



## ISSUES IN JEWISH THOUGHT

### THE PLACE OF DOUBT

— a personal view

### SECOND SERIES

By Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks MA (Cantab)

Booklets in *this* series:

Israel and the Jew  
Explaining Suffering  
The Chosen  
Future Worlds  
The Place of Doubt

United Synagogue Youth and Community Services  
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## Foreword

Orthodox Judaism has long accepted and even encouraged the questioning mind. As Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, President of Bar Ilan University has put it:—

“A Jew dare not live with absolute certainty, not only because certainty is the hallmark of the fanatic and Judaism abhors fanaticism, but also because doubt is good for the human soul, its humility, and consequently its greater potential ultimately to discover its Creator.”

(“One Man’s Judaism”)

The problem for the modern Jew is not that he has questions but that he does not know where to find the answers. It is in the spirit of Rabbi Rackman’s advice that Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks in this series “Issues in Jewish Thought” provides a route map for the journey to greater understanding. The booklets are brief and to the point, providing an introduction to Jewish thinking on each of the issues treated. The booklets should be particularly useful in forming the basis of an adult education programme or a study or discussion group at local synagogues. We are fortunate in having in Rabbi Sacks, a teacher who combines breadth and depth of learning with great clarity of exposition.

This series is part of an ambitious programme of publications on which the United Synagogue is embarked and in which Rabbi Sacks, holder of the Sir Immanuel Jakobovits Chair in Modern Jewish Thought at Jews College will play a prominent part. This is the second volume in the series and a third is being planned.

The programme also includes plans to produce a substantial series of practical guides to Judaism, the first volume being on Shabbat, and more basic pamphlets of instruction in Jewish ritual and practice. Through this range of publications it is hoped that members of the United Synagogue will increase their understanding of and strengthen their commitment to traditional Jewish values and practices, and thus enrich their experience of Jewish living.

Leslie Wagner  
Chairman, Adult Education  
and Publications Committee



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There is a very strange story told by Hassidim about the subject of doubt. A hassid once came to R. Menahem Mendel, the great Rebbe of Kotzk. He was overwhelmed, he told the Rebbe, by worry.

“What do you worry about?” asked R. Menahem Mendel.

“I worry about whether there really is justice and a Judge.”

“What does it matter to you?” asked the Rebbe.

“But Rebbe, if there is no justice and no Judge, then where is the meaning of Creation?”

“What does it matter to you?”

“But if there is no justice and no Judge, what then does the Torah mean?”

“What does it matter to you?”

“Why does the Rebbe say, ‘What does it matter?’ What else could matter?”

“Well, said the Rebbe, ‘if it matters that much to you, then you are a good Jew, and nothing will go wrong with you. In such a case there is nothing wrong with a good Jew worrying.’”

This little exchange, disturbing and paradoxical, seems to hover on the very edge of heresy. Can it really be that *mattering* is all that matters, as if what counted was our strength of feeling rather than the direction of our conviction? Is there nothing wrong with doubt?

Clearly, to understand what the Kotzker Rebbe was suggesting we need to re-examine our most fundamental assumptions about the nature of faith.

## TWO KINDS OF FAITH

The Hebrew word *emunah* is ambiguous in an important way. It can signify either having faith, or being faithful. And these are not the same thing.

To have faith that something is so, is to have a mental attitude towards a proposition, rather like knowledge or belief or conviction. Faith in this sense tends to be a little different from belief, but part of the same family of concepts. Thus when someone says ‘I know, or, I believe that there is life on Mars’ we are entitled to ask him for evidence. When he says ‘I have faith that there is life on Mars’, what is usually implied is that he has grounds for his belief, but he would not necessarily expect us to share them. Perhaps he saw it in a dream, and

has usually discovered his dreams to be reliable. It is enough evidence for him, though he need not expect anyone else to be convinced, so he qualifies his claim by calling it faith, not belief.

To be faithful is quite different. This usually belongs not to a proposition but to an agreement, and means, roughly, keeping to your side of the bargain. Sometimes what is implied is quite specific, as in the phrase, a faithful husband or wife. At other times the agreement is unspoken and vague. Friendship, for example, involves loose but real mutual obligations — to help one another in difficulty, perhaps, or to stand by one another in a time of personal crisis. A faithful friend is one who does what a friend should when the need arises.

