach to appoint a queen without doing at least a minimal background check!).

Sefer Shofetim also teaches us how to discover Hashem in the world as it functions today. Examples of happenings against all odds in Sefer Shofetim is Shamgar ben Anat's defeat of the mighty Pelishtim using only a cattle prod as a weapon (Shofetim 3:31) and Gidon's defeat of the enormous numbers of Midyanite invaders, with only three hundred men (chapters six and seven of Sefer Shofetim).

Contemporary examples events happening against all odds are the victories of the Israeli army despite overwhelming odds in the 1948, 1967 and 1973 wars as we discussed in part two of this series (archived at www.koltorah.org). Indeed, Rav Berel Wein reports that a West Point general once remarked that though the United States Military Academy studies wars fought throughout the world, they do not study the Six Day War - because what concerns West Point is strategy and tactics, not miracles.

In particular, Israel's survival in its first two months of existence when it had hardly any air force or armored corps and managed to survive and often emerge victorious through the use of using seltzer bottles as bombs and ineffective cannons which made a very loud noise such as the Davidka, was clearly an act of God and eerily reminiscent of Shamgar ben Anat's victory using cattle prods. A view of the map of the nascent Jewish State in May 1948, reveals the terrible vulnerability of our people and deepens one's appreciation for God's hand in our surviving an attack from all sides. Even mighty nations such as the ancient

Assyrians, ancient Greeks and modern day Nazi Germany could not withstand an attack on two fronts. We, on the other hand, managed to survive a war fought on three fronts with hardly any weapons and a rag tag army that had just emerged from the underground on the day Israel declared independence. The only reasonable explanation of Israel's survival is the subtle hand of the one "Who peers behind the latticework".

Incredible Timing

Another manner in which we discover Hashem "standing behind the window" is incredible timing such as Achashveirosh's insomnia and recalling Mordechai's kindness just at the right moment in preparation for Haman's nocturnal visit to the royal palace. Another example is Haman falling on Esther's bed precisely when Achashveirosh reentered the palace.

An example in Sefer Shofetim is how the untrained Jewish army defeated the mighty army of Sisera (Perakim 4 and 5) which was regarded as impossible to defeat due to its possession of superior weaponry – iron chariots (Shofetim 4:3). Da'at Mikra and others explain (as is apparent from Shofetim 5:20-21) that precisely at the right moment as we began to attack, a great rainstorm unexpectedly flooded the Jezreel Valley, turning it into mud and thereby rendering the iron chariots not only useless but also a death trap against the attacking Israelite army.

For contemporary examples, one need only recall how incredible timing has made dramatic differences in the course of the lives of so many individuals. For an example on a national level, I submit that Hashem sent incredible array of Torah giants, such as Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, Rav Moshe Feinstein, Rav Ovadia Yosef and the Lubavitcher Rebbe precisely during the twentieth century when the very survival of Orthodoxy was in grave danger. The emergence of these great and talented Rabbanim, each of whom will have the stature of a luminary for all generations, precisely in the mid-twentieth century, rescued Orthodox from its nadir in the 1950's to its reinvigoration and incredible vitality in our day. It is exceedingly rare to simultaneously have so many rabbis of such inter-generational stature. However, the timing was perfect to save the Torah legacy for posterity.

Another example of incredible timing on a national level is the emergence specifically in the nineteenth century, of authoritative works on Jewish Law, such as the Aruch Hashulchan, Ben Ish Chai, Chayei Adam, Kaf HaChayim, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch and Mishnah Berurah which capped and closed the era of four centuries of commentary and debate on the Shulchan Aruch. The stability brought about by the emergence of these works in the nineteenth century established the Halachic infrastructure for later rabbinic authorities to applying the Halacha to the dizzying array of dramatic and unprecedented technological, social and political changes of the twentieth century and beyond.

