

Knowing vs. Believing; אמונה מול ידיעה

The recent discussions on Cross-Currents and Moreorthodoxy regarding Torah Me'Sinai makes me wonder whether perhaps it is time to revisit one of the fundamental assumptions about faith and belief. Everyone involved in this debate shares an understanding that belief means conviction; that a believer accepts the truth-claims of their religion as irrefutable, scientific facts. If that is their working assumption, then the enterprise they engaged in was worthwhile because they were evaluating and assessing a particular truth-claim based on whether its logic holds up. I, however, am not convinced that this underlying assumption is necessarily correct.

As a matter of fact, this assumption is based on a minority opinion out there, one that believes that the ikarim are factual statements. As is well known, this is an age old debate and the majority opinion does not agree with this approach. The dominant voice within Jewish philosophy is that the claims of Jewish dogma are not scientific, empirical facts; they are religious beliefs and do not operate on a truth-false continuum. (The proclamation is “ani ma'amain,” I believe, not ani yodeia, I know!)

The key difference between scientific facts and religious beliefs is that facts are assessed by their factual veracity while religious tenets are not assessed that way at all. Contrary to a factual claim, a religious belief is a faith-proclamation which the religious person chooses to believe in regardless of its scientific validity. To use Brisker terminology: emunah in the Ikarim is a mitzvah, not a statement of fact, describing objective reality: we believe in those principles because we are commanded to do so, not because we are convinced in the truthfulness of these claims. If that indeed is what the ikarim are-faith proclamations, not fact-claims-then the whole discussion about proofs for Torah Me'Sinai or for any other ikkar becomes irrelevant and immaterial.

I suspect that the misguided assumption that the ikkrai emunah are rationally based is the result of a disproportionate commitment to Maimonides' hyper-rationalist approach to Torah and Mitzvot, which was strongly influenced by Ancient Greek philosophy.

It is, however, important to keep in mind though that a philosophically oriented approach to Judaism is unique to Rambam and his followers and is not shared by many in Chazal and the Rishonim.

The overarching sense amongst classical sources is that religiosity is a-rational. A-rationalism meaning the understanding that religious belief and religious observance is a process that transcends reason or logic. The religious believer who chooses to accept the faith-claims of his or her religion decides to do so regardless of whether or not those claims add up or make logical sense. According to this approach, attempting to justify religious claims through logical arguments is wrong and misguided.

While the rational a-rational paradigm is a general question in discussions of Jewish theology, it is particularly acute in regards to the ikkrai emunah. In simple terms the question is as follows: is the mitzvah of emunah a command *לדעת*; to logically understand and confirm, or *להאמין*; to believe and blindly accept? Even a cursory read of the relevant Rabbinic and halakhic sources gives one the impression that the dominant opinion is that emunah is about belief, not conviction. Some of the commentators go so far as to claim that this is even what the Rambam himself advocated in his understanding of the mitzvah of emunah. (See Rambam: *יסוה"ת פרק א' הל' א'*; *סהמ"צ מ"ע א* and the *nosai keilim*; R. Bachye's *Chovat Ha'levavot*, particularly the first chapter. Additionally, *שו"ת הרשב"א, ח"א סי' ט'*; *קנאת סופרים מצוה א'*; *רדב"ז מצודת דוד מ' א'*; *הגהות ר' יוסף קאפח שם, הגהות ר' חיים הלרס*; *הל' הגר"ח מבריסק* See also the debate between Rambam and Ravad in *הל' עבד ריש הל' יסוה"ת משמו של הגר"ח מבריסק*. Essentially Maimonides there presents Avraham as a rational philosopher who discovered monotheism through the use of his intellectual faculties. Ravad disagrees. According to him, Avraham's route to monotheism was not rational at all.)

While the Rambam's opinion on this question is somewhat ambiguous, almost everyone else seems to accept the idea that emunah is a command to believe religiously, not to necessarily know scientifically.

I would argue that the belief in a rational religiosity is what tripped up Iyov. His mistake was thinking that belief in God is a rational process, where a quid-pro-quo model works-if you are righteous you will be rewarded. It was not until God revealed Himself and, in so many words, explained to him that faith is not a philosophical enterprise-one cannot expect it to logically cohere-that Iyov was able to regain his faith. (see Mishna, Sotah 27B and Ramban's commentary on Iyov)

Given all this, it would seem appropriate to challenge and perhaps even reject the basic assumption underlying this debate, that faith is a philosophical paradigm, and instead reinvigorate the emunah approach as the appropriate model for the contemporary believer.

I think that it is particularly important to adopt the emunah model over the yediah approach in our time. Our audiences, for the most part, are either inundated with arguments against most of our basic beliefs or, alternatively, jaded and not interested in the esoteric back and forth where each side in this discussion is trying to win the debate on the basis of minutely argued proofs. Instead, our congregants are looking to us to provide them an emunah that is straightforward, passionate and easily attainable.

In addition to the intellectual advantages of championing a faith that is emunah oriented, there are also spiritual benefits. A philosophically informed Judaism lacks passion and fervor, whereas a commanded-ness based approach does the exact opposite, it creates a form of intimacy with the Divine that could possibly inspire our communities to strive and search for opportunities to experience 'קרבת ה' ever more in their lives.