ISSUES IN JEWISH THOUGHT

FAITH AND REASON
— a personal view

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By Rabbi Dr Jonothan Sacks (MA Cantab)

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Jewish young people growing up at the end of the twentieth century face challenges and opportunities never before encountered. The break up of European Jewish communities and the simultaneous availability for many of academic and professional careers was swiftly followed by mass defection from Jewish faith and Jewish living as the outside world beckoned. But the optimism of the nineteenth century gave way to the grim reality of the twentieth century as war and holocaust proved that intellectual and scientific progress did not inevitably lead either to peace or to justice. As a result, post war generations have a healthy and sometimes radical cynicism towards modernity. The rise of modern Israel has complicated and deepened the dilemma for the generations of the 60's, 70's and 80's. Modern nationalism is frequently seen as morally degenerate, yet a commitment to and a feeling for Israel is normally asserted as the lowest common denominator of Jewish life.

Many young people are now being thrust into this maze with little hope of finding the way through. Their Jewish education and knowledge is normally inadequate to respond with any degree of cogency to the intellectual probing of a modern western upbringing and education in which the critical faculty is well developed and even glorified. But in many cases the home inheritance is enough to point in the direction of Jewish tradition or Israel without being able rationally to support such a life style. The resultant confusion explains an intermarriage rate of over 20% and a negation of Jewish values from all segments of the Jewish population.

For 40 years Jewish Youth Study Groups has attempted to provide for its membership a movement whereby young people could grow up within a stable and supportive Jewish environment and equip themselves with at least some clues to form a way through the maze described above. Local Study Groups with their study courses and shiurim, national events and Shabbatot and the annual Summer and Winter Schools together build a model of Jewish life both residential and non-residential through which Study Groupers can expand their Jewish horizons. Many complete this surrogate Jewish education by spending time in Israel on a Study Group Israel Summer School or a period in a yeshiva/girls college. As a further contribution to this process we are happy to offer this series of "Issues in Jewish Thought" by Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks. Our author was carefully chosen as he exemplifies the path trodden by so many Study Groupers in his own life and can write with both erudition on his chosen subjects and empathy towards his readers. We are happy to acknowledge with grateful thanks the assistance of the United Synagogue Youth and Community Department and its director Mr. Jeffrey Blumenfeld. His cooperation and help in the production of this series has been invaluable. It is our hope and prayer that this series will provide for both Study Groupers and the wider Jewish public a beginning to the mystery of the life and survival of the Jew in the 20th and 21st century.

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If God exists, then He has always existed. If He does not, then He never has. Why, then, are there so many more atheists now than there were? The Torah, with few exceptions, speaks of the danger, not of **dis**belief but of **too much** belief. Its primary target is the serving of several gods, not the belief that there is none.

This suggests an important point: that faith **has a significant history.** On the face of it, the opposite seems true. Judaism in particular and religion in general embody timeless truths, ideas that have no history because they do not change. God does not change. Neither, by and large, does man: still that awkward mixture of body and soul, good and evil, brute and angel described in the opening chapters of Bereshith. Why, then, if the two partners are the same, should the relationship between them be subject to alteration? The distance, or lack of it, between man and God is always bounded by two constants. On the one hand, 'God is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth' (Psalm 145:18). On the other, He is always just beyond grasp: 'Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?' (Job 11:7).

In a way, this is certainly true. At any age in man's history, an **individual** can find himself close to God, or feel utterly removed. But the **collective** response shifts from age to age, so that at one stage Abraham was, in the rabbinic phrase, 'on one side and the rest of the world on the other'; whilst at another, the Psalmist can confidently call the person who 'says in his heart: There is no God', a 'fool' (Psalm 14:1). Faith is always possible: but at times it is the norm, at others the exception.