The differences between the two ideas are obvious. Faith involves belief, whilst faithfulness usually involves action. Faith is a relationship to truth, whereas faithfulness is normally a relationship to another person or group. Faith belongs within the broad sphere of knowledge, whilst faithfulness is part of moral obligation.

Sometimes *emunah* is used in the Torah in the first sense. Thus when Abraham is promised by God that he will have children, whose offspring will be as innumerable as the stars, it says: "He believed in God and He counted it as righteousness" (Bereishith 15:6). This means that Abraham thought that the promise would come true, because God had said so.

However it is used in the second sense as well. And so important is this second sense, that it can be argued that all references to faith in the Torah — even the one above — can ultimately only be understood through it.

An important illustration is the word *Amen*, clearly related to *emunah*. It occurs in two contexts in the *Chumash*. In one, a woman suspected of adultery had to undergo a kind of trial by ordeal to establish her guilt or innocence. By the nature of the case, there were no witnesses, and so an unusual judicial procedure had to be adopted. Naturally any appearance of injustice had to be guarded against, and so the woman was asked to agree to the terms of the trial, and of the curse should she be found guilty. This she did by saying, "Amen, Amen." (Bamidbar 5:11-31).

In the second, Moses commands the Israelites that when they cross the Jordan they should ratify the covenant they had already made with God, at a ceremony on Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval. There in particular they would be asked to agree to the terms of twelve curses, each of which would be a punishment for the twelve listed sins. These had in common the fact that they could all be committed in secret, and so might not be detected or punished by normal judicial means. Therefore God Himself would punish them. Again, so that there might

be no protest at any later stage, the Israelites were asked to signify their agreement to the arrangement, which they did by answering Amen after each curse. (Devarim 27:11-26)

In both cases Amen does not indicate belief, but rather binds a person to the terms of some agreement. And if we examine other instances of what is usually translated as 'belief', we will almost invariably find that there is some reference to a mutual undertaking or agreement between two parties. *Emunah* will then either mean, keeping to the agreement, or more often, trusting the other party to keep to it.

It is in this sense that God says to Moses and Aaron, after they have struck the rock instead of speaking to it: "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the presence of the Israelites. . ." (Bamidbar 20:12). Simply, they did not keep to the agreement by which they were only to speak to the rock.

Even Abraham's belief, already mentioned, is of this kind. For he does not believe that it is *likely* that he will have children, on the basis of considering the evidence. Instead, he accepts that God's word is enough: he trusts Him to keep to His promise.

<sup>1</sup> *Emunah* primarily means being faithful, and trusting the other party to be faithful, to a mutual set of obligations. Each party has only the other person's word to go by; yet by those words they bind themselves to one another. Perhaps the clearest analogy is marriage. Here is a mutual undertaking, freely entered into, by which husband and wife agree to commit themselves to one another in the strongest of ways, formally and informally. No wonder, then, that this was the favourite image used by the prophets to describe the character of *emunah*. "I will betroth you to Me for ever," says God, "I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, love and compassion. I will betroth you to Me in faith (*emunah*) and you will know God" (Hosea 2:21-22).

#### THE CONTENT OF FAITH

Many of the confusions about faith arise simply because *emunah* in the Torah does not mean the same as 'faith' in English. This is no accident. Words reflect the culture to which they belong. The word 'faith' owes its meaning primarily to the Christian tradition in which a *creed* — belief in the truth of certain key doctrines — is central. In Judaism what is central is an *agreement*, the Covenant, by which the people at Sinai

undertook that they and their descendants would be bound by the commandments, and by which God took them as His 'special treasure'.

Thus *emunah* does not refer to belief in any philosophical doctrine. It is simply: assenting to the terms of the agreement. Nachmanides accordingly explains the command of belief in God to mean: *acceptance of His kingship*, that is, accepting that we are bound by His command. He illustrates his point by referring to a rabbinic commentary on the first two of the Ten Commandments: "It is to be compared to a king who enters another province. His servants say to him, 'Enact laws for the inhabitants'. But the king replies, 'No. First let them accept me as king, and then I will give them laws. For if they will not accept my sovereignty, how will they obey my laws?'" (Nachmanides to Maimonides, *Sefer HaMitzvot*, positive command 1; *Mekhilta*, BaHodesh, 6.)

