

What a Jew Believes - Practicing Faith in a Skeptical World

Session 4

Torah From Heaven: Did God Really Speak - and Does He Ever Change His Mind?



Part One - Article of Faith

You might inquire about times long past, going back to the time God created man on earth [exploring] one end of the heavens to the other. See if anything as great as this has ever happened, or if the like has ever been heard. Has any nation ever heard God speaking out of fire, as you have, and still survived?

1. Deuteronomy 4:32–33

The seventh principle The prophecy of Moshe, our teacher - peace be upon him - and that is that we believe that he was the father of all the prophets that were before him and that arose after him, [meaning] that all are below him in [loftiness] and that he is the chosen one from the entire human species.

The eighth principle That the Torah is from Heaven and that is that we believe that this Torah that is given to us through Moshe, our teacher - peace be upon him - is completely from the mouth of the Almighty; which is to say that it all came to him from God, may He be blessed, in a manner that is metaphorically called speech. And no one knows how it came to him except Moshe himself, peace be upon him - since it came to him. And [we believe] that he was like a scribe who is dictated to and writes down all of the events, the stories and the commandments.

And therefore [Moshe] is called the engraver. And there is no difference between "And the sons of Cham were Kush and Mitsrayim" (Genesis 10:6), "and his wife's name was" Meheitabel" (Genesis 36:39), "And Timnah was his concubine" (Genesis 36:12) [on the one hand] and "I am the Lord, your God" (Exodus 20:2) and "Hear Israel" (Deuteronomy 6:4) [on the other]; since they are all from the mouth of the Almighty and it is all the Torah of God - complete, pure and holy truth.

2. Rambam 13 Principles of Faith

The faith of the Jewish people is based on eyewitness testimony and requires neither proof nor demonstration

3. Kuzari

I contend that this revised Kuzari principle makes it rational to believe that the forbears of the Jewish people experienced amass revelation of Divinity and that there was a miraculous Exodus from Egypt, even if the numbers involved were very much smaller than in the Biblical account.

4. The Kuzari Principle, Prof Sam Lebens

The Inconvenience of Biblical Traditions. One or two examples will both explain this argument and make clear its unanswerable force. The first example is taken from the story of Abraham. For centuries, the Hebrew tribes waged a life - and - death struggle with the native population for the possession of ancient Palestine. But instead of the Hebrews claiming that they too were natives of Canaan - that they were the true aborigines of its soil, Bible Tradition concerning the beginnings of the Hebrew people is emphatic that its ancestors were not born in Canaan, but were nomads, immigrants shepherds, and had their origin in Ur of the Chaldees. Now even the skeptical historian is forced to admit that such a tradition must be based on strict history, as no people would invent such an inconvenient tradition in regard to a matter of vital importance like its right and title to its national homeland.

5. R Joseph Hertz, The Pentateuch and Haftoras.

Part Two - Right and Wrong?

Everyone has heard people quarrelling. Sometimes it sounds funny and sometimes it sounds merely unpleasant; but however it sounds, I believe we can learn something very important from listening to the kind of things they say. They say things like this: "How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?"—"That's my seat, I was there first"—"Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm"— "Why should you shove in first?"—"Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine"—"Come on, you promised." People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups. Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man's behaviour does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some kind of standard of behaviour which he expects the other man to know about. And the other man very seldom replies: "To hell with your standard."

These, then, are the two points I wanted to make. First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave in that way. They know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in.

6. CS Lewis "Mere Christianity"

What, therefore, is distinctive of Judaism is that God speaks and, through speaking, enters a dialogue with mankind. That is the first belief of Torah min hashomayim: words are holy. Without words there is no such thing as meaning. And that is why the soul in itself, the universe in itself – are not a place to find meaning. It is only when we have words that we can give meaning to anything. We could not read meaning out of creation. The Gemara says that if the Torah had not been given we would have learned industry from the ant, modesty from the cat. But the truth is that if the Torah had not been given, we could equally well have learned cunning from the fox, scavenging from a wolf, violence from a tiger. The universe does not contain meanings on the face of it.

That is because Judaism holds what is fundamentally holy is not a place, a person or a power. What is fundamentally holy is words. God's speech to us and our response to God. Meanings lie in language. We would not find them anywhere else. That is why Judaism is the supreme example of a religion of language and, therefore, of meaning.

If we do not find God in the Torah, we will not find Him anywhere else.

7. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Part Three - What Torah Taught The World

To the first-century Stoic philosopher Seneca, the Sabbath was absurd, a way for Rome's backward Jewish subjects to waste "almost a seventh of their life in inactivity." But when (or if), perhaps a millennium earlier, the Jews took over an old Mesopotamian day of taboo and transformed it into one of holy rest, they brought into the world not just the Sabbath but something just as precious, and surprisingly closely linked. They invented the idea of social equality.

The Israelite Sabbath institutionalized an astonishing, hitherto undreamed-of notion: that every single creature has the right to rest, not just the rich and the privileged

8. Bring Back the Sabbath , Judith Shulevitz New York Times

There must be a law that no imperfect or maimed child shall be brought up. And to avoid an excess in population, some children must be exposed. For a limit must be fixed to the population of the state.

9. Aristotle Politics VII.16

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."

10. Paul Johnson, " A History of the Jews"

Alone in the ancient Near East , in biblical law , human life and property are not commensurable . No way exists to legally equate them or to measure one against the other. The standard in biblical law is that human life cannot be substituted for vicariously or ransomed. No economic value can be applied to human life . Only the person who is guilty can be executed . By the same token, no civil property damage or theft can be compensated for by a human life. Property must be compensated by property, and life by the life of the guilty person. What lies behind these diametrically opposed perceptions of human value ? As we have seen , Emuna Elish, the Babylonian creation epic that was recited annually , has a very explicit understanding of human value. This epic explains that the purpose of the creation of humans was to be the gods slaves , thereby enabling the gods to rest from the drudgery of serving themselves. Humans fill the gods needs for food , drink , and shelter by providing sacrifices, libations, and temples . In other words , the humans have a utilitarian purpose. They are created not for their own sake but as a means to an end , a tool to be used by the gods for their own relaxation.

It is not too great a jump to go from the view of all humans as the gods slaves to that of a single human life as having limited value. In light of Emuna Elish, the perspective of both the biblical creation story and the flood story presents a revolution in evaluating human life . As already mentioned, Gen. 1: 26 - 28 reveals a totally novel , majestic view of humans - made in the Divine image and given the world to rule. In God's address to Noah and his children at the end of the flood story, Gen. 9:6 imparts a new legal repercussion of being created in God' s image

11. Justice for All: How the Jewish Bible Revolutionized Ethics, Jeremiah Unterman

Part Four - Biblical criticism

I have never been seriously troubled by the problem of the Biblical doctrine of creation vis-a-vis the scientific story of evolution at both the cosmic and the organic levels, nor have I been perturbed by the confrontation of the mechanistic interpretation of the human mind with the Biblical spiritual concept of man. I have not been perplexed by the impossibility of fitting the mystery of revelation into the framework of historical empiricism. Moreover, I have not even been troubled by

the theories of Biblical criticism which contradict the very foundations upon which the sanctity and integrity of the Scriptures rest.

We all know that the Bible offers two accounts of the creation of man. We are also aware of the theory suggested by Bible critics attributing these two accounts to two different traditions and sources. Of course, since we do unreservedly accept the unity and integrity of the Scriptures and their divine character, we reject this hypothesis which is based, like much Biblical criticism, on literary categories invented by modern man, ignoring completely the eidetic-noetic content of the Biblical story. It is, of course, true that the two accounts of the creation of man differ considerably. This incongruity was not discovered by the Bible critics. Our sages of old were aware of it. However, the answer lies not in an alleged dual tradition but in dual man, not in an imaginary contradiction between two versions but in a real contradiction in the nature of man.

12. Rabbi Soloveitchik "The Lonely Man of Faith"

Here we find an entire narrative that actually constitutes a satirical negation of polytheistic beliefs. The founding of the city of Babylon, center of a mighty civilization, and the creation of its great temple tower, sacred to the supreme god Marduk, are portrayed as an offense to God. Mesopotamian theological propaganda that described the building of Babylon as the work of the gods at creation is tacitly refuted and the popular pagan notion that the ziggurat was the navel of the earth, the channel of physical communication between heaven and earth, is subject to scorn and derision. Babel, taken to mean "the gate of god" by the Semites of Mesopotamia, is, by an Israelite play on words, construed as "confusion," and the confutation of mythological paganism is complete.

13. Nahum Sarna Paganism and Biblical Judaism

Rising to this challenge, R. Mordechai Breuer proposed his Theory of Aspects (torat ha-behinnot). He posited that God revealed the Torah to Moses in its complex form so that the multiple aspects of the infinite Torah could be presented in different sections. Since we are limited as humans, we cannot simultaneously entertain these perspectives, so they appear to us as contradictory. The complete truth emerges only when one takes all facets into account. In this manner, R. Breuer accepted the text analysis of the Documentary Hypothesis while rejecting its underlying beliefs and assumptions

Moreover, R. Bazak argues that the Patriarchal narratives reflect the realities of their period and do not reflect the realities of a much later era when critics claim they were written. The same is true of the exodus from Egypt. R. Bazak quotes R. Yoel Bin-Nun, who observes that nobody living some 1000 years after these events could have invented details that so closely reflect the periods in which the Torah says they occurred.¹³ Additionally, many of the ostensible conflicts that archaeologists raise between their findings and the biblical text are based on superficial readings of the biblical text.

14. R Hayyim Angel, Review of “Until This Day: Fundamental Questions in Bible Teaching” by R Amnon Bazak

Part Five Does He Ever Change His Mind

The ninth principle Faithful transmission and that is that this Torah has faithfully been transmitted from the Creator, God - may He be blessed - and not from anyone else. And [so] it cannot be added to and it cannot be taken away from, as it is stated (Deuteronomy 13:1), "you shall not add to it and you shall not take away from it.

15. Rambam

כל ספרי הנביאים וכל הכתובים עתידין ליבטל לימות המשיח, חוץ ממגילת אסתר. והרי היא קיימת כחמשה חומשי תורה וכהלכות של תורה שבעל פה, שאינן בטלין לעולם. ואע"פ שכל זכרון הצרות יבטל, שנאמר: "כי נשכחו הצרות הראשונות וכי נסתרו מעיני, " (ישעיהו סה:טז) ימי הפורים לא (יבטלו, שנאמר: "וימי הפורים האלה לא יעברו מתוך היהודים וזכרם לא יסוף מזרעם." (אסטר ט:כח)

All the books of the Prophets and all the Writings will be annulled in the days of the Messiah, apart from Megillat Esther. It will continue to be binding like the Five Books of Moses and the entire Oral Law which will never be invalidated. Even though all memory of our suffering will be erased...still the days of Purim will not be annulled.

16. Mishneh Torah, Laws of Purim

Rav Kook (Ktav Yad Kodsho II, pp. 15-17) relates to both possibilities: that animal sacrifices may return in the Third Beit HaMikdash (the historically mainstream opinion, see Rambam, Mlachim 11, 1), or alternatively, he proposes possible halachic justification if the Sanhedrin may prefer (either temporarily or permanently) to annul them. The bottom line is that he leaves all the options open, and if the Sanhedrin may feel that having animal korbanot may "turn off" people from wanting the Beit HaMikdash (maybe even temporarily), he suggests several different halachic ways to justify such an approach. He obviously takes into account the halachic "given" that the mitzvot are eternal, yet nevertheless, suggests ways to solve such issues.

17. Rabbi Ari Chiwat

Rabbi Joshua responded by saying that one cannot prove anything from a carob tree. Rabbi Eliezer then said to him, "then if the halacha is with me, let the stream prove it!" to which the water responded by flowing in the opposite direction. Rabbi Joshua responded by saying that one cannot prove anything with a stream. Rabbi Eliezer then said, "then if the halacha is with me, let these walls prove it!" to which the walls of the room began to cave in. Rabi Joshua then rebuked the walls by saying that the walls had no authority in a halachic debate. The walls then stood at angles in respect to both of the rabbis. Finally, Rabbi Eliezer said, "if the halacha is with me, then may it be proven by heaven!" In response to this, a voice came down from heaven and said to Rabbi Joshua, "why do you argue with Rabbi Eliezer? The Halacha is in accordance with him in every way". Rabbi Joshua said to the heavenly voice, "The Torah is not in heaven so we take no notice of heavenly voices since you have already written in the Torah to follow the majority.

18. Bava Metzia 59b