

Questioning Belief
Torah and Tradition in an Age of Doubt





Raphael Zarum

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BELIEF**

Torah and Tradition in an Age of Doubt

London School of Jewish Studies
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In memory of

Brian Roden – Benjamin Ben Joel Hacoheh z”l

A man of few words and many good deeds.

A man of truth and compassion.

*He was a wonderful role model and source of support and love
to his children, grandchildren, and wider family.*



The publication of this book is dedicated

in loving memory of

Averil Grose

יונה חוה בת שמואל יוסף



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Foreword

“We Ask Not Because We Doubt But Because We Believe”

Gila Sacks

The first time I heard Rabbi Dr. Raphael Zarum teach I was seventeen. He was teaching a first pilot of what would go on to become his *Torah L'Am* course. Over four short classes, he opened up the windows of Torah and flooded our classroom with light. He walked us through the structure of the Torah, grounding us in its facts, its history, maps, and characters. And then he taught us to ask questions of any text, to have confidence in our ability to find answers to those questions, and to give a *dvar Torah*.

The effect that this had on the participants in our class was profound. By the end of these sessions, our group – of multiple generations, diverse religious backgrounds, and varying degrees of familiarity or comfort with Torah and Jewish learning – stood a little taller. The Torah had become a little less mysterious. It didn't need to be translated or refracted through generations of rabbis, but was there for them to hold in their

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hands, and read, and have a view on. And for me, a sheltered Orthodox teenager, watching this all happen was transformative.

At the time, I thought that the magic of what Rabbi Zarum was doing in that classroom was giving legitimacy to our questions. But that is not unique – indeed, to be told that our questions are valid has rightly become a more mainstream expectation for today’s students of Torah. Instead, over time, as I saw him teach more, I realized he was doing something else – he was teaching us to take seriously the pursuit of answers. Questions might take confidence, but answers take work. We needed to take seriously the work involved in finding answers to our questions, because while all questions may be valid, all answers are not. In his teaching, rooted as it always was in facts, in history, in scholarship, Rabbi Zarum modeled the pursuit of answers.

And so, at least for me, his student, it is very fitting that Rabbi Zarum has written this book of serious answers to serious questions. The content matters – but so too does the process he is showing us. Readers here will be fortunate to have a glimpse of what it is like to sit in Rabbi Zarum’s classrooms – the excitement, the clarity, the challenge, and the humanity of his explorations and arguments. But perhaps more than that, they will come away knowing they cannot just let their questions hang in the air – they have a responsibility, and an ability, to work hard on their answers.

Of course, it should not really be me writing this foreword. My father, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *zt”l*, would without a doubt have filled these pages with his pride and affection for Raphael and his work, because he was a close *talmid* of Rabbi Sacks, and they learned much from each other over many years.

Rabbi Sacks had great faith in Raphael and what he was trying to do. He supported and celebrated Raphael’s work to revive Jews’ College, the institution he himself had led, and transform it for a new generation into the London School of Jewish Studies. He admired Raphael’s work to raise the bar of adult education for the entire UK community, to lift people’s expectations of what Jewish learning could and should look like. And while his approach is fully his own, Raphael shares many of the traits which shaped Rabbi Sacks’s work: the hunger for knowledge and to integrate and synthesize wisdom from all sources; the drive to

set a long-term vision and challenge us to do likewise – a vision not just for his own work or institution, but for the whole community.

There are those who ask for the sake of the question. For them, to question is perhaps an attempt to shrug off the yoke of responsibility, or free themselves from the ties that bind us to each other. And there are some who ask for the sake of the answer. For them, to question is to commit to the search for meaning, for truth, to commit to being part of the story, not a dispassionate observer. In this book – I hope the first of many – Rabbi Zarum shares some of his answers and helps us to be part of the story. As Rabbi Sacks wrote:

Judaism is not the suspension of critical intelligence. To the contrary: asking a question is itself a profound expression of faith in the intelligibility of the universe and the meaningfulness of human life. To ask is to believe that somewhere there is an answer. ... Far from faith excluding questions, questions testify to faith – that history is not random, that the universe is not impervious to our understanding, that what happens to us is not blind chance. We ask not because we doubt, but because we believe. (“The Art of Asking Questions,” in *The Jonathan Sacks Haggada*)