In Judaism, then, the heart of faith does not lie in any intellectual conviction as such, but in the acceptance of the two facets of the Covenant: (i) that we are bound by the 613 commandments of the Torah and their halachic exposition through the rabbinic tradition; (ii) that our fate as individuals and as a people is God's response to the way we fulfil that obligation.

All of the so-called 'principles of faith', formulated by Maimonides and others, can in the end be understood as consequences of this twofold agreement. But how does it make a difference to see faith as commitment, rather than as a kind of knowledge? In particular, how does it affect the nature of doubt?

### THE PLACE OF DOUBT

Consider an example, and from two points of view. In the first you are cast as a member of the jury. The defendant is accused of a crime. At first glance, he appears to you to look like an honest, well-natured individual, and in fact throughout the trial he never seems otherwise. But the evidence mounts up against him; and he is silent in his own defence. You may be bound to conclude that your first impression was mistaken; at any rate you will have, on the basis of the evidence, to decide that he is guilty.

Now consider the same situation with this difference: that you are not a member of the jury, but a friend of the accused. You have known him for a long time; you have had many reasons to be thankful for his help; you admire him; you know him to be a good man. When the accusation is brought, and as the trial proceeds, you feel bound, by loyalty, to

defend his innocence. You cannot be impartial, for if you were you would cease to be a friend. Of course you are puzzled by the evidence brought against him, and even more by his silence in the face of it. But even as the verdict is pronounced, you feel duty-bound to protest its injustice. This is what you must *do*. As to what you must *think*, there is no clear answer. What you want, more than anything, is to ask him personally and privately why he did not refute the charge, and how he accounts for what appears to be the case against him. You may have your theory — unfortunate coincidence, perhaps, or deliberately manufactured evidence — but you are aware that you will not be satisfied until you have heard his side of things from his own mouth.

The example illustrates quite sharply the difference between faith as a matter of weighing up the evidence and coming to an intellectual conclusion, and faith as loyalty, an implicit agreement between close friends. And it is important to note that in the second case, our reactions are no less *rational* than in the first. It is just that *detachment is morally impossible*, so that rationally we are compelled to respond in a different way to the same facts.

Note how doubt and certainty are related quite differently in the two situations. In the first case, our initial certainty — based on first impressions — was gradually worn away by the evidence, to be replaced by doubt, and then certainty in the opposite direction. From a detached point of view *doubt is opposed to certainty*.

The second case is more complex. There is a difference, for a start, between what I must say and do — defend my friend's innocence — and what I may think. What is more, my commitment to his innocence makes me think twice about the evidence — it looks damaging, and I cannot ignore the fact, but I am obligated to search for other possible explanations and not take the evidence at its face value. Thirdly, I am more interested in hearing what he has to say about it, than in any conclusions I may come to myself, because I know he would not tell me a lie. Fourthly, and most importantly, had I not been his friend, certain of his innocence, I would never have been involved in these problems. I would have concluded, like the jurymen, that he was guilty. Precisely because I am not detached, I am faced with a dilemma: I am certain that he is not the kind of person who could have done the crime; but what am I to make of the case against him? *My certainty creates the doubt*.

The example needs the most careful reflection. Most discussions of faith, certainty and doubt assume that faith involves a detached attitude towards the facts, and that it is a kind of belief, either based on the evidence (rational) or regardless of the evidence (irrational). But

Jewish faith is not of this kind. It hinges on a mutual relationship, analogous to the situation of the friend. For this reason it has a more subtle interaction with the evidence, while not in any way being irrational. In particular, *certainty as to what to do* (in the example, a show of loyalty; in the case of Judaism, obedience to the commands) can coexist with doubt. And doubt itself is not so much *half-belief*, as a *desire to hear the explanation from the source*.

### THE PROBLEM OF JUSTICE

How does this example translate itself into the realities of religious life? Take the most profound of all problems of faith, the problem of justice. This was, in fact, the problem brought by the Hassid to the Rebbe of Kotzk: if the wicked prosper and the innocent suffer, how can there be Divine justice in the world? Yet belief in reward and punishment is, on any analysis, a fundamental principle of Judaism, for it is God's side of the Covenant — He will reward those who obey Him and punish those who do not.