Enemies Acting Foolishly

Finally, the Vilna Gaon notes that in our times Hashem subtly makes our enemies act foolishly, such as Achashveirosh's series of ridiculous decisions that led to Vashti's removal from power and Haman foolishly responding to Achashveirosh that the one the king wishes to honor should ride in the king's horse and wear the king's crown (this deepened Achashveirosh's suspicion of Haman and greatly contributed to the decision to hang Haman).

In Sefer Shofetim the Moabite king Eglon (Perek 3) and his team of bodyguards acted incredibly foolishly by allowing a representative of a conquered nation, Ehud, to speak privately with Eglon, leaving the latter exposed to attack with no one to help him. In addition, the Moabite security team in its foolishness did not properly check Ehud for weapons and he managed to sneak in a weapon which he used to kill Eglon, leading to the end of Moabite rule over part of Israel.

Modern day examples abound such as the series of astoundingly foolish series of mistakes made by the Egyptian military leadership both immediately before and during the Six Day War. Other examples of foolish decisions during the 1948 Israeli War of Independence include Arab armies (even the Arab Legion commanded by British officers) making shockingly incorrect decisions not to attack some Jewish positions such as at Gesher Ad Halom and Kfar Saba where Jews had little or no effective ammunition.

Accordingly, there is ample opportunity, even absent open miracles, to perceive Hashem's involvement in the running of the world.

Conclusion – The fierce eastern wind at the Yam Suf

Ramban (Shemot 14:21) writes that Hashem made a fierce east wind blow the entire night was to give the Egyptians the opportunity to think that the Yam Suf was split by natural causes (i.e. the fierce eastern wind) and not by Hashem. The Ramban clarifies, though, that the Egyptians nonetheless had ample opportunity to recognize Hashem's involvement such as the fact that the Yam Suf was split into sections (Tehillim 136:13). Unfortunately for the Egyptians, they did not exercise their common sense and recognize Hashem's presence.

The secular veneer, or latticework, of the world serves the identical purpose as the fierce eastern wind the night preceding Keriat Yam Suf. It creates the potential for the atheist to choose to not believe. However, Hashem also creates far greater opportunities for us to discover Him, as we have presented in this series, just as He did at the Yam Suf. Hashem provides the potential to be led astray because there is hardly a Mitzvah of Emunah if there was no potential to think otherwise.

This is similar to the rule regarding the qualifications for Matzah for Pesach. Grain must have the potential to become Chametz in order for it to have the potential to be made into

Matzah to be used for the Mitzvah at the Seder. Similarly, there must be a slight potential for atheism, otherwise there is no Mitzvah of Emunah.

Kohelet (7:14) teaches that “Zeh L’umat Zeh Asah Elokim”, Hashem makes counterparts. Hashem leaves a small opportunity for non-belief but creates the counterpart of far greater opportunity for belief. The non-believer will be held accountable for his failure to exercise his common sense and look beyond the secular shell of the world, as the Egyptians were at the Yam Suf. “The ways of Hashem are just; the righteous shall walk in them but sinners will stumble on them” (Hoshei’a 14:10).

Strengthening Our Belief in Hashem and His Beautiful Torah – Part Seven: Emunah Peshutah

In this concluding essay in our series of discussions about Emunah we discuss whether it is indeed worthwhile to engage in these sorts of explorations to strengthen our Emunah.

A Reverse Tinok Shenishbah?

We should note at the outset a distinct advantage of making the effort to strengthen our faith. The Rambam (Hilchot Mamrim 3:3) speaks of those raised in heretical environments as equivalent to a Tinok Shenishbah, one who was captured and raised in a Nochri environment. Such an individual is regarded in some manner as being coerced to live in the manner in which he was raised and thus we not harshly condemn someone raised in such circumstances for his failure to believe in traditional Jewish belief. A TABC student once remarked that if we do not take the time to deepen our belief in Hashem and the divine origin of the Torah and we believe only because this is the manner in which our parents and community believe, then in a certain manner we are a Tinok Shenishbah. Just as the sins of a Tinok Shenishbah among heretical Jews is not viewed as severe so too one could argue that the Mitzvot of one believes simply because he follows the prevailing belief in his social circle are not viewed as having great meaning. It is highly worth investing the time to increase and deepen one’s Emunah.

There are many portals and paths to Emunah. We outlined some of these approaches in this series and each of us can find Rebbeim and Sefarim that will lead us to other opportunities and paths to be able to declare that one believes Be'emunah Sheleimah, in full faith.

Emunah Peshutah

Nonetheless, one who finds belief in Hashem and other traditional Torah beliefs to be intuitive and obvious (Emunah Peshutah) is not a reverse Tinok Shenishbah. Such an individual does not necessarily need to delve into the issues and arguments we have raised. Such individuals readily and intuitively perceive the light of Torah which draws us near Hashem (as expressed in the Yerushalmi Chagigah 1:10). For such an individual, every Tefillah and every encounter with Torah further deepens his or her faith without the need for the discussions in this series of essays.

From a young age I found it intuitive that the Torah is a divine document and that our history is so unusual that it was obvious to me that it was guided by God's hand. For example, as a junior in high school we studied two Shakespearian plays, Hamlet and Macbeth. I found these two plays enthralling, magnificent and far superior to any other secular literature I had ever encountered. However, I recognized even as a youngster that while these were outstanding works that they paled in comparison to the Torah in its depth, manifold interpretations and continued relevance. I recognized that Shakespeare represents the pinnacle of human achievement but yet Torah is "in another league" being that it is the product of a divine author².

Many Torah educators historically have not taught Emunah to their Talmidim and Talmidot. Perhaps they feel that through the study of Torah, the students will be exposed to the majesty of Torah and inevitably arrive by themselves to the conclusion that the Torah is a divine document. The Rambam (Hilchot Issurei Biah 22:32) might be expressing this idea by teaching that a Torah scholar "recognizes the crown of Torah".

Strengthening Emunah

On the other hand, an insight from Rav Elchanan Wasserman might favor delving into matters of Emunah. He notes that the Torah records (Shemot 14:31) that after Keriat Yam Suf we believed in Hashem and Moshe. However, it is clear that we believed in Hashem even prior to the splitting of the Yam Suf, as the Torah explicitly states that we believed in Hashem and Moshe Rabbeinu much earlier in the Exodus process (Shemot 4:31). Rav Elchanan explains that Shemot 14:31 does not mean that only after Keriyat Yam Suf we believed in Hashem. Rather, it means that our faith was enhanced and deepened as a result of that intense experience. Perhaps a reason we recite this Pasuk on a daily basis, is to remind us that even one with Emunah can enrich his faith and thereby deepen his commitment to meticulous Torah observance.

² This experience might be compared to the Gemara's teaching (Brachot 19b) that one should make an effort to see non-Jewish kings, for if he merits he will be able to distinguish between non-Jewish and Jewish kings.

A Remedy for Shallow Emunah

Rashi (to Breishit 7:7) surprisingly describes Noach's Emunah as shallow. He observes that even Noach did not enter the Teivah until the flood waters overwhelmed him. The Steipler Rav (Birkat Peretz to Parashat Noach) explains that although Noach believed in Hashem, he did not believe in the truth of Hashem's word on the same level as he believed in the reality of the mundane world. Proper belief is one in which one believes in Hashem and His Torah on the same level as he believes that the sun and the moon exist.

The Steipler Rav (ibid.) explains that this is the essential lesson of the deathbed advice offered by Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai that "One's fear of Hashem should be the same as his fear of Man". The existence of Hashem and the truth of His Torah should be just as obvious as the existence of other people. Otherwise the Emunah is shallow and the resulting level of commitment to completely and properly observe the Torah is limited.

Engaging Talmidim in discussions in Emunah has the potential to elevate shallow Emunah to a deep-rooted belief, which yields a firm life-long commitment to Torah observance. Christian Anfinsen, a 1972 winner of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, converted to Orthodox Judaism and retained it for the rest of his life. In Anfinsen's writing, his feeling was that the history, practice and intensity of Judaism were an extremely interesting philosophical package. Anfinsen is not alone in highly intelligent and educated non-Jews converting to Orthodox Judaism. If those who are raised outside the Jewish community recognize the compelling truth of Orthodox Judaism, certainly those raised within the Orthodox community should readily grasp and internalize the rational basis for our beliefs. Rav Moshe Wolfson of Brooklyn famously remarked that Jews have Emunah etched into their DNA just as a beaver has the ability to make a dam embedded in its DNA and a bird has the ability to make a nest as a part of its genetic makeup. Thus, presenting healthy minded Jews the rational basis of Judaism can serve to deepen Emunah and prevent the problem of "Noachs" in our community.

Bava Batra 89b - Oy Li Im Omeir Oy Li Im Lo Omeir

Some will argue that it is better not to examine issues of Emunah with students and youngsters because it may cause those who already believe to question those beliefs. This concern is reminiscent of a dilemma of Chazal recorded in Bava Batra 89b. Honesty in weights and measures is forcefully commanded by the Torah and was strictly enforced by the authorities in a Torah community. Chazal were aware of all the tricks which a swindling merchant might do to deceive his customers - from using metal weights which wore out with use, to employing heavy sticks to smooth out measured flour to the disadvantage of the buyer. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai thus expressed his dilemma in regard to making public this awareness: Oy Li Im Omeir Oy Li Im Lo Omeir , "Woe to me if I speak, woe to me if I do not speak."

Should he speak and reveal these strategies there was a danger that swindlers might learn from him how to better deceive their unknowing customers. Should he not speak, his silence might be interpreted by the swindlers as an indication that the sages were unaware of their tricks. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai finally resolved his dilemma on the basis of Hoshea 14:10: "The ways of Hashem are straight. The righteous walk safely upon them and the sinners stumble." The ways of Hashem must be made known to all, decided Raban Yochanan ben Zakkai, and it was the free will of man to utilize the information for good or evil.

Will there be those who will react to discussions of Emunah with contrived and unreasonable responses that employ tortured logic? Unfortunately, the answer might be yes. Strategies should be taken to manage this concern properly and sometimes a frontal approach to presenting issues of Emunah might be unwise. Caution should be exercised but this concern should not deprive the vast majority of Orthodox Jews who will spiritually prosper from an effective and well-presented rational explanation for our lifestyle.

Conclusion – Mainstream Orthodox Education for Emunah

Discussions of the rational basis belief in Hashem and the divine origin of the Torah have, generally speaking, been confined to Jews who engage in outreach to non-observant Jews. However, it may be appropriate for rabbis, educators and parents throughout the Orthodox community to occasionally discuss these matters. The risk of not addressing the rational basis of our faith and hoping that it will somehow be inculcated naturally is readily apparent. Shallow commitment and instances of lapsed commitment are not unusual occurrences in all segments of the Orthodox community. The phenomenon of texting on Shabbat is a manifestation of this problem. Since the evidence of Hashem and the divine origin of the Torah are so accessible and readily understood, it behooves any Jew who is concerned about preserving the Jewish legacy to at the very least consider devoting some time to strengthen one's own Emunah and the Emunah of his fellow Jews. We prefer to engage in substantive Torah study and not engage in mere discussion of the Torah. However, some time must be devoted to discussing the fundamentals of our faith.

Postscript

It is important to stress at the conclusion of this series that which we noted at the beginning. There are many portals to Emunah and the arguments and sources which satisfies this author may not necessarily satisfy others. One who is not satisfied with the arguments we presented should consult other Rabbanim and teachers who can provide alternatives (such as a more Chassidic approach).