

Matters of Faith

The phrase Jews know best in the Torah is:

Sh'ma Yisrael, HaShem Elokenu, HaShem echad!

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One. [Deut. 6:4]

This simple statement encapsulates the essential part of Judaism: There is a God, and only one. It is obviously a matter of faith. What I would like to do is examine closely matters of faith. Have you ever paused to think just what it is that you believe in, what drives your actions? If you had to encapsulate your faith in a short statement, what would you say? What is your "starting point" in life? Let's explore some possible starting points and examine ultimate issues from a Jewish point of view.

First, what is faith? Faith is what you accept without proof. It informs and drives your actions.

Now, the rationalist may respond: "I accept nothing without proof. Without hard evidence, clear to all, nothing can be accepted as true." Actually, this is impossible. You must have a starting point. Logic and reason are only the road used to travel from unquestioned premises to conclusions. Logic and reason just say: "If this, then that." You cannot skip the "If this" part. It would be "irrational". There must be faith at the beginning.

These premises are called "axioms" in mathematics. Yes, even mathematics requires unproven statements as starting points. For example, standard geometry begins with Euclid's axioms. Change these axioms and you get a different geometry, which is also useful. Einstein showed that our world obeys a geometry different from Euclid's, because space is curved.

But does the scientist have faith. Yes. He believes there is order in the universe; that there are laws; that things are not random. If he did not believe that, he would not be a scientist. He'd be selling insurance. His job is precisely to discover these laws, and he could not do that if he doubted their very existence. Another article of faith of the scientist is that he believes he can understand these laws. If he thought they were beyond his comprehension, he would not even try. He also believes there must be a single unified theory that explains everything. There is no requirement that there be such a theory: It is just an article of faith. It stems from our biblical quote: God is One. The idea that God is One leads the scientists to try to unify and simplify their theories, to show that even very different phenomena can derive from the same basic law.

Sometimes the faith of the scientist can be misplaced. In the 19th century, scientists believed that two experiments performed under exactly the same conditions must produce exactly the same results. One day they discovered they don't, and quantum mechanics was born.

Some will say: "I accept only what I see or feel. These are my starting points." But these starting points can lead you astray. Things are often not what they seem. There are mirages and manipulations. Our knowledge is incomplete. For example, based on our immediate observations, the earth is flat and the sun moves around it. You need sophisticated equipment to prove this is not so.

Some will say: "I just follow my instinct". Yes, but where does this instinct come from? It comes from inherited teachings, which flow from the faith of ancestors. Judaism teaches that there are two types of faith. The first is *emunah*. It is specific and expressible as "propositions", such as "God is One" or "God rewards the righteous". The second is *bitachon*, which can be translated as "trust" or optimism. It is diffuse and non-specific. For example, the Talmud tells of a robber about to steal, and says, "God, help me!" He has the chutzpah to trust that God will help him, even if it is to break God's own commandments! [Berachot 63a, according to En Yaakov]

The only faith mentioned in the Bible is monotheism and chosenness, as related in the Book of Isaiah:

You are My witnesses, says the Lord, and My servant whom I have chosen; so that you may know Me and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before Me no God was formed, and neither shall any be after Me. [Is. 43:10]

God. Can one “prove” the existence of God? No. No proof of the existence of God is possible. No matter what "miracles" you may witness, how do you know God is causing them, and not just an alien from outer space impressing you with his advanced technology? You can't. So it's a matter of faith. After all, how hard would it be to impress a primitive man who lived centuries ago that you are God? You land in his village in a helicopter; you show him all kinds of modern technology; if you are mean you show him who is boss with machine guns and dynamite; and you heal his sick loved ones with five dollars' worth of antibiotics. The “alien” in question is not God, but can make you believe he is. He has no answers to ultimate questions.

Now we need to define “belief”. What is the meaning of "I believe"? Is it just a warm fuzzy feeling? That would be irrelevant to "truth". Is it something you are willing to state in public? You may feel compelled or socially pressured to say it. No, belief must be provable by action, or else it is meaningless.