The first thing to notice, and we must stress it yet again, is that it is faith which creates the problem. If we did not believe in God, then we would have no reason for thinking that the good are rewarded, and hence the suffering of the innocent would cause us no surprise. If we ever, like the Hassid, feel troubled by our doubts, then we must remember that *without faith there would be no doubt*, and that *the stronger the faith the more intense the doubt*. Consider again the case of a friend. If we don't know much about him, or do not trust him, then nothing he can do will surprise us. It is *only* if we know and trust him that we will be pained and perplexed by a report of misconduct on his behalf. The more trust, the more perplexity.

The second point: if our faith were detached, then our certainty in the justice of God would be compromised by seeing the innocent suffer. We might still believe, but with less conviction. Eventually, if we were overwhelmed by evidence of injustice, we might give up our belief altogether, either in the existence of God, or in His justice, or in His involvement in human affairs. This would happen if our faith were like the vantage-point of the jurymen.

In fact, though, many of the great figures in the Torah — Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Job — were deeply perplexed by the problem of justice. What is more, they were highly rational men, not content to let the problem lie, or to admit at the outset that it was beyond their comprehension. Yet none of them reacted in the way described in the

previous paragraph. Their faith was not like that. It is not that they had more faith, or less, but that it was embedded in a strong and mutual *relationship with God*.

A fine illustration of how they expressed the problem is given by the prophet Habakkuk. He says to God: "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; You cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" (Habakkuk 1:13). In this single verse we can trace all the features of our example of the friend. On the one hand the prophet is *certain* that God is just. On the other hand, there is clear evidence of injustice in the world, which God seems to be allowing to happen. This apparent contradiction does not weaken the prophet's faith, but it does create in him an intense perplexity. He may have explanations of his own to offer, but these are of no real importance to him. Instead he wants to hear the truth from God Himself. His *doubt is translated into prayer*.

This is not the place to consider the answer he receives. But it is worth noting that for Habakkuk, as for the other Biblical figures we mentioned, faith does not consist in *pious acceptance of the incomprehensible*. If so, neither he nor they would have spoken to God in prayer. It consists in a passionate awareness of the problem, and an equally passionate desire to search for its solution. Even had they received no answer from God Himself, then this too would be a fact that they would have had to live with, just as the friend might have had to go on demonstrating his loyalty even if he never had the chance to hear the truth. This is one of the risks of friendship and of faith, and demonstrates how even a simple human relationship can, in an extreme situation, create dilemmas insoluble by logic or science. This is not mysterious or irrational or peculiar to the relationship between man and God.

At this stage we should be able to go back to the story with which we began, and understand what the Rebbe of Kotzk was suggesting.

### ABSENCE AND NON-EXISTENCE

But it will be argued: This is all very well for those who are certain that there is a God. What of those who are not? The analysis has spoken of the prophets who had a relationship with Him. What of those who have searched for a relationship, and have not found it?

These questions are important, yet they too are rooted in a mistaken

assumption. We have suggested that Jewish faith belongs not to a relationship as such — as, for example, Martin Buber seems to argue — but to a special kind of relationship, a Covenant, or a relationship of mutual obligation.

There is a crucial difference. A simple relationship, for example between people who are mere acquaintances, exists only in the contact between them. No contact, no relationship. Or if faith is like that, then: no religious experience, no belief. But a moral relationship can be as active in separation as in togetherness. If a husband, for example, thought that while he was living with his wife he was bound to be faithful to her, but while he was away on business he was fully entitled to behave as he chooses, then he would not have a very clear sense of the duty of a husband. And in religious terms: we may feel ourselves at times utterly distant from God, yet if we felt that this terminated the relationship and entitled us to forsake the commands, we would not have understood either the relationship or the commands. Once again note that this is not obscure or 'fundamentalist'. It is just what a moral commitment is. As between man and wife, so between man and God.

But it will be countered: a husband is only bound to his wife so long as she exists. What if she dies, or if it is discovered that they were never married?