Acknowledgments

In Edgware, the London suburb where I grew up, Dayan Michael Fisher was one of the great community teachers. Every Shabbat afternoon my father, Arieh Zarum, would take me to hear him give a class in his home. By then he had retired from his role as head of the Federation of Synagogues Beis Din. Although their backgrounds were very different, Dayan Fisher and my father liked each other enormously. One grew up in Grodno, then in Imperial Russia, and was a brilliant Litvishe Talmudist; the other was a Yemenite Jew, born in Tel Aviv in pre-state Israel, who knew the Bible by heart and adored Maimonides. They shared a deep love of Torah and would talk for hours. Both have continually influenced my thinking and learning.

One lasting memory about their relationship was Dayan Fisher's interpretation of the phrase in *Pirkei Avot* "Make for yourself a teacher" (1:6). He said that that my father had *made* him into a teacher because when he knew Arieh Zarum was to attend his class, he would spend all day before preparing, often late into the evening – "burning the mid-night oil" were his exact words – so that he would be thoroughly ready for anything my father might ask or say.

Something similar has happened to me. Stuart Roden and I have met regularly for several years to study together. His questions always home in on the heart of the issue. Stuart rightly expects the Torah to be intelligible and ethically grounded. His gentle probing of the text

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and its meaning constantly challenge me. His curiosity has spurred my returning to key questions again and again, looking for more considered responses that make sense to both of us and point to a deeper understanding. I cannot thank him enough for his encouragement and support in the years it has taken to write this book. He has made me a teacher, and I am honored to have him as a friend.

Four more people have aided me immensely on this journey. Joanne Greenaway, the CEO of London School of Jewish Studies (LSJS), always kept me on track, helping me to keep going despite any other commitments. Her input and belief in this project have been very precious. Rabbi Dr. Harvey Belovski and Dayan Ivan Binstock both took the time to read the book thoroughly and provided many helpful comments on content, referencing, and style, and I am appreciative for all their time and effort. The insights and encouragement of Rabbi Joseph Dweck, the Senior Rabbi of the S&P Sephardi community in the UK, have also been invaluable.

Many other friends and colleagues have taken the time to read parts or all of the manuscript, discussed it with me, and given their remarks and criticisms. They have all made this a much better book. I would like to thank Uri Berkowitz, Harris Bor, Benjamin Ellis, Yehoshua Engelman, Gila Fine, Samuel Lebens, Jason Marantz, Hannah Mays, Neil Moss, Jacqueline Nicholls, Michael Rainsbury, Barnea Selavan, Zahavit Shalev, Abe Sterne, Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, Dan Sacker, Gila Sacks, Archie Sinclair, Jonathan Sive, Evelyn Stern, Adam Taub, Oriel Weinberg, Adrian Weller, Ramon Widmonte, Peter and Alonet Zandan, and Gitta Zarum.

You will find that I have quoted Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, the great twelfth-century rabbinic scholar and philosopher, known as Maimonides or Rambam, more than anyone else in this book. His influence on Judaism is immeasurable. Though he lived over eight centuries ago, his writings are still so exciting and challenging to read. The Yemenite community held him in such high esteem that they included his name in their version of the *Kaddish* prayer. As a Jew of Yemenite descent, I am very proud of this association.

For over a decade I had the privilege to meet regularly with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *zt"l*. His approach to learning Torah, living

Acknowledgments

meaningfully, and leading responsibly has had a profound effect on my life. I treasure those years of friendship and continue to be guided by his writings. I am honored to hold the Rabbi Sacks Chair in Modern Jewish Thought at LSJS, established by the Zandan family. He always encouraged me to write, and I have tried to live up to his advice: always be crystal clear, justify your arguments, check all the sources, and never be boring.