This is so not only of faith itself, but of the route to faith. The Israelites in the wilderness lived in the closest proximity to God: 'Has any nation ever heard God speaking out of fire, as you have, and still survived? Has God ever done miracles ... as He did for you in Egypt before your own eyes?' (Devarim 4:33-34). They were never again to hear His voice directly, as they did at Sinai. Instead God spoke to them through His prophets. When prophecy ceased, the rabbis created a literature, the **aggadah**, through which they sought to find the Divine meaning in their situation. There were some residual traces of a sense

of direct communication with God: the Talmud mentions a 'Heavenly voice' which intervened in the disputes between Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel, and between R. Joshua and R. Eliezer. There were sages, like R. Joshua ben Levi, who were visited by the prophet Elijah. But the overall tendency is of a growing distance between heaven and earth, bridged with diminishing frequency by direct revelation.

The sages were aware of the fact that this was a product of time rather than individual merit. It was not that there was no-one who deserved to be a prophet, but that the age of prophecy had passed. The Talmud records that on one occasion a Heavenly voice proclaimed to a gathering of rabbis: 'There is one amongst you who is worthy that the Divine Presence should rest on him as it did on Moses, but his generation does not merit it.' (Sanhedrin 11a). The man in question was Hillel.

All this serves to explain why philosophy — specifically, the attempt to provide a rational basis for Jewish belief — should have appeared so late in the history of Judaism. With the exception of Philo of Alexandria, who lived at the end of the Second Temple period, and who had little influence on rabbinic Judaism, Jewish philosophy is a post-Talmudic phenomenon. Its first major exponent was Saadia Gaon, whose great work, **Emunot VeDe'ot**, was not written until around 933 C.E. It is an extraordinary fact that over 1,500 years should separate Aristotle from the man who did most to reconcile his thought with Judaism, Moses Maimonides.

Philosophy is, in short, a product of alienation. Considered in itself, the pursuit of knowledge through reason has an independent validity and importance. But it must seem secondary, when it touches upon such subjects as God, creation, and ethics, to a religion which has already had access to the revelation of the Torah. Why prove the existence of God, when we believe in the Torah which begins, 'In the beginning, God created ...'? It is not until there is a prolonged sense of the distance between man and God that religious philosophy emerges in Judaism. It is as if, God having ceased to speak to man through His prophets, man tries to scale the heights back to Him through his intellect.

The achievements and shortcomings of the Jewish philisophers of the Middle Ages must be set against this background: that they were responding to the mood and spiritual needs of an age. The prophets did not need reason to convince them of the reality of God. Why should they? They were spoken to by Him. It may be, in the twentieth century, that we have outgrown our faith in reason — whether the result is to leave some people as agnostic, or others reaching back to older sources of inspiration. If there are times when we find Jewish philosophy abstract and unconvincing, this may be due not so much to any weakness that it has, as to the distance we have travelled spiritually since then, whether for good or otherwise.

Logical truths are timeless. The idea that they are the way to God, is not.

SAADIA: THE TWO PATHS

The relation between faith and reason is not unitary: there are many ways of conceiving it. In this brief outline we will consider three major possibilities, paths opened up for us by three great thinkers: Saadia Gaon, Judah HaLevi and Moses Maimonides.

Saadia tells us, at the outset, that he was moved to write the **Emunot VeDe'ot** because of the doubts and confusions he saw in his contemporaries: 'I saw, in this age of mine, many believers whose belief was not pure and whose convictions were not sound ... And I saw men who were sunk, as it were, in seas of doubt and overwhelmed by waves of confusion, and there was no diver to bring them up from the depths, nor a swimmer who might take hold of their hands and carry them ashore.'

For Saadia there are three sources of knowledge: observation, intuition, and logical inference. They belong to mankind as such. For Jews, however, there is a fourth source: authentic tradition, passed down by Moses and the prophets in an unbroken sequence to us. There is no tension between them: tradition assures us that we are right to see observation and reason as sources of knowledge; and if we use them as such then we will arrive at identical conclusions to those stated in the Torah.