This was used as an argument against Judaism almost two thousand years ago, in some of the earliest Christian writings. It became popular, in Christian theology, in a slightly different form in the 1960s. The atheist says, there is no God. The radical theologian says, God is dead. Judaism must regard both as blasphemous. Yet it understands the sense of desolation from which such sentences emerge. We do, at times, feel forsaken and alone. It is a feeling expressed in many of the Psalms. But we prefer to describe it differently. We speak of the hiding of God.

Isaiah said: "Truly You are a God who hides Himself" (Isaiah 45:15). A chilling prophecy in Devarim reads: "I will then display anger against them and abandon them. I will hide My face from them and they will be devoured. Beset by many evils and troubles they will say, 'It is because my God is no longer with me that these evils have befallen us.' On that day I will utterly hide My face." (Devarim 31:17-18).

What do such descriptions imply? Simply, that there are times when we can look for evidence of God's presence, and find none. What then is the difference between God's absence and His non-existence? All the difference in the world. Firstly, if God is absent, then we are still bound by the commandments. Secondly, non-existence is meaningless, a negation. Hiding, by contrast, is a deliberate Divine act for whose meaning we may search. It evokes, not despair, but prayer. "How long,

O Lord? Will You hide Yourself for ever?" (Psalm 89:47).

None of the perceptions or emotions which give rise to doubt are alien to Judaism. The Torah itself is full of them. But because of the covenantal framework within which Judaism is set, none warrants the conclusion which might be drawn from them in other cultures. So long as we are bound to the Torah, God too is bound to us. And because of this, the sense of forlornness, which might have had devastating consequences for faith, becomes a legitimate part of the religious life. This is not an abstraction, or playing with words. It is the difference, in human terms, between having no friends, and having a friend whom one has hurt and who now keeps his distance.

"Where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away?" asks God. (Isaiah 50:1). It is a deliberately rhetorical question. The partners may be kept apart, but their marriage has not been terminated.

## FUNDAMENTALS

Still, though, it will be argued: You have made everything rest on our acceptance of the Torah and the halachah. You say that all of my doubts can be contained and given positive expression within that one fundamental certainty. But what if I have doubts about just that: whether to accept and live by the Torah?

This is the ultimate question. But even so, it is less simple than it sounds. For what looks like one doubt is, in fact, separable into four. And they are substantially different.

The first is to doubt whether a particular law is right and justified. Paradoxically, this is perfectly acceptable in Judaism. For virtually every rabbinic law, there were authorities who disagreed with it and thought that the law should be otherwise. A *halachah pesukah* in the sense of an undisputed, self-evident rule (see Berachot 31a) is relatively rare. For every Biblical law which seems to lack reason, our rational faculty quite rightly raises objections. Maimonides wrote about this at length and concluded, logically and on the basis of rabbinic sources, that prohibitions like that against wearing mixed wool and linen which "were it not for the Torah, would not be wrong at all", would be resisted by the rational mind (Shemoneh Perakim, ch.6).

This does not mean, of course, that we are entitled to reject the law. A citizen who objected to a particular law and felt free to break it would still be a criminal; what is more, he would not have understood what a

law is. There is a famous passage in the Talmud which describes how R. Eliezer was convinced that on a particular point of law he was right and his colleagues were wrong. he brought "all the proofs in the world"; he was even supported by a voice from Heaven. The vote went against him; he refused to accept the decision of the majority; he was excommunicated. (Baba Metzia 59b). He was right to argue his case, and wrong not to bow to the eventual decision. Doubt may not justify disobedience; but this does not mean that there is no place for doubt.

The second kind of doubt, which may or may not flow from the first, is whether to obey the law in practice. This is not merely natural, but the rabbis went out of their way to stress its reality. "The greater the man, the greater his inclination to do wrong," they said (Sukkah 52a). "A person should never say, 'I do not desire to eat pork, or to perform a forbidden sexual act.' Instead he should say, 'I do desire to do these things, but what shall I do, seeing that my Father in Heaven has decreed that I should not?'" (Sifra to Vaykira 20:26).

We have a natural resistance to laws. Even something which is not desirable in itself may be attractive simply because it is illegal: "Stolen water is sweet" (Proverbs 9:17). At the same time, insists Jewish belief, we are capable always of mastering our desires; and of thinking our way beyond what seems attractive to what is right. The rabbis were anxious, in the above quotations, to insist that this kind of doubt should not make us feel guilty. It is normal, even desirable. But to act on it is mistaken, just as it is wrong to act on our natural instincts of envy or aggression.

