TORAH STUDIES

Vayera

A Faith You Can't Lose

Why belief in G-d doesn't come from proof—and isn't undone by it either

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Vayera

G-d reveals Himself to Abraham three days after his circumcision at age ninety-nine, but Abraham rushes off to prepare a meal for three guests who appear in the desert heat. One of the three—who are angels disguised as men—announces that, in exactly one year, the barren Sarah will give birth to a son. Sarah laughs.

Abraham pleads with G-d to spare the wicked city of Sodom. Two of the three disguised angels arrive in the doomed city, where Abraham's nephew Lot extends his hospitality to them and protects them from the evil intentions of a Sodomite mob. The two guests reveal that they have come to overturn the place and to save Lot and his family. Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt when she disobeys the command to not look back at the burning city as they flee.

While taking shelter in a cave, Lot's two daughters (believing that they and their father are the only ones left alive in the world) get their father drunk, lie with him, and become pregnant. The two sons born from this incident father the nations of Mo'ab and Ammon.

Abraham moves to Gerar, where the Philistine king Abimelech takes Sarah—who is presented as Abraham's sister—to his palace. In a dream, G-d warns Abimelech that he will die unless he returns the woman to her husband. Abraham explains that he feared he would be killed over the beautiful Sarah.

G-d remembers His promise to Sarah and gives her and Abraham a son, who is named Isaac (Yitzchak, meaning "will laugh"). Isaac is circumcised at the age of eight days. Abraham is one hundred years old and Sarah ninety at their child's birth.

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Vayera

Hagar and Ishmael are banished from Abraham's home and wander in the desert; G d hears the cry of the dying lad and saves his life by showing his mother a well.

Abimelech makes a treaty with Abraham at Beersheba, where Abraham gives him seven sheep as a sign of their truce.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does it make sense to believe something is true despite sound reasons to question it?
2. Is there anything that you believe to be true and would continue to believe even if someone could “prove” you wrong?
3. If a Jew professes to be an atheist, would you believe them?

TEXT 1

Midrash, *Shemot Rabah* 23:5

"תָּשׁוּרִי מֵרֹאשׁ אֲמָנָה". אָמַר רַבִּי יוּסְטָא הַר הוּא וּשְׁמוֹ אֲמָנָה, עַד אוֹתוֹ הָהָר אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמֶּנּוּ וּלְהַלָּן חוּצָה לָאָרֶץ. אָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן רַבִּי יוֹסֵי כְּשֶׁיַּגִּיעוּ הַגָּלֻיּוֹת לְשָׁם יִהְיוּ אוֹמְרִים שִׁירָה, לְכָךְ נֶאֱמַר: תָּשׁוּרִי מֵרֹאשׁ אֲמָנָה . . .

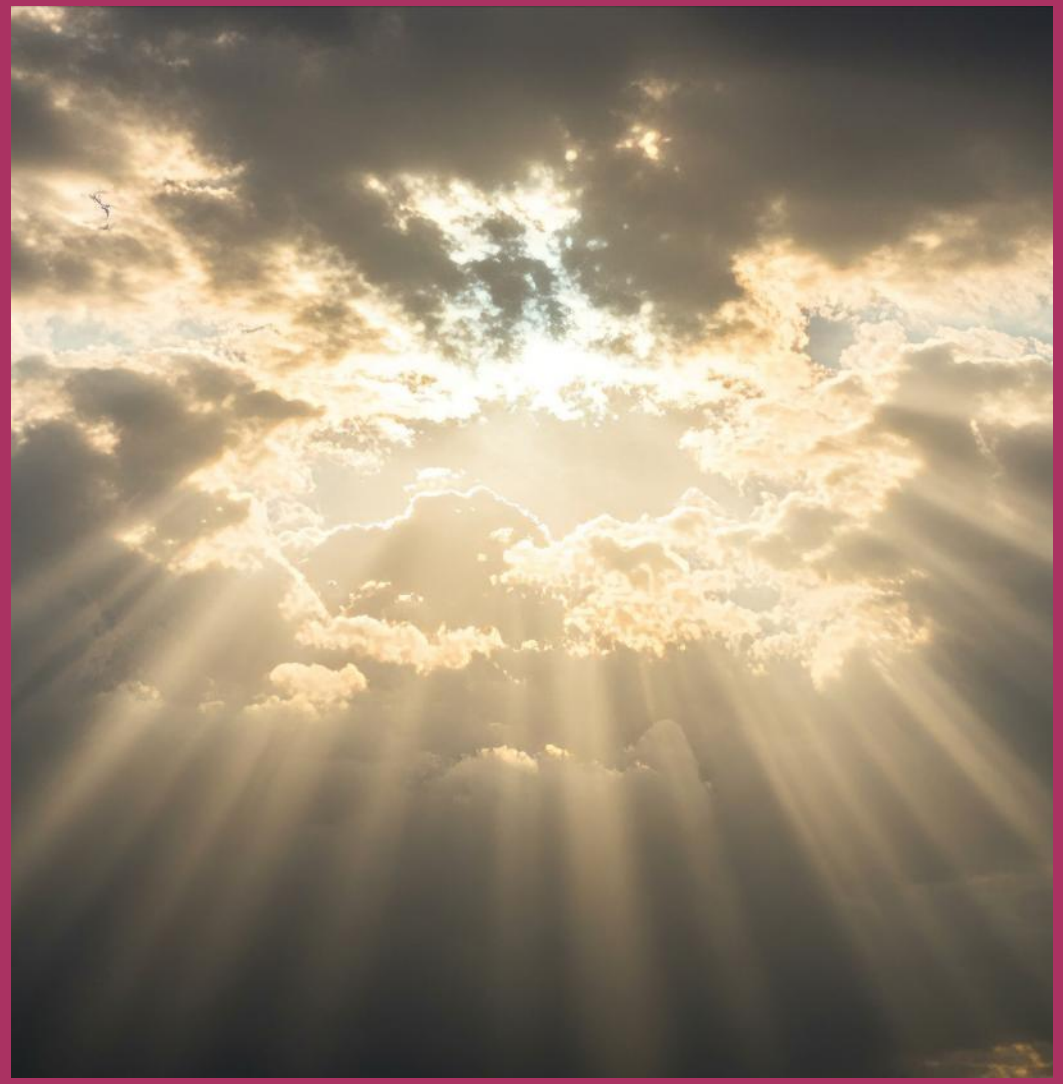
"Look from the top of Amanah" (Song of Songs 4:8): Rabbi Yusta said, "There is a mountain named Amanah. The Land of Israel extends until this mountain; what lies beyond it is not Israel." Rabbi Elazar ben Rabbi Yosi said, "When the exiles reach that landmark, they will sing to G-d. This is the meaning of the passage, 'Look from the top of Amanah.'" . . .

וּבְאֵיזֶה זְכוּת אוֹמְרִים יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁירָה?

In whose merit does Israel sing to G-d?

בִּזְכוּת אַבְרָהָם שֶׁהֶאֱמִין בְּהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר, "וְהֶאֱמִן בַּה'" (בְּרֵאשִׁית טו, ו). הֵיא הָאֱמוּנָה שְׁיִשְׂרָאֵל נוֹחֲלִין בָּהּ, וְעָלָיו הַכָּתוּב אוֹמֵר, "וְצַדִּיק בֶּאֱמוּנָתוֹ יִחְיֶה" (חֲבַקּוּק ב, ד).

In the merit of Abraham, who believed in G-d, as it is stated, "He believed in G-d" (Genesis 15:6). By virtue of his faith, Israel inherits [the Land]. It is regarding him that the Torah says, "The righteous will live by their faith" (Habakkuk 2:4).



Abraham suffered greatly but never stopped believing in G-d: it only strengthened his faith. He was the first to openly teach belief in G-d.

QUESTIONS

What is faith, and what keeps it alive?



TEXT 2

Rabbi Yosef Albo,
Sefer Ha'ikarim 1:19

הָאֱמוּנָה הוּא הִצְטַיְּיר הַדָּבָר בַּנֶּפֶשׁ צִיּוּר חָזָק עַד שֶׁלֹּא תְּשַׁעֵר הַנֶּפֶשׁ בִּסְתִירָתוֹ בְּשׁוּם פָּנִים, אַף אִם לֹא יוֹדֵעַ דֶּרֶךְ הָאֵימוּת בּוֹ.

Faith is when we envision something in our soul as a powerful inner image. It is so fierce that the soul cannot conceive of it being contradicted. [One holds this faith] even if one has no logical proof for it.

ANSWER

Faith is an inner conviction that something is true, even without proof. It’s the strength to live with unanswered questions. Just as we know we exist and feel we have free choice, we also feel that G-d exists.

QUESTION

Where does this feeling of truth come from, especially in Abraham, who wasn't raised with faith: what was the source of his faith?

TEXT 3A

Genesis 12:1–3

א. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם, לֶךְ לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ.

ב. וְאֶעֶשְׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל, וַאֲבָרֶכְךָ וַאֲגַדְּלָה שְׁמֶךָ, וֶהְיֵה בְּרָכָה.

ג. וַאֲבָרְכָה מְבָרֲכֶיךָ, וּמְקַלֶּלְךָ אָאֹר.

1. G-d said to Abram, “Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.

2. “I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

3. “I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse.”

TEXT 3B

Rashi, Genesis 12:2

שֶׁהִבְטִיחוֹ עַל הַבָּנִים וְעַל הַמָּמוֹן וְעַל הַשֵּׁם.

G-d promised Abram children, wealth, and prestige.

Abraham and Sarah begin their journey when G-d tells them to leave their home for a new land, blessing them along the way with:

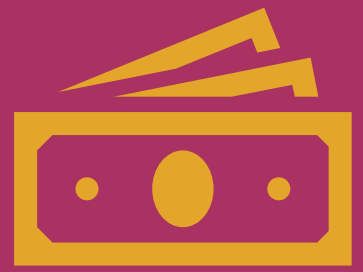
children



a good name



wealth



TEXT 4

Maimonides,
Mishnah, Avot 5:3

הָעֲשָׂרָה נִיסְיוֹנוֹת שֶׁנִּתְנַסָּה אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ, כּוּלָּם דִּבֵּר הַכָּתוּב:

1. הַגֵּירוּשׁ, בְּאָמְרוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ "לֵךְ לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ" (בְּרֵאשִׁית יב, א) וְגוֹ'.

2. הָרָעָב אֲשֶׁר מָצָא בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן בְּבוֹאוֹ שָׁם, וְהוּא יִתְבָּרַךְ "וְאֶעֶשְׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל" (בְּרֵאשִׁית יב, ב). וְזֶה נִיסָּיוֹן גָּדוֹל.

3. חָמָס הַמִּצְרִים עָלָיו, בְּהִילָּקַח שָׂרָה לְפַרְעֹה.

4. הִלָּחֲמוֹ בְּאַרְבָּעָה מְלָכִים.

5. לָקְחוּ הָגָר לְאִשָּׁה, אַחַר שֶׁנּוֹאַשׁ מֵהוֹלִיד מִשָּׂרָה.

6. הוּא הַמִּילָה, אֲשֶׁר צִוָּוה בָּהּ בִּימֵי הִזְדַּקְנָה.

All of Abraham's ten tests are documented in Scripture:

1. Abraham's exile, as G-d said, "Go forth from your land."

2. The famine he found when he arrived in Canaan after G-d promised, "I will make you a great nation" (Genesis 12:2). This was a big test.

3. The injustice of the Egyptians when Sarah was taken to Pharaoh.

4. The war against the four kings [to save Lot].

5. Taking Hagar as a wife after despairing of having a child with Sarah.

6. Being told to circumcise at an old age.

TEXT 4

Maimonides,
Mishnah, Avot 5:3

7. חָמָס מֶלֶךְ גְּרָר עָלָיו, בְּלָקְחוֹ שָׂרָה גַּם כֵּן.

8. גֵּרֹשׁ הָגָר, אַחֲרֵי הִבָּנוֹתוֹ מִמֶּנָּה.

9. הַרְחָקַת בְּנוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל . . . וּכְבָר הֵעִיד הַכָּתוּב אֵיךְ הָיָה קָשֶׁה בְּעֵינָיו הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה, בְּאָמְרוֹ "וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם" (בְּרֵאשִׁית כא, יא).

10. עֲקֵדַת יִצְחָק.

7. The injustice of the king of Gerar taking Sarah as well.

8. Expelling Hagar after she bore a child.

9. Sending away Ishmael, . . . which was very hard for him, as the Torah states, “and the matter was very bad in the eyes of Abraham” (Genesis 21:11).

10. Binding Isaac upon the altar.



G-d tested Abraham in ten different ways, seeming to go against all promises He had made.

Perhaps Abraham saw his suffering as a way to grow and strengthen his mission.

But this doesn't explain his final test, when sacrificing Isaac seemed to destroy his future, yet his faith remained.



TEXT 5

Genesis 1:24; 2:7

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים תּוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה לְמִינָהּ, בְּהֵמָה וָרֶמֶשׂ וְחַיְתוֹ אֶרֶץ לְמִינָהּ, וַיְהִי כֵן.

וַיִּיצֶר ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה, וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים.

And G-d said, “Let the earth bring forth living beings according to their kind: beasts, creeping things, and wild animals according to their kind,” and it was so. . . .

And G-d formed man from the dust of the ground, and He blew into his nostrils a soul of life.

ANIMALS

- Created alive

HUMANS

- Body created
- G-d blows soul into body

QUESTION

Why were two separate actions needed for the human?

TEXT 6

Rashi, Genesis 2:7

עֲשָׂאוֹ מִן הַתַּחְתּוֹנִים וּמִן הָעֶלְיוֹנִים, גּוּף מִן הַתַּחְתּוֹנִים וּנְשָׁמָה מִן הָעֶלְיוֹנִים.

G-d made him of earthly matter and of Heavenly matter: the body of earthly matter, the soul of Heavenly matter.

WHY HUMANS REQUIRED TWO STEPS

1. The first was the creation of the body from the earthly matter.

2. The second was the creation of the soul from the heavenly matter.

TEXT 7

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, ch. 2

וְנֶפֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִית בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל הִיא חֵלֶק אֱלוֹקָה מִמַּעַל מַמָּשׁ, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב, "וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים." וּכְמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב בַּזֹּהַר, "מַאן דִּנְפַח מִתּוֹכֵהּ נָפַח," פֵּרוּשׁ, מִתּוֹכִיּוּתוֹ וּמִפְּנִימִיּוּתוֹ. שֶׁתּוֹכִיּוּת וּפְנִימִיּוּת הַחַיּוּת שֶׁבָּאָדָם מוֹצִיא בִּנְפִיחָתוֹ בְּכֹחַ.

The second soul in a Jew is literally a portion of G-d above, as it is written: “He blew into his nostrils a soul of life,” . . . as the *Zohar* says: “One who blows, blows from within themself,” meaning from their inwardness and innermost being. The deepest and most inward life force within a person emerges powerfully through blowing.

ANIMALS

- **Created through speech**
- "And G-d said"

HUMANS

- **Created through breath**
- "He blew into his nostrils"

Unlike animals, G-d blew the soul into Adam, giving life from His inner essence and thereby imparting a portion of His very self into us.

TEXT 8A

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Sefer Me'ah She'arim*, p. 29a

אָמַר רַבֵּנוּ הַזָּקֵן מַהִי נְשָׁמָה?

הַשַּׁעֲרֵי תְּשׁוּבָה לְרַבֵּנוּ יוֹנָה כָּתַב, "מַכֶּרֶת אֶת רִיבּוֹנָהּ." וְאַחַר כָּךְ אָמַר, "יוֹדַעַת אֶת רִיבּוֹנָהּ". וַאֲנִי הוֹסַפְתִּי, "חֵלֶק אֱלוֹקָה מִמַּעַל".

הַיְינוּ . . . וַוייל זִי אִיז אַ חֵלֶק אֱלוֹקָה מִמַּעַל, דָּאט זִי אַ צוּקָאךְ אִין דֶּער עִנְיָן מַאֲמִין צוּ זַיִין דֶּערִינֶען.

The first Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, asked: "What is a soul?"

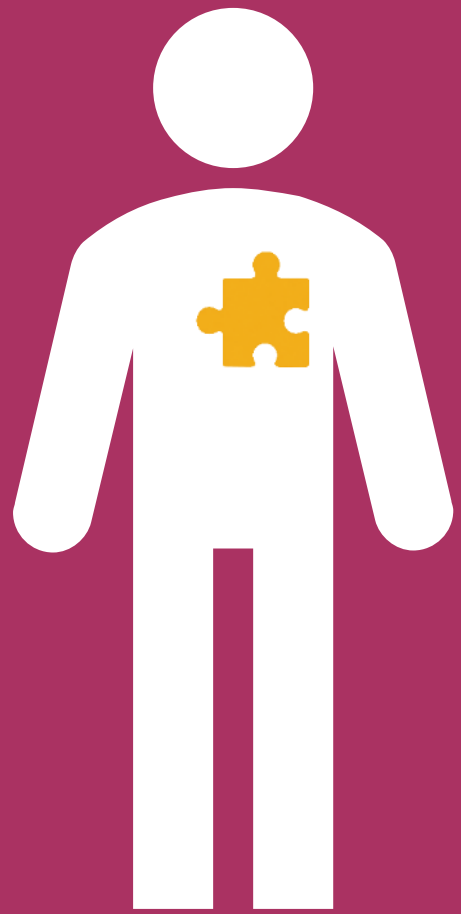
He responded [to his own question with]: "Rabbi Yonah of Gerona wrote in *Gates of Repentance*: 'The soul knows its Master.' Then Rabbi Yonah added, 'It recognizes its Master.' And I added: 'It is a portion of G-d above.'"

This means that . . . the soul believes in G-d with passion because it's part of G-d above.

חֵלֶק אֱלוֹקָה —a portion of G-d

chelek Elokai

A Jew knows G-d exists because the soul **is a portion of G-d**, so belief is built into who we are. Just as we instinctively know we exist, we instinctively know G-d exists.



True faith is not based on instinct or experience. It is a deep inner conviction, as real as our own existence.



TEXT 8B

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, ibid.

עִנְיַן אֱמוּנָה, לֹא בְּדָבָר שֶׁהוּא מוּשָׂג בְּשֵׂכֶל וָדַעַת, כִּי בָּזֶה לֹא שַׁיָּיךְ עִנְיַן אֱמוּנָה מֵאַחַר שֶׁהוּא מֵבִין בְּשִׂכְלוֹ וְדַעְתּוֹ אֶת הַדָּבָר.

וּלְהֵיפּוּךְ, עִנְיַן אֱמוּנָה בְּדָבָר שֶׁהוּא עֶצֶם מֵעַצְמוּתוֹ וּבְמַהוּתוֹ, לֹא שַׁיָּיךְ דַּעַת וְשֵׂכֶל, כְּמוֹ שֶׁלֹּא שַׁיָּיךְ לוֹמַר שֶׁהוּא מֵבִין בְּשִׂכְלוֹ שֶׁזֶּה יָדוֹ אוֹ רַגְלוֹ. כִּי זֶה עַצְמוּתוֹ וּמַהוּתוֹ וְלֹא שַׁיָּיךְ בָּזֶה שֵׂכֶל וָדַעַת. . .

רַק בְּכֹחַ אֱמוּנָה הַפְּשׁוּטָה מִצַּד שֶׁהִיא חֵלֶק מֵעַצְמוּתוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ יְכוֹלָה הִיא לְהַכִּיר אוֹתוֹ אוּן צוּקאכְט וּוֶעֶרְען פּוּן אִים כְּפִי הָאֱמֶת אַז עֶס אִיז אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבַדּוֹ.

Faith isn't for matters that are grasped by intellect and knowledge. Faith doesn't apply to matters that we understand with our minds and reason.

Conversely, intellect and knowledge do not apply to matters we intrinsically know—in our very essence and being—just as it doesn't make sense to say, "My mind *understands* that this is my hand or my foot." Intellect and knowledge are irrelevant to matters that form our very essence and being. . . .

It is only through pure faith that comes from being part of His blessed essence that we can recognize G-d and become passionate about the truth that there is nothing besides Him.



Faith is a deep certainty beyond logic, as real as existence itself because the soul is part of G-d.

That’s why Abraham’s faith never wavered: true faith doesn't change, even through suffering or questions.

TEXT 9

Midrash, *Bereshit Rabah* 39:1

מָשָׁל לְאֶחָד שֶׁהָיָה עוֹבֵר מִמָּקוֹם לְמָקוֹם וְרָאָה בִּירָה אַחַת דּוֹלֶקֶת בָּאֵשׁ.

אָמַר, "אֶפְשָׁר שֶׁהַבִּירָה זוֹ בְּלֹא מַנְהִיג?"

הֵצִיץ עָלֶיהָ בַּעַל הַבִּירָה וְאָמַר, "אֲנִי הוּא בַּעַל הַבִּירָה."

כָּךְ הָיָה אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ אוֹמֵר, "אֶפְשָׁר שֶׁהָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה בְּלֹא מַנְהִיג?"

הֵצִיץ עָלָיו הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא וְאָמַר, "אֲנִי הוּא בַּעַל הָעוֹלָם."

A parable: a person was traveling from place to place and saw a palace aflame.

He asked, “Is it possible that this palace has no master guiding it?”

The owner of the palace looked out and said, “I am the owner of the palace.”

So too our Patriarch Abraham asked, “Is it possible that this world has no Master?”

G-d looked out and said, “I am the Master of the world.”

FIRST STAGE: LOGIC AND DISCOVERY

Abraham reached G-d through observation and reasoning.

SECOND STAGE: INNER FAITH

Abraham received a gift from G-d: faith itself, an inner certainty G-d placed within him.

Knowledge is human, but faith is a G-d given inner connection beyond reason.