Thus Saadia sees reason and revelation as two paths, leading in very different ways to the same point. He is supremely optimistic that their findings will never conflict. God, he says, 'has informed us ... that if we would engage in speculation and diligent research, inquiry would produce for us in each instance the complete truth, tallying with His announcements to us by the speech of His prophets. Besides that, He has given us the assurance that the godless will never be in a position to offer a proof against our religion, nor the sceptics to produce an argument against our creed.' (**Emunot VeDe'ot**, Introduction, 6)

There are those who believe that speculation leads to heresy. Not so, he says: it does so only for the ignorant. Did not the sages discourage speculation? Yes, he concedes, but only amongst those who put the Torah aside and relied upon reason alone. They might, after all, make a mistake in their reasoning, and unless they had the record of revelation beside them they would never be aware of the fact. But why if every truth can be reached by reasoning, was it necessary for there to be a revelation at all? To this, Saadia replies that the process of reasoning takes time; some people make errors; other stop short of their goal, overwhelmed by the effort. God therefore gave us the conclusions in advance, so that we could live by them before we had reached the stage of proving them by reason.

This view of the harmony and complementarity of reason and tradition dictates the structure of his work. On each topic he first states the view of the Torah; he then proves rationally that it is in fact the truth; and he proceeds to deal with alternative views and objections and to show that they are unfounded.

There is one small point which he concedes in the course of his exposition, which threatens to make the whole project circular. He has to admit that there are passages in the Torah which, if taken literally, would conflict with sound belief. He says, therefore: 'Whenever there is encountered in either the assertions of the Torah or in the words of any one of us monotheists, an expression describing God or His deeds which stands in contradiction to the requirement of sound reason, there can be no doubt that it was meant to be taken in a figurative sense.' (**Emunot VeDe'ot 1:3) Thus, there can** be a conflict between reason and the Torah, but it is always to be resolved by reinterpreting the verse in question. This will ensure that harmony is preserved, but at the price of making reason the master.

MAIMONIDES: THE INTELLECTUAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

For Saadia, then, reason ran alongside faith, and theoretically either one of them would be sufficient. We need tradition only to safeguard us from errors in our reasoning; we need reason only to protect us against challenges to our faith. Not so for Maimonides. For him, philosophising was an essential means to the knowledge of God, which was itself first in importance amongst the commands.

Maimonides' achievements are vast and complex: any summary is a misrepresentation. He is a difficult writer, because what he seems to say forthrightly in one place he unsays in another so that a deliberate mystery often hangs over his views. The **Guide for the Perplexed,** his philosophical masterpiece, is a great and often revolutionary work. But it commanded attention for another reason: Maimonides' standing as a halachist, author of the unsurpassed **Mishneh Torah,** made him a figure impossible to ignore even in the least philosophical of Jewish circles. Moreover, he introduced philosophy into his halachic code at several points; and its structure and methodology owe much to his logical training. He practised what he preached: in his hands the whole range of Judaism is enriched by the discipline of reason.

We need only take the opening of his halachic code to gain a sense of the radical transformation Judaism receives. A work like the **Sefer Ha-Chinuch** proceeds along the order of commands in the Torah: it begins, accordingly, with the injunction to be fruitful and multiply. The **Shulchan Aruch**, and its predecessor, the **Tur**, are arranged chronologically, so that they begin with the rules for getting up in the morning. Not so the **Mishneh Torah**, which begins at the **logical** beginning: the commands to know, love and fear God, from which everything else flows.

Here is Maimonides' treatment of the first of the Ten Commandments, 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt': 'The foundation of foundations and the pillar of all sciences is to know that there is a First Being who brought every existing thing into being ... If it could be supposed that He did not exist, it would follow

that nothing else could possibly exist.' (Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 1:1-2) This is, undeniably, the God of the philosophers. In the Torah, the command is rooted in a specific **historical** experience, the going out of Egypt. For Maimonides it is grounded in the **logical** proposition that if anything exists, then something must have brought it into being, and that something — if we are not to be involved in an infinite regress — must be something which was not itself brought into being. The command thus becomes a dictate of reason. Indeed Maimonides was later to write that when the rabbis said that this command was heard by the Israelites directly at Sinai, and not through Moses, they meant that it was **self-evident** and therefore did not need to be revealed: 'Whatever can be established by proof is known by the prophet in the same way as by any other person; he has no advantage in this respect.' (Guide, II, 33.)

The second command, 'Thou shalt have no other gods besides Me', is equally provable. For there to be two identical things, they have to occupy space; otherwise one could not differentiate between them and say they were two, not one. But God does not occupy space, because He is not physical. Therefore there is only One. This again is how Maimonides argues, not in a philosophical treatise but in a code of Jewish law (Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 1:7).

Again, the love and fear of God are not simply emotional commitments. They are the products of intellectual contemplation. Once a person reflects on the greatness of God's works, and from that to His wisdom, he will be filled with a longing to know more — which is love — and a sense of the smallness of his comprehension — which is fear (ibid. 2:2). It seems that we must become philosophers to fulfil — in a way that is more than rudimentary — the most fundamental of the Torah's commands.

This approach naturally has startling consequences. For example: prophecy is, at least in part, an intellectual phenomenon. The prophet 'must have studied and acquired wisdom, so that his rational faculty passes from a state of potentiality to that of actuality; his intellect must be as developed and perfect as human intellect can be' (Guide II, 36). The major difference between the prophet and the philosopher is that the latter has perfected only his logical faculty, whereas the former has developed his imaginative faculty as well.

Or in another direction: God does nothing without a reason, and His rational purposes are discoverable if we exercise sufficient study. Therefore, the idea that some, at least, of the 613 commandments do not have reasons, is a mistake. Even the most apparently irrational of the commands has a specific point. Maimonides was the first systematically to employ a major insight: that a major theme of the Torah is to keep the Israelites far from idolatry, and that therefore if we were to possess accurate historical information about the pagan cultures with which they were surrounded, we would see that many of the commands whose reason is obscure were directed against then-common heathen practises. Thus he suggests that the prohibition of wearing clothes of mixed linen and wool had its origin in the fact that pagan priests used to wear such clothes; he surmises that the law against 'seething a kid in its mother's milk' was also directed against an idolatrous rite.

Maimonides did not believe that everyone could become a philosopher, but he did believe that the major intellectual truths which reason discloses must be known, at least in broad outline, by every Jew. Thus he insisted — against strong oposition — that if one took the Torah literally and thought, as a result, that God had physical attributes (a mighty hand, an outstretched arm ...), then one was a **heretic who had no share in the world to come** (Hilchot Teshuvah 3:7). Surely — many were tempted to reply — this cannot be so: there are many simple Jews who take the Torah literally, and were brought up to do so, and how can they be branded as heretics? Maimonides had no time for this reply: "If you think that there is an excuse for those who believe in the corporeality of God on the ground of their training, their ignorance or their limited comprehension, you must make the same allowance to the worshippers of idols" (Guide, I, 36).

The faculty of reason was not for Maimonides, as it was for Saadia, a mere adjunct to religion, a way of proving that faith was well-grounded. It was the **primary route** to the knowledge, and hence the love, of God. It had a dominant place in the inner life of Judaism. Nonetheless Maimonides was acutely aware of the limits of reason. "God's essence as it really is, the human mind does not understand and is incapable of grasping or investigating" (Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 1:9). We can only know what God is not; not what He is. The first book of the Guide is devoted to what has become, in Western philosophy,

very much a twentieth century concern: the limits of human language. The Torah is consistently **metaphorical** when it speaks of God, for no word which can be applied to finite beings means the same when applied to the Infinite Being. "The Torah speaks in the language of man", but the languge of God is beyond us. Even Moses, whose knowledge of God was different in kind from that of anyone else before or since, could only see the 'back', not the 'face' of the Divine Being.

We are physical beings, we have bodies; therefore a purely spiritual truth will always be some way beyond us. The intellect is our link with God, and like a long-distance telephone line it can do something but not everything to bridge distances. At the very moment that we hear the voice at the other end, we are aware of how far apart we still are.

JUDAH HALEVI: THE GOD OF ARISTOTLE AND THE GOD OF ABRAHAM

Maimonides wrote the Guide by around 1190 C.E. Over fifty years earlier the great poet Judah HaLevi had written a book, the Kuzari, which reads in retrospect as a kind of antithesis to the whole Maimonidean vision of Judaism. It is set in the form of an imaginary dialogue between a rabbi and the king of the Khazars, a Turkish people who had converted to Judaism in the eighth century C.E. In the course of their conversation, Judah HaLevi is able to set out his sense of the qualitative difference between Judaism and the systems of the philosophers. Judaism is not a religion of reason: it is a religion of revelation and history; the faith of one people and its relationship with God; the drama of a holy people, a holy language, a holy book, and a holy land.