The third doubt is more fundamental. One may wonder whether to accept the halachic system at all. On the face of it there can be no place for such thoughts in Judaism, for they contemplate complete defection from the faith. Yet in a curious and moving way we express such a sentiment in our prayers every Monday and Thursday morning: "We are accounted like sheep brought to the slaughter, to be slain and destroyed, to be smitten and reproached. Yet *despite all this*, we have not forgotten Your name. Please, then, do not forget us." (S.P.B. p.66).

What is the meaning of the phrase 'yet despite all this', if not a suggestion that there were times when we had every reason to forsake Judaism entirely? The person who defects, saying, "What advantage is there to me in adhering to the people of Israel who are lowly and persecuted? Better to join the nations who are powerful" (Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:18) is not *irrational* at all. He is disloyal. We accept that there are rational alternatives to Judaism, some of which may at times exercise the most powerful attraction. 'Yet despite all this' we remain loyal. And precisely because we are conscious of that loyalty,

we are aware of the alternatives. We live through such doubts, but we do not deny their reality.

Only the fourth doubt we can have no place for within Judaism, and that is doubt as to whether we are bound by the Torah at all. The person who says, 'Perhaps the Israelites accepted the Torah; even my grandfather did; but what has that got to do with me?' has, in the words of the Haggadah, 'excluded himself from the community'.

Think of someone born in a given country which has a certain legal system. He may disagree with the law but agrees to keep it. He may break the law. He may disapprove of the whole system and go to another country. But he cannot deny that the laws exist, and that so long as he is there they apply to him. He may say, 'I didn't choose to be born here'. But from this nothing follows, any more than it follows from the fact that none of us chose to be born, that existence has got nothing to do with us.

The most important fact of our lives — that we were born — is one we did not choose, yet its implications cannot be avoided. That we were born into a system of laws — the Torah — is also not something we chose, yet we cannot say, 'It has nothing to do with me'. Every other doubt is possible, but this is not. And because it is not, we are assured of the one certainty from which all else follows and through which all doubts circulate without undermining: that we are commanded; hence we are bound to God; hence God is bound to us.

So long as the convenantal, halachic relationship is strong we can find a positive place for doubts about the justice of God, the presence of God, the wisdom of the commands. Such doubts do not challenge faith nor are they opposed to it. Rather, they flow from faith and move it forward. They are part of what the Mishnah calls "argument for the sake of Heaven". (Avot 5:20)

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

In the above essay I have analysed the spiritual rather than the philosophical place of doubt; and as a result the presentation may seem somewhat unconventional. For representative philosophical views see Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Rosenblatt, Yale University Press, Introductory Treatise, pp.3-37; Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Friedlander, Dover Publications, Introduction, pp. 1-11. A modern and careful analysis may be found in the title essay of Norman Lamm, *Faith and Doubt*, Ktav, pp. 1-41. For the important concept of trust (*bittachon*) in God, see Bachya ibn Paquda, *Duties of the Heart*, trans. Hyamson, Feldheim, vol. I, pp.280-381.

The great twentieth century mystic, Rav Kook, wrote some remarkable essays on the positive contribution of doubt and even denial in the dialectical process of faith. See *Abraham Isaac Kook*, trans. Ben Sion Bokser, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, SPCK, pp.140-152, 175, 256-258, 261-269.



