

Rabbi Norman Lamm on Faith, Doubt and Teshuva
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FAITH AND DOUBT

The problem to which this paper is addressed is of momentous importance. How can we affirm our Jewish faith in a world so beset by doubt? How, in the encounter of halakhic Judaism with modern thought, can we preserve both our integrity and our identity? How can we be academically and philosophically honest and yet Jewishly firm? How can we emerge from the

On Three Types of Faith...

For our purposes, let us sharpen that distinction. The first, that of acknowledgement, is a *cognitive* type of faith, in which I intellectually accept certain propositions as true — such as the existence and unity of God — whether or not I can offer convincing logical proof for my conviction. This is a “belief-that” type of faith; *that* God exists, *that* He is One, *that* He is incorporeal. The content of this faith is noetic, its mode is intellectual. The second type, that of *trust*, is not “belief-that” but “belief-in.” Regardless of the thoughts I entertain *about* God, regardless of my theology and the dogmas I affirm, I believe *in* Him: I trust and esteem Him. This is the area not of propositions but of relationship; it is not existential in the logician’s sense, but existential in the existentialist’s sense.⁶ Of

Now, this second category, that of trust and “belief-in,” can be subdivided into two other classes. Trust can be expressed as an emotional investment in another; it involves warmth, affect, and affection. And trust can be expressed in action, in the willingness to pursue a certain course of conduct at the behest of the one in whom I have faith-trust, even to the point of sacrificing my life if he should demand it. The first type of faith, that of acknowledgement and “belief-that,” the assent to a set of metaphysical or axiological propositions, we shall refer to as *Cognitive Faith*; the second, the emotional form of trust or belief-in, as *Affective Faith*; and the third, or behavioral form of trust, as *Functional Faith*.⁸

Three Types of Doubt

1) Cognitive Faith

Many of us are familiar with the fact that “Amalek” is the numerical equivalent of “safek,” doubt. But the doubt that refers to is the kind Bnei Yisrael experienced when Amalek first attacked at Refidim, when the nation wondered “Hayesh Hashem b’kirbeinu ihm ayin, is Hashem really within our midst or not?” That’s the sort of uncertainty we should strive to dispel and replace with clarity.

But the existence of doubt is inherent in the human experience. The whole of Shas and its commentaries are replete with unresolved difficulties, even if we have halachic rules on how to proceed nonetheless. And sometimes, we are called upon to actually embrace doubt, as in Chazal’s teaching ([Berachos 4a](#)), “Accustom your tongue to say ‘I don’t know.’” Such acceptance of doubt is a sign of spiritual maturity and humility. And, of course, a person needs a healthy measure of self-doubt, in order to know that the human capacity to stumble exists until the day of death, just as Yochanan Kohein Gadol abandoned his roots and became a tzeduki when he was 80.

Mishpacha Magazine (!)

3) Functional Faith

However, this grant of legitimacy to doubt must be limited to cognitive faith, and must not affect functional faith or halakhic practice. Once we violate a halakhic norm on the basis of a cognitive doubt, we have in effect ceased to function as believers and begun to act as deniers — not even as doubters. One can suspend intellectual judgment; one cannot suspend action. This is precisely the point made by William James in his criticism of agnosticism when he formulated his idea of the “forced option.” You can refuse to come to a conclusion, or insist that it is impossible to come to a conclusion, in the theoretical sphere, such as on the question of the existence or non-existence of God; but in practice you must act *as if* there is a God or *as if* there is no God. There is no middle ground;

ing a truth that Judaism proclaimed a long time ago for men of all ages: *naaseh* comes before *nishma*, Halakhah precedes and remains unconditioned by theology. Judaism has always maintained that behavior influences belief, that the cognitive may be fashioned by the functional. Thus the bold statement of the Rabbis that God cries out, “Would that they had forsaken Me but kept My Torah!”³⁰ “The heart,” a medieval halakhic source states, “follows actions.”³¹ Thus, too, the wise insight of Yehudah Halevi, so characteristic of his whole *Weltanschauung*: “A man cannot attain a relationship with God except by [the observance of] the word of God.”³² It is the func-

2) Affective Faith

The paradigm for this doubt is the question of Abraham: “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” (Gen. 18:25). It is not a matter of getting back at God because of the evil in His world by questioning His existence — although that is a psychologically understandable reaction. It is, rather, a matter of accepting His existence and His personality, but doubting His interest in us, His fairness, or, if you will, what He has informed us about His nature: that He is a *Rachum ve’Chanun* and *Tzaddik*. Hence, it would seem, *safek* can exist even within the affective, non-cognitive aspects of Faith.

ness. It is an integral part of man's relation with God, his deepest religious experience, and neither can nor should be removed. These polarities are akin to what the mystics have called *ratzo va-shov*, the alternation between intense light and the very blackest darkness of the soul. It is they — the trust-correlatives of certainty and doubt — that constitute the dynamism and the very essence of the genuinely religious man's spiritual biography.

not by being resolved but by being pushed into irrelevance. In the presence of the beloved and mysterious Thou, questions are no longer meaningful, because the whole category of discursive belief-that has been subsumed under and swallowed into affective belief-in. Thus, Job rants and raves, and for millenia learned theologians and philosophers and Bible scholars try to discern the thread of his argument. But when God appears out of the whirlwind, Job is overwhelmed — not by the cogency of the divine philosophy, but simply the Presence of the Thou whom he loves and fears, by Whom he is fascinated and overawed.

Faith and Doubt and Teshuva

וְכַשֵּׁם שֶׁשׁוֹקֵלִין זְכוּיֹת אָדָם וְעוֹנוֹתָיו בְּשַׁעַת מִיתָתוֹ כִּי בְּכֹל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה שׁוֹקֵלִין עֲוֹנוֹת כֹּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד מִבְּאֵי הָעוֹלָם עִם זְכוּיֹתָיו, בְּיוֹם טוֹב שֶׁל רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה. מִי שֶׁנִּמְצָא צָדִיק נִחְתָּם לְחַיִּים. וּמִי שֶׁנִּמְצָא רָשָׁע נִחְתָּם לְמִיתָה. וְהַבֵּינוֹנֵי תוֹלִין אוֹתוֹ עַד יוֹם הַכְּפוּרִים אִם עָשָׂה תְּשׁוּבָה נִחְתָּם לְחַיִּים וְאִם לֹא נִחְתָּם לְמִיתָה

Rambam

The beinoni is the one in the middle. The beinoni represents complacency, satisfied with living a life that is not too invested in religious growth, yet conforming enough to meet the threshold of basic Torah expectations. The beinoni leads a life of religious mediocrity, content to remain entrenched in his or her current state of observance and faith.

(Adapted from Pachad Yitzchak)

Teshuva of Return

כְּמָה מְעֹלָה מְעֹלֵת הַתְּשׁוּבָה. אָמַשׁ הִיָּה זֶה מִבְּדֵל מֵה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ישעיה נט ב) "עֲוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם הִיוּ מִבְּדֵלִים בֵּינְכֶם לְבֵין אֱלֹהֵיכֶם". צוּעֵק וְאִינוּ נֹעֲנָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ישעיה א טו) "כִּי תִרְבוּ תִפְלָה" וגו'. וְעוֹשֶׂה מִצְוֹת וְטוֹרְפִין אוֹתָן בְּפָנָיו שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ישעיה א יב) "מִי בִקֵּשׁ זֹאת מִיְדֵיכֶם רִמַּס חֲצָרִי", (מלאכי א י) "מִי גַם בָּכֶם וְיִסְגַּר דְּלֵתֵיכֶם" וגו'. וְהַיּוֹם הוּא מְדַבֵּק בְּשִׁכְנָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים ד ד) "וְאַתֶּם הַדְּבָקִים בְּה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם". צוּעֵק וְנֹעֲנָה מִיַּד שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ישעיה סה כד) "וְהָיָה טָרֶם יִקְרָאוּ וְאֲנִי אֶעֱנֶה". וְעוֹשֶׂה מִצְוֹת וּמְקַבְּלִין אוֹתָן בְּנֶחֱת וְשִׂמְחָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (קהלת ט ז) "כִּי כָבֵד רָצָה הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת מַעֲשֵׂיהָ". וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלָּא שְׂמֵחָאִים לָהֶם שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (מלאכי ג ד) "וְעִרְבָה לָהּ מִנְחַת יְהוּדָה וִירוּשָׁלַם כִּימֵי עוֹלָם וְכִשְׁנַיִם קִדְמֵינִי":

How exalted is the level of Teshuvah! Previously, the [transgressor] was separate from God, the Lord of Israel, as [Isaiah 59:2] states: "Your sins separate between you and your God." He would call out [to God] without being answered as [Isaiah 1:15] states: "Even if you pray many times, I will not hear."

He would fulfill mitzvot, only to have them crushed before him as [Isaiah 1:12] states: "Who asked this from you, to trample in My courts," Now, he is clinging to the *Shechinah* as [Deuteronomy 4:4] states: "And you who cling to God, your Lord." He calls out [to God] and is answered immediately as [Isaiah 65:24] states: "Before, you will call out, I will answer." He fulfills mitzvot and they are accepted with pleasure and joy as [Ecclesiastes 9:7] states, "God has already accepted your works," moreover, [G-d] desires them, as [Malachi 3:4] states: "Then, shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasing to God as in days of old and as in the former years."

Rambam Teshuva, 7

The Most Important Teshuva of All

This, then, is how our own doubts may be transcended, if even for a fleeting moment, which may be worth all of eternity: by the realization that we may well be the objects of God's doubt. The fullness of faith can be attained when, instead of doubting God, we come to the sudden and terrible awareness that God may be doubting us; that our *human* existence has yet to be affirmed by God who may not be convinced of its worth; that God may have lost faith in us because we have betrayed Him. That must be the focus of our concern.

What a tragic fate! — to be tossed between the torment of doubting God and the terror of being doubted by Him. But it can be more than a fate; it can be a destiny: to be concerned with and be the concern of the Creator of all.

א--י. עד שלא נוצרתי איני כדאי, ועכשו שנוצרתי כאלו לא נוצרתי. עפר אני בחי. קל וְחֹמֶר בְּמִיתוּתִי. הָרִי אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ כְּכֵלִי מְלֵא בּוֹשָׁה וְקִלְמָה.

God, before I was formed, I was unworthy [to be created]. And now that I have been formed, it is as if I had not been formed. I am like dust while I live, how much more so when I am dead. Here I am before You like a vessel filled with shame.

Yom Kippur Machzor