In 2018, LSJS published a booklet I co-wrote entitled “Big Questions, Brief Answers.” It gave short, easy-to-read responses to thirty-three questions about Judaism. The positive feedback received, and the requests for a longer work, encouraged me to write this book. My co-author for the booklet, Maureen Kendler, *a”h*, was an expert at writing sensitively and personally. Maureen was a wonderful teacher who lectured at LSJS for over a decade and was loved by her many students. She was a mentor to the teaching staff, and her kindness, warmth, and great humor helped us all. Maureen too is a part of this book.

I am especially grateful to Irving Grose and his family for dedicating the book in memory of his wife Averil Grose. Irving has been a thoughtful and loyal student for many years, and I am honored by his care and support.

Thanks also go to all the staff at LSJS for their constant support, and to publisher Matthew Miller, editorial director Reuven Ziegler, and the rest of the Maggid staff, in particular Ita Olesker, Caryn Meltz, Aryeh Grossman, Tani Bayer, Taly Hahn, and Debbie Ismailoff. I am grateful to editor Rookie Billet and to Rabbi Yitzchak Blau for his helpful comments.

Finally, I’m indebted to my family: to Jacqueline and our daughters, Levona and Sapira, for their constant love and support. And thank you all especially for smiling knowingly every time I said I was *almost* finished.

Of course, there are mistakes in this book. But as the Beatles sang, “With every mistake we must surely be learning.” No idea is ever fully formulated, no vision entirely realized, and no book complete. We are all on a journey in which we occasionally take a break to gather our thoughts, and these are mine. If I have misread any reference or misunderstood any idea, I apologize. My only aim has been to open curtains and shed new light on our wonderful tradition.

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“Abba, who made God?” “Abba, if Joshua and the Israelites marched round Jericho sounding trumpets for seven days until the walls came down, does that mean they blew on Shabbat?” These questions and so many more, said my father, were what I would nag him about in my childhood. He always said he loved my questions and those of my sisters, Alonet and Deganit. His patient responses, quoting verses the length and breadth of the Bible, ingrained in us a love of our tradition and a belief in its eternal relevance and ever-expanding possibilities. And so, my personal dedication for this book is to my Abba, *avi mori*, Arie ben Moshe veOra. May his memory and his deep love of God and the Torah be a blessing for us all.

Introduction

Do you firmly believe in God? Do you think all the stories in the Torah are true? And are its laws still ethical for today? If you are not certain, then you are not alone.

The modern world has dramatically changed us all. Scientific innovation and instant online access have increased our knowledge exponentially. Radical changes in social norms have profoundly affected our attitudes and values. New discoveries about human history, culture, and psychology force us to constantly reassess our sense of humanity and its purpose.

Jews, of course, are not exempt. These changes have led many of us to ask deep and difficult questions about our faith. Some find the Torah to be antiquated and unscientific, with little to say on contemporary issues. Some query the morality of Jewish law when it clashes with modern sensibilities. Some search for an authentic relationship with God and wonder why they have never experienced it. Most worrying of all, some feel that Judaism lacks relevance and personal meaning in their lives.

In my experience as both a lecturer and a rabbi, the questions being asked are rarely intended to provoke or belittle Judaism. On the contrary, they come from an honest desire to better appreciate our religious tradition. At times, when questions are expressed forcefully, they

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may come from feelings of frustration or even anger, but they tend to arise from a genuine desire to live a fulfilling Jewish life.

Judaism was always meant to be a religion that encourages questioning: “Ask your father, who will tell you, your elders who will speak to you” (Deut. 32:7). From the inquisitive child at the Passover Seder to the confused yeshiva student who questions their teacher’s lecture, Jewish tradition is suffused with a culture of curiosity. Abaya, the fourth-century Babylonian rabbinic sage, would often say, “I am open and ready to answer anyone asking questions about the Torah.”¹

And yet, I have spoken with many people who feel that their questions have been left unanswered. This might be because they found the responses unsatisfying, or simply because they never found anyone whom they felt comfortable enough to ask. This can open the door to disillusionment and a gradual disengagement from Jewish life.

