

The Torah Personality: A Non-Believer

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Joseph Campbell the famous mythologist tells of a meeting he once had with a priest while on vacation. The priest, recognizing the famous professor, asked Campbell if he believed in God, to which Campbell replied, "no." "Well, would you believe in Him if I could prove Him to you?" asked the priest. "Yes," replied Campbell, "but then how would I have faith?" The priest conceded defeat.

This anecdote typifies the idea of Christian faith. The virtue of faith is only possible where the mind does not convince us that something is so. Indeed, some have gone so far as to say that the ideal of Christian faith is to believe in something the mind dictates as absurd. As the famous early Christian Tertullian said, "*credo quia absurdum*," (I believe that which is absurd). Søren Kierkegaard went even further and said that the very absurdity of the Christian claim makes it worthy of belief. This type of thinking has its source in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 1 & 2.

There is nothing mysterious about why religion demands belief. Religion is not a result of knowledge and investigation. It is basically man's projections of an inner world onto what we call the real world.

Such a system by definition demands belief. Its very existence is dependent on the denial of a *weltanschauung*¹ that bases itself on reasoning alone. Such a system would spell doomsday for the religion. Other modes of cognition must be sanctified so that the religion may survive. These modes are dubbed "spiritual."

In order to protect itself further, religion maintains that these modes of cognition are superior to reason. The challenge of religion then becomes to rely exclusively on the "spiritual" type thinking. This becomes the mark of virtue, so much so that if one were to know something by reason there would be no religious challenge and hence no virtue. This was Campbell's response to the priest.

What does Torah have to say about this? Torah teaches the exact opposite of what all man-made religions teach. We usually characterize religious people as believers because they accept as true things which cannot be proven through reason.

We call non-religious individuals non-believers because they demand proof for their convictions and therefore reject religious notions. In the eyes of the Torah both the religious and non-religious people are believers while the Torah personality is not a believer. Does this sound strange? Let us examine the matter more closely.

The Christian idea of faith leads to insoluble problems when we approach Torah. If having faith is the highest level of religiosity then Moses, the greatest figure in the Torah would be the least religious.

1 Worldview

Since he knew God via direct prophecy, "face-to-face," there would be no need for him to have any faith. He would thus be devoid of the most important religious virtue, faith. Similarly, the Patriarchs who had knowledge of God via prophecy would have no need for faith.

Moreover, all Israel who witnessed God's revelation at Sinai would have no need for faith. The Torah then is a book of the faithless. Indeed, Torah encourages faithlessness. God tells Moses, "Behold I will come to you in the thickness of the cloud in order that the nation shall hear when I speak with you and in you too will they believe forever, (Exodus 19:9)." God expects the people to believe in Him and the fact that Moses is His loyal servant only *after* the spectacular event at Sinai.

God never tells Moses to tell the people to simply have faith. Moses repeats the formula at great length in Deuteronomy 4:9-15, and 32-36, 5:2-5 and 19-24. It is quite clear through all of this that the only reason the people were expected to believe in God and Torah was because they witnessed the event at Sinai with their own eyes, as it stated, "You have been shown so that you may know that Hashem, He is God..., (Ibid. 4:35), "Face to face, God spoke to you, (Ibid. 5:4)", "You have seen that from the heavens I have spoken to you, (Exodus 20:19)." There is not one word in God's Torah that suggests that we suspend our critical faculty and indulge in what Christians call faith.

The Torah actually cautions against such a practice. In Deuteronomy 13, the Torah warns us not to follow any prophet who deviates from any of the teachings of the Torah even if his predictions of signs and wonders come true.

Predictions, signs and wonders evoke the mysterious element in man's nature. The false prophet is a test (13:4) to see if man will remain faithful to the evidence of Sinai or follow the mysterious, the emotional and the faith type of thinking.

We are never to be impressed by soothsayers, miracle workers, faith healers or other mystical performers. Throughout the Five Books of Moses and the prophets we find respect only for knowledge, wisdom, and understanding.

The message of the Torah is a clear one: If we are to perfect ourselves we are to pursue knowledge not any other modes of cognition. God's universe and God's Torah are based on knowledge.²

Only those who think of themselves as scholars but have never mastered the method of Torah analysis, and often times do not even know Hebrew, proclaim otherwise. Nahum M. Sarna in his book *Understanding Genesis*, states:

The quality of faith associated with Abraham at the covenant ceremony shows itself once again in this situation. Answering the doubts of his servant, the Patriarch is absolutely sure that the mission will be successfully accomplished. "The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, who promised me under oath, saying 'I will give this land to your offspring' - He will send his angel before you and you will get a wife

2 (See especially the first three chapters of Proverbs)

for my son from there, (Genesis 24:7)." Nahum M. Sarna, Understanding Genesis, (Schocken Books) 171.

Sarna then compares these words of Abraham with the words he used previously at the covenant of the parts, Genesis 15:2 and 15:8 stating:

At the outset of his career his very first words to God were expressions of doubt about each of the two elements of the divine promise - posterity and land. "O Lord God, what can you give seeing that I die childless... (Genesis 15:2)," he had said despairingly of the former; and, "O Lord God, how (sic) shall I know that I am to possess it?" (Ibid. 15:8) was his response to the latter. Now he evokes both posterity and land, serenely confident that God's promises will work themselves out in history. Abram, the doubter has become Abraham, the man of absolute faith (Ibid).

Sarna's claim that Abraham was "absolutely sure that the mission will be successfully accomplished" is patently false. Had Sarna simply read the very next verse he would have realized this. Genesis 24:8 states, "And if the woman be not willing to follow thee then thou shalt be clear from this my oath."

It is clear from 24:8 that Abraham was not sure at all that God would fulfill his mission. Sarna made a mistake in his translation verse 7. In Hebrew the future tense often signifies a hope or desire. The correct translation for the Hebrew word *Yishlach* in this instance is not *will send* but *shall send*, meaning should send.

The same is true of Genesis 49:10. The translation should read "The scepter shall not depart from Judah," meaning should not depart, not will not depart. People in Israel often say *Hashem Yaazor*, meaning (I hope that) God shall help, not God will help.

Abraham was not a man of naïve religious faith who assumed that God will do as he wishes. He knew full well that neither he nor any other human being has knowledge of God's will. He thus prepared his servant for both eventualities.

Being raised in a Christian environment Sarna equated faith with religious virtue, he then proceeded to project this notion onto the Torah. He committed the error of a bad historian. He took something from his existing environment and projected it onto the past.

Sarna's idea that Abraham doubted God at the covenant of Genesis 15 is not only wrong it is stupid. How can one speak to God, know that He is Creator of heaven and earth and yet not think He can give him a son or give a certain land to a certain people?

He is however, consistent. He demonstrates as much understanding of Genesis 15 as he does of Genesis 24³. Unfortunately, due to the fact that most people are ignorant, men like Sarna can masquerade as scholars when they don't even know the most basic and fundamental principles of Torah. One must be extremely cautious about one's authorities these days.

3 (Genesis 15 contains a very profound concept which I cannot expound upon here).

It should be pointed out that the word *Emunah* translated as belief or faith does not connote in Hebrew what these terms mean in English. The word *Emunah* means verification of a truth from an external source⁴. It does not mean blind religious faith.

The Torah personality is guided by the *Tzellel Elokim*, the divine element in man's soul. All Torah authorities interpret that term as the rational element in man's soul. He bases his life on his knowledge of Torah and the demonstration at Sinai⁵.

His belief in God is based on knowledge not shallow faith. As Maimonides states in the very beginning of his work, "The foundation of foundations and the pillar of all knowledge is to know that God exists." One must search assiduously for the knowledge of God's existence through the study of Torah.

The Torah personality is an individual committed to a way of life based on knowledge. For decisions in religious matters he studies the Talmud. He uses only intellect in interpreting its words. No Talmudic authority has ever based a ruling on feeling or religious emotion. Only logic and reason are admissible in this endeavor. What is contrary to logic is false.

But what of modern man, is he a believer or a non-believer? Every person must have some philosophy of life. Every person strives for happiness and acts in a way he thinks is good. Modern man is ruled by one notion-success.

He is convinced that fame, fortune and satisfaction of his desire for romantic love will bring him happiness. But does modern man know this to be true? Can he prove this? Indeed if we were guided merely by what we observe of others' lives it would be patently clear that such is not the case.

Again and again people find to their dismay that those people who have what they dream of are in the depths of misery and despair. But modern man does not change his course. He persists in believing that in his case it would be different. He is a believer. He believes his emotions.

Torah teaches us not to trust our emotions, to reason about what is truly good for man and to understand the nature of our emotions and instinctual life. Only through knowledge can we have a good and happy life.

The Torah personality is a total non-believer in the benefits most people ascribe to wealth, fame or romantic love. Maimonides states that the true Torah personality does not get excited by a sudden increase in his possessions or renown nor does he get depressed by a decrease in his wealth or popularity. He rides an "even keel" through life having the true good, Torah knowledge before his mind's eye always and everything else in proper perspective. His emotional life is tempered by knowledge. He is very critical in his judgments and goes through a lengthy analysis of himself and Torah before making any decisions.

4 (see Genesis 42:20 and Exodus 14:31)

5 (For an understanding of how the demonstration at Sinai is relevant today you may read a special paper I have written on the subject)

Thus, based on our original definition of a believer, as he who accepts conclusions uncritically; and a non-believer as he who is guided by his mind, we must conclude that the Torah personality is a non-believer while modern non-religious man is a believer par excellence.

Modern religious man who subscribes to the man-made religions, attempts to escape the human dilemma by creating in his mind a world based on simplistic infantile notions which have no support from reality. 'If only I could believe these things life would be great', he thinks. Belief becomes his great challenge.

For the Torah personality perfection is the challenge. But even witnessing the event at Sinai does not give man perfection as is clear from the Torah narrative. Knowledge of God's existence through Sinai is only the beginning.

Perfection involves the study and understanding of Torah ideas. We must gain knowledge of what is good and what is evil. We must understand our every emotion. We must recognize the difference between our instinctual nature and our divine element. We must exercise careful judgment in our deeds to make certain that we are not being guided in our lives by our basic emotions.

Like a great general, the Torah personality assesses his own strengths and weaknesses, knows when to move into battle and when to avoid certain situations. He knows when, and when not, to satisfy his instinctual nature. His every move is determined by knowledge.

He knows that even the most righteous occasionally fail. He is always ready to reanalyze and reevaluate his past deeds. He learns from his errors and thereby rises to even greater heights. His is not an infantile simplistic challenge of faith, but the challenge of challenges—the challenge of human perfection.

He is armed with a great work, the work that gives man true insight into the greatness and the frailties of human nature. He is constantly engaged in the delights of this insightful work, the great joy its knowledge brings, as well as the unique existence it forges for him.

The Torah personality is never bored. He is interested in all of God's knowledge, from the most obscure minutiae of *Halachic* detail to the latest advance in scientific knowledge. In all this he sees God's infinite wisdom. He is best described as the prophet describes him, "And let us know, let us run (eagerly strive) to know God, (Hosea 6:3)." Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra states on this verse, "We should eagerly strive to know God because this is the foundation of all knowledge and because of this alone man was created."