## GLOSSARY

- ARAMA, ISAAC — Spanish rabbi and philosopher, 15th century C.E. His famous commentary to the Bible is entitled 'Akedat Yitzchak'.
- BET DIN — Jewish court of law.
- DERECH ERETZ — Literally, 'the way of the land'. Used figuratively to mean, variously, polite behaviour, a worldly occupation, involvement in matters of secular concern.
- EMUNOT VE-DEOT — '(The book of) Beliefs and Opinions', Saadia Gaon's philosophical treatise, completed in 933 C.E.
- GALUT — Exile; the condition of Jews outside Israel.
- GAN EDEN — Literally, 'the Garden of Eden'. Used figuratively to signify the resting-place of the soul after death.
- GEHINNOM — 'The Valley of Hinnom', a valley south of Jerusalem. Used figuratively as a name for the place where the wicked are punished after death.
- HALACHAH — A term signifying either a particular Jewish law, or Jewish law in general.
- HASSID — 'Pious man'. Often used specifically to refer to an adherent of the popular mystical movement in Judaism initiated in the 18th century C.E. by the Baal Shem Tov.
- JUDAH HALEVI — Poet and philosopher, born c.1075; d.1141 C.E.
- KUZARI — Title of Judah HaLevi's great philosophical dialogue, in which he sets out, in the form of an imagined conversation between a rabbi and the king of the Khazars, his view of the uniqueness of Jewish spirituality.
- MAGGID MISHNE — Commentary to Maimonides' Mishne Torah, by R. Vidal of Tolosa, 14th century C.E.
- MAIMONIDES — R. Moses ben Maimon (RaMBaM), 1135-1204 C.E., outstanding rabbi, philosopher and codifier of Jewish law.
- MEKHILTA — Collection of teachings from the Mishnaic period arranged as a commentary to the book of Shemot. There are two such collections, the MEKILTA DE-RABBI ISHMAEL and the MEKILTA DE-RABBI SHIMON BAR YOCHAI.
- MIDRASH — A generic name for rabbinic Biblical interpretation.
- MIDRASH RABBAH — Whenever there is a reference in the text to a book of the Bible, followed by the word RABBAH (e.g. SHEMOT RABBAH), the work referred to is a volume in the collection known as the MIDRASH RABBAH; a series of midrashim to the Five Books of Moses, and the five Megillot.
- MISHNE TORAH — Literally, 'repetition of the Torah', and used to refer either to the book of Devarim, or to the law code of Moses Maimonides (Rambam). Whenever there is a quotation from Maimonides, whose source is indicated as 'Hilchot... ', the reference is to one of the books of his Mishne Torah.
- NACHMANIDES — R. Moses ben Nachman (RaMBaN), 1194-1270 C.E. Spanish rabbi, philosopher, and mystic. Author of a famous commentary to the Torah.
- ORACH CHAYYIM — Section of the Shulchan Aruch dealing with the laws of prayer, Shabbat and the festivals. Literally, 'The Way of Life'.
- RASHBAM — Acronym of R. Samuel b.Meir, c.1080-1158 C.E. French rabbi and author of a commentary to the Torah. A grandson of Rashi.
- RASHI — Acronym of R. Shlomo b.Yitzchak, 1040-1105 C.E. French rabbi, author of the most famous of all commentaries to the Torah, and of the indispensable systematic commentary to the Talmud.
- REBBE — Teacher; often used specifically of Hassidic leader.
- SAADIA GAON — Outstanding rabbi and leader of Babylonian Jewry, 882-942 C.E. A pioneer in many fields of study, including grammar, Biblical translation and commentary, halachic codification, and Jewish philosophy.
- SHECHINAH — The Divine Presence, a term usually employed to indicate the aspect of the Divine which is indwelling, rather than transcendent.
- SHEMONEH PERAKIM — 'The Eight Chapters': title of the introductory treatise to Maimonides' commentary on the Ethics of the Fathers.
- SHULCHAN ARUCH — 'Prepared Table'; name of Joseph Caro's law code, first published in 1564-5 C.E.
- SIFRA — Halachic midrash, of the Mishnaic period, to the book of Vayikra.
- SIFRE — Halachic midrash, of the Mishnaic period, to the books of Bamidbar and Devarim.
- TALMUD — 'Study' or 'Learning': the name given to the composite work of the Mishna (compiled by R. Judah HaNasi, early 3rd century C.E.) and the exposition and elaboration of it, the Gemarra. There are two such works, the Babylonian Talmud (Talmud Bavli), and the Jerusalem Talmud (Talmud Yerushalmi).
- TUR — Full title — Arba-ah Turim, 'Four Rows': the name of the halachic compendium written by R. Jacob ben Asher, c.1270-1340 C.E.
- TZIDDUK HA-DIN — Vindication or acceptance of the Divine judgement. In a more specific sense, the name of the prayer said at a funeral (S.P.B. 424-5).
- YALKUT SHIMONI — Anthology of midrashim, usually attributed to 13th century C.E.
- ZOHAR — 'Splendour': major work of Jewish mysticism, mainly arranged as a commentary to the Torah.