With uncanny foresight, HaLevi rejects at the outset Maimonides' as-yet-to-be-written analysis of the first command as belief in the First Cause of all being. God did **not** say, 'I am the Creator of the World': He said, 'I am the Lord your God who led you out of the land of Egypt'. The Israelites knew God not through philosophical reflection but through the miracles He had performed on their behalf at decisive points in their history. To this day it is the uninterrupted tradition, whereby that historical memory is passed from one generation to the next, which forms the core of our belief (Kuzari I, 11-25).

Philosophy is **not** the way to religious knowledge at all. He rejects 'religion based on speculation and system — the research of thought, but open to many doubts'(I,13). Other nations had their philosophers; only Judaism had the prophets. The prophet is not just a very wise man: he is a special kind of being. Moreover, religious knowledge of God is not just intellectual knowledge. For were it so, then ignorance of God would be no different from, say, ignorance of the fact that the earth is round (IV,13): it would make no real difference to our lives.

Reason is universal, Judaism is not. HaLevi's love for his people, language and land, was intense. The Kuzari ends, as its author's own life was to end, with a decision on the part of the rabbi to set out for Jerusalem. Perfection could only be found in Judaism; and Jewish perfection only in the land of Israel. Although Jerusalem no longer bore the visible mark of the Divine Presence, yet the invisible Presence was always there. Life in **galut,** though it might sometimes be comfortable for the Jew, lacked spiritual meaning. HaLevi's rabbi speaks of his conviction that **galut** can never give the Jew freedom, in words which more than eight centuries later have a truly prophetic ring: 'I only seek freedom from the service of those many people whose favour I do not care for and shall never obtain, even though I were to work for it all my life. Even if I could obtain it, it would not profit me — I mean serving men and courting their favour' (V,25).

This orientation leads HaLevi into strong statements about Jewish spiritual superiority. All men may be rational, but only Jews have that spiritual sensitivity which allows the strong and special bond with God. That is why, although all societies have rational laws, only Judaism has the Torah. The commandments which we do not understand are more evidently Divine than those which we do. The laws of impurity, for example, testify to the impact of death on its surroundings: something which only an acutely sensitive people wold be affected by (II,60). Even the lowly and dispersed condition of Jews in the medieval world was a symptom of their special relationship with God. 'Israel amidst the nations is like the heart amidst the organs of the body' (II,36): it feels both pleasure and pain, health and sickness, more acutely. We are punished more than others, because we are closer to God. HaLevi re-affirms the words of Amos: 'Only you have I loved of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities' (Amos 3:2).

These, then are the themes of the Kuzari. It is an anti-Aristotelian, and generally anti-philosophical work; and there are those who would dismiss it lightly as the product of passion more than reflection. Thus, Husik writes bluntly: 'In Judah Halevi the poet got the better of the rationalist.' (A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy, p.150.) But in fact the enterprise of rationalising Judaism has suffered several blows in the twentieth century, some from general intellectual trends, others from the traumas of events: the holocaust and the rebirth of Israel. Many of the features of contemporary Jewish thought are to be found in the Kuzari. And it is worthwhile to reformulate them.

First: since the demolition-work of Hume and Kant it has become generally accepted that we cannot prove the existence of God. Briefly, science operates by discerning relationships between observable phenomena. God is not observable, therefore there is no place for Him in science. Logic operates by establishing relationships between concepts. It may, then, tell us something about the concept of God but not about whether something exists under that concept. At most logic can tell us what would follow **if** there were a God; it is beyond its scope to say **whether** there is a God. Faith can live with science and logic — indeed it must do — but it cannot establish itself on their foundations.

This was a truth which Judah HaLevi saw very clearly. He noted that in mathematics, logic and the demonstrative sciences there is broad agreement and an accepted method of settling disagreement. But in metaphysics — philosophical theories on larger questions of the nature of reality — there was no agreement. Each Greek school had its own view; 'there is no concensus of opinion between one philosopher and another'; and there is no rational procedure which would decide between them (V,14). Metaphysics is philosophy getting ideas beyond its station; reason just does not take us that far. The only certainties lie through revelation, history and tradition.

Second: even supposing that the philosophers were right, would their god be our God? Here HaLevi is particularly acute, anticipating the distinction which Martin Buber was to call the I-Thou and I-It relationships, and which the author of the Kuzari terms, the difference between the God of Abraham and the God of Aristotle (IV,16). HaLevi is what we would call nowadays a religious existentialist: he is concerned not with knowledge as such, but with existence; with what it is to be in a living relationship with God. Our knowledge of God through concepts puts us, as it were, in possession of information; but it does not lead to a longing for attachment, and a love so strong that men are willing to die rather than transgress the will of God.

There are two kinds of name for God in the Torah. One, like **Elokim,** is a **concept**, meaning roughly 'the force of all forces'. The other, in particular the four-letter name, is a **proper name**; standing in relation to the former much as 'Moses' does to the description, 'the greatest of the prophets'. It is a word which implies **relationship**: 'No-one applies a distinct proper name to God except he who hears His address, command or prohibition' (IV,3). The Jewish people is unique in knowing God by name, in being able to speak to Him directly and be spoken to by Him. For this reason it can conceive God as a person, who knows, cares about, and is involved in the human situation. It alone has achieved prophecy, and a connection with Providence throughout its history. The god of the philosophers is abstract, unconcerned with the deeds of man; a testimony, in fact, to our inability to reach God by our own efforts. God dictates where and how we should meet.

Third: the Nazi holocaust and the history of the emergent State of Israel have brought home to us how far our optimism was misplaced, that rationality breeds tolerance, that man would recognise universal truths, and that Jews had a valid place in the diaspora as the moral teachers of mankind. We have been thrown back in upon ourselves and our sense of tragic or epic destiny. History has once again become pregnant with Divine meaning, however hard to decipher. Judah HaLevi's thought turns again and again on **Am Yisrael** and **Eretz Yisrael** as the people and place of the Divine encounter. The meeting with God does not happen at some timeless, universal level. It occurs through a specific set of commandments; it is written through the extraordinary history of the sons of Jacob; it reaches its climax on one small corner of the earth's surface — the place chosen by God as His home. The commandments mean more to us than a set of rational prescriptions. Prayer is 'to the soul what food is to the body' (III,5). Shabbat is not what it was for Maimonides: a period of relaxation and a reminder of the truth of creation (Guide, III,43). It is the mystery

which has kept Judaism alive (Kuzari, III,10). A rational society might strive to imitate our day of rest, but it would succeed no more 'than statues resemble living human bodies' (III,9).

As we suggested at the outset, there is a history to the way we approach God, and the path of reason is a part of that history. At any time we have available to us the differing approaches of Saadïa, Maimonides and HaLevi, but there are times when one more than the others will seem to speak to our needs. Perhaps the passion and particularism of the Kuzari is more relevant today than the serene universalism of the Guide; perhaps not. One thing is sure: each generation has its own gate to God.

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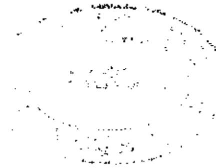

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The three main works referred to above, are all available in English translation. Saadia's **Emunot VeDe'ot** is available as **The Book of Beliefs and Opinions**, trans. Rosenblatt, Yale University Press. The **Kuzari**, trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld, is published by Schocken Books. Maimonides' **The Guide for the Perplexed** is accessible in two translations, one by M. Friedlander, Dover Publications; the other by S. Pines, University of Chicago Press. If you want to read more about Jewish philosophy, you might try: Isaac Husik, **A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy**, Jewish Publication Society of America. This provides a good summary of the thought of the key figures of the Middle Ages. Julius Guttmann's **Philosophies of Judaism**, Holt, Reinhart and Winston, provides a more extensive coverage, going back to Biblical and Talmudic Judaism, and forward to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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