TEXT 10

Rabbi Yehudah Loew,
Gevurot Hashem,
chapter 9

הָאָדָם הַיּוֹדֵעַ דָּבָר בְּהַשָּׂגָתוֹ וּבִידִיעָתוֹ, הַיְדִיעָה הַזֹּאת הִיא יְדִיעַת הָאָדָם.

וּמָה שֶׁהוּא מַאֲמִין בּוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ, זֶה שֶׁהוּא מִצַּד הַשֵּׁם יִתְבָּרַךְ אֲשֶׁר מַאֲמִין בּוֹ.

What we know from comprehension is human knowledge.

Our faith in G-d is from the G-d in Whom we believe.

TEXT 11

Rabbi Don Yitzchak Abarbanel, *Rosh Amanah*, chapter 4

טָעָה טָעוּת גְּמוּרָה מִי שֶׁמָּנָה אֶת הַפָּסוּק "אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלוֹקֶיךָ" (שְׁמוֹת כ, א) מִצְוָה.

לְפִי שֶׁהַמִּצְוָה הִיא מִן הַמְּצֻטָּרֵף וְלֹא תְּצוּיַּר בְּזוּלַת אֱלוֹהַּ מְצַוֶּה יָדוּעַ. וְלָזֶה כַּאֲשֶׁר נַנִּיחַ אֱמוּנַת מְצִיאַת הָאֵל מִצְוָה, כְּבָר נַנִּיחַ אֱמוּנַת מְצִיאַת הָאֵל קוֹדֶמֶת לְמְצִיאַת הָאֵל . . . וְכָל זֶה בְּתַכְלִית הַבִּיטוּל וְהַגְּנוּת.

One who understands the passage “I am G-d, your G-d” (Exodus 20:2) as a commandment to believe [in G-d’s existence] is in total error.

A commandment inherently assumes the existence of a known Commander. Without assuming a Commander, there can be no talk of a commandment. Therefore, if we assume G-d commands us to believe in Him, it means we believe the Commander exists before we are commanded to believe in Him. . . . [Believing otherwise] is absurd and ridiculous.

אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלוֹקֶיךָ

Anochi Hashem Elokecha

I am G-d, your G-d

This is not a command to believe G-d exists, but a call to recognize His unity and perfection, since a command only works once the Commander is already accepted.



Faith is not learned or proven. It is already within us, an inner awareness of G-d that the soul naturally recognizes.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

After this lesson, how would you answer this question: Should we believe a Jew who claims to be an atheist?

TEXT 12

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, ch. 19

כְּשֶׁבָּאִים לִידֵי נִסָּיוֹן בִּדְבַר אֱמוּנָה, שֶׁהִיא לְמַעְלָה מֵהַדַּעַת, וְנָגְעָה עַד הַנֶּפֶשׁ . . . אֲזַי הִיא נֵיעוֹרָה מִשְּׁנָתָהּ . . . לַעֲמוֹד בַּנִּסָּיוֹן בֶּאֱמוּנַת ה' בְּלִי שׂוּם טַעַם וָדַעַת וְשֵׂכֶל מוּשָׂג לוֹ . . . וְלִבְחוֹר לוֹ ה' לְחֶלְקוֹ וּלְגוֹרָלוֹ, לִמְסוֹר לוֹ נַפְשׁוֹ עַל קִדּוּשַׁת שְׁמוֹ.

When confronted with a test of faith that transcends all logic and pokes at the very soul . . . the soul arises from its slumber . . . and withstands the test of faith, without rational reason or logic . . . and chooses G-d: [the person] offers their life to G-d in martyrdom for the sanctification of His Name.

Every Jew has faith because every Jew has a Divine soul. If it isn't felt, it's only due to a blockage between the soul and mind. In crisis, that faith naturally emerges.





The blockage is removed by living a Torah and *mitzvah* life. *Mitzvot* connect the soul and mind, so G-d becomes felt and known.

KEY POINTS

1. Faith in G-d is a unique form of belief. The soul knows that G-d exists because it is part of G-d. As we know that we exist, so does the soul know that G-d exists.
2. This faith is impervious to logical refutations or arguments because, to the soul, this fact transcends logic. We can never be persuaded that our faith is wrong.
3. Faith is a natural byproduct of having a Jewish soul. That's why there's no need to command a Jew to believe.
4. Sometimes there's a blockage between the soul and the mind, and the mind can't experience the faith of the soul. This is why some Jews profess to be lacking in faith.
5. Adopting a Torah-based lifestyle is the most immediate solution to unplugging the blockage between mind and soul.


JLI