I can playfully manufacture a test scenario. Suppose aliens from outer space were to land and tell you: "We have video recordings of all of human history, taken with powerful remote cameras. We know what happened for certain. To prove it, here are some scenes from your life you'll recognize. Now answer this: Did Moses part the sea? We have taken your children hostage and will kill them if you answer wrong." It's only then that you'll know whether or not you believe Moses parted the sea!

But, until such a scenario comes to pass, you can't be sure you “believe” biblical accounts. In matters theological, "belief" is a meaningless term. For example, I may be strongly attached to Judaism as a whole, I may find its approach, track record, teachings, rituals, etc., inspirational, satisfying, useful, and right on the mark; but

I don't know what I believe if it's not backed by some action of mine. That is why belief has never been important in Judaism, in spite of an attempt by Maimonides to create a Jewish creed. Judaism never emphasized belief, only commandments, only action.

For example, I believe in gravity, so I won't jump off a cliff, even when I am in serious danger, because I know for certain I will die if I jump. My behavior proves my belief in this narrow point. Likewise, I will support building satellites that improve communications, because I believe gravity will make them stay in the right orbit. My actions demonstrate my belief, to myself and to others.

Let me illustrate with an anecdote about the Danish physicist Niels Bohr. Bohr was half Jewish, professed to be a secular humanist, and won the Nobel prize for his contributions to quantum mechanics. One day, so the story goes, Bohr was walking home with some of his graduate students. When they arrived, the students noticed a horseshoe on Bohr's front door. They were horrified. "Professor!" they said, "how can you, of all people, believe in such superstitious nonsense!" Bohr smiled, saying: "Relax. I don't believe for a minute that the horseshoe will bring me luck. I agree it's all baloney and hogwash. However, I am given to understand that the horseshoe works whether or not you believe in it."

The important conclusion here is that most theological discussions are futile, and tragic when they result in violence and loss of life, as they often did outside Judaism.

As mentioned earlier, Judaism does not directly require faith, or belief. Judaism emphasizes "action" commandments, unlike other religions. In the Midrash, God is quoted as saying: I don't mind if my people stopped believing in Me, as long as they follow My commandments:

It is written [in the Book of Jeremiah], "They have forsaken Me and have not kept My law." [Jer. 16:11] This means [it would have been better if] they had forsaken Me, yet kept My law, because the light of My law would have led them back to the right path.

[Lam. R. Prologue 2]

The only Jewish test of belief is: How does it affect your actions? If it doesn't, Judaism says: Don't worry about it.

Some people have evolving faith. They say: "These are my starting points today, but I reserve the right to change them." This is OK and encouraged, as long as you truly believe in SOMETHING today.

If one were to ask me for my own statement of faith, I would say:
There are laws governing the universe and we can understand these laws. Behavioral laws are derived from the Torah and natural laws from scientific observation.

Let me make a few comments about it:

-First, the statement rejects the assertion that there are things beyond our comprehension, things that our brain cannot grasp. I emphatically reject the view: "We may physically not be able to understand certain things. Can a monkey understand the theory of relativity?". There are two reasons for this:

-First, even if it is true that there are things we can't understand, we cannot possibly know it.

-Second, we were given a mind to try to understand things. It would be defeatist to reject this gift.

-Second, the statement does not say: "There is order in the universe". Order is a matter of perception. At one level (say, microscopic), things may seem chaotic, but at another level (say, macroscopic), order can be perceived in statistical laws. This is exemplified by quantum mechanics, classical statistical mechanics, the theory of heat and diffusion, etc. Also, "order" may imply "determinism" to some, and so it is avoided.

-Third, the statement does not say: "We can attain all knowledge". This would imply knowing the future with certainty, and hence determinism. The laws in question may well be statistical, as in quantum mechanics. Knowing all the laws does not mean knowing all there is to know, because of built-in limits, such as the speed of light or the uncertainty principle.

-Fourth, the statement does not say "We will have answers to all questions". Some questions are the right questions to ask, and some are the wrong questions to ask, and we have no way of knowing which is which in advance. For example, a hot question 2,000 years

ago was: "What does the Earth rest on?". We now know this is the wrong question to ask. Moreover, the laws themselves may imply that some questions, although not "the wrong question", simply cannot be answered with certainty, such as "What will I do tomorrow?" (because of free will) or "What will that particle do next?" (because of quantum mechanical uncertainty).

Fifth, the statement does not say "We will know all the reasons, all the purposes". The laws themselves may reveal purpose, or they may not.

-Sixth, the statement does not say "We WILL discover all the laws", only that we can understand them if explained to us. Some laws may not be discoverable or verifiable by experiment (such as parallel universes), and must remain in the domain of speculation, or to complete a compelling theory. The laws may require that some portions of the universe be inaccessible. So a theory, while "correct", may be unverifiable.

It is important to note that a theory always remains a theory. No cause-to-effect relationship can EVER be "proved". No one knows if one day a new fact will invalidate a theory that has so far been successful.

Seventh, although the statement does not mention "God", or the realms of mysticism and the paranormal, it does not exclude them. They would become part of the laws. Some religious concepts may find their way in those laws in a different language.

Eighth, the statement does not profess faith in "human goodness", in "progress", in "love", and other hard-to-define and hard-to-measure characteristics. They could, however, be embedded in the laws in a different, quantifiable form.

Ninth, the statement must not necessarily be understood in the sense that science will explain everything. An Orthodox Jew can look at the statement and say: "I fully agree. You will find all these laws in the Torah".

Tenth, the statement does not imply that we will be bored to tears living in a world in which we know everything, with nothing left to discover. The laws themselves may take care of that problem. For example, the laws of quantum mechanics imply that we can determine probabilities of events occurring, not certainties. There are always "surprises" and "unknowns" to spice up life. Also, a law may be that the laws themselves change with time, perhaps unpredictably, or according to some "superlaw".

Eleventh, the statement says nothing about whether the pursuit of knowledge (that is, the attempt to discover these laws) is a desirable thing. That is a subjective assessment. Quotes from the Jewish tradition point to the necessity of being careful with new knowledge. For example, in Genesis, we read:

And the Lord God commanded the man saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil [*tov vara*] you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you will surely die." [Gen. 2:16-17]

And the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be as gods [*elohim*], knowing good and evil." [Gen. 3:4-5]

The Mishna says:

Everyone who tries to know the following four things, it would have been better for him if he had never come into the world: What is above and what is below, what was before [creation], and what will be after [all is destroyed]. [Hagigah 2.1 -- 11b]

The Talmud tells the story of the four rabbis who ventured in the orchard [*pardes*] to learn esoteric knowledge:

One died, one became deranged, one apostasized, and one emerged whole. [Hagigah 14b].

So it IS possible to emerge whole, IF you are prepared! The Book of Proverbs concludes:

Have you found honey? Eat as much as is enough for you, lest you consume too much of it and have to vomit it forth. [Proverbs 25:16]

Finally, the statement does not exclude belief in an afterlife. There are two arguments in favor of an afterlife. The first is religious: The resurrection of the dead is a rabbinic doctrine, included in

Maimonides' thirteen principles of faith. The second is scientific: Nature is thrifty, not wasteful. Conservation laws appear all over physics: Conservation of mass-and-energy, of linear and angular momentum, of spin, of electric charge, etc. The thought that after death nature would completely waste a mind and all its contents and potentialities does not track with all these conservation laws.

In conclusion, let us quote the Talmud:

Shim'on, the son [of Rabban Gamliel], said: "All my days I have been raised among the Sages, and I have found nothing as good for the body as silence. The main thing is practice, not study, and whoever talks too much brings on sin." [Avot 1:17]