A weak reply to a real question, or ignoring it completely, confirms the feeling in the questioner that Judaism is ill-equipped to respond to contemporary issues. Besides being insensitive, teachers who give flip-pant or dismissive answers fail to understand the religious angst of the sincere individual who stands before them. Receiving a pat answer can cause further problems. It shuts down the asker rather than opening them up to further exploration. Answering a question with a quick and clever retort comes across well at the time, but often crumbles when scrutinized. Rabbi Yehoshua Engelman, a teacher of mine and a good friend, is fond of saying, “Never ruin a first-rate question with a second-rate answer.”

Many intelligent adults no longer even bother to ask questions about Judaism because they fear that their doubts will never be convincingly addressed. To stay committed, they feel that they must sacrifice some of their intellectual integrity and, as Micah Goodman notes, “put their critical thinking aside whenever they enter a synagogue or *beit*

1. Rashi on Kiddushin 20a, s.v. *amar Abaye*. See also Rashi on Sota 45a, s.v. *hareini kven Azzai*. Rava, Abaya’s contemporary, also made this statement; see Rashi on Eiruvin 29a, s.v. *hareini kven Azzai*. These sources show that both rabbis were inspired by the second-century scholar known as Ben Azzai.

midrash (religious study hall).”² Meanwhile, when teenagers and college students do not receive meaningful responses to their questions, they tend to disengage and drift away from Jewish life. In their wake are hurt and distraught parents who lack the knowledge and experience to cope.

So, what do I know? Well, to be honest, I have been asking many of these questions myself for a very long time. I too was frustrated with many of the stock responses and formulations with which I was routinely presented. And so I went looking for something better. I sought out ideas, books, and people that might help me. Years of learning with some wonderful rabbis, pursuing academic studies, exploring my Yemenite-Ashkenazi heritage, reading widely, teaching reflectively, and having endless late-night conversations have enabled me to forge a path.

I believe serious questions should be treasured. They reveal a genuine interest; they show that the asker is trying to make sense of what they are learning and attempting to see how it fits into their view of the world. Inquiry is the springboard to further knowledge and new perspectives.

There is a risk in mistaking the Jewish tradition for a vast super-computer. Press a button and a specific, timeless answer to any question just pops out. An exact solution for every problem and possibility! But this misses the point that our tradition spans thousands of years and encompasses multiple different approaches which are often subtle and complex. That is why I prefer the term “responses.” Responses are not universal; they are situated in place and time. They engage with the questioner. They encourage comebacks and further discussion.

Our understanding of Jewish tradition changes and adapts, depending on when and where we live. And so, the responses given in this book are not meant for *all* times; rather, they are how I think about the many challenges of modernity *right now*. They are based on my experience of engaging with people and their opinions, just as much as on my reading and research. I know that responses can never be conclusive, but I have done my best to make them as reasonable and helpful as possible.

This book is a collection of my approaches to some of the most challenging questions on the Torah, the text at the heart of Judaism. The

2. Micah Goodman, *The Wondering Jew*, trans. Eylon Levy (Yale University Press, 2020), 3.

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range of issues addressed reflects the many fascinating people, passionate seekers, and casual inquirers who have contacted me over the years. Of the thousands of questions I've been asked, the ones in this book are those that arise most often, in some form or another. They deserve decent responses.

Responses and Interpretations

I begin each chapter by expanding on the question posed and exploring its various elements. Often, I include a critique of the standard answers given. This reduces the natural tendency for confirmation bias, the temptation to present information in a way that just reaffirms my values and assumptions. All of us are inclined to such bias when it comes to emotionally charged topics or deeply held beliefs. Then I share my own responses to each question. These involve presenting and analyzing a range of traditional Jewish sources and modern texts, often in novel ways. Says the Talmud, "One person's way of thinking differs from the next, just as one person's face differs from the next."³ And so, of course, these responses express my personal way of thinking about these questions.

Rabbi Yehuda Henkin (1945–2020) once asked his grandfather, the prominent halakhist Rabbi Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, whether it was permissible to interpret non-legal parts of the Torah in ways different from those of the rabbinic sages. "Yes," he answered, "provided the intention is to strengthen *yirat shamayim* (reverence for God)."⁴ This is my intention here: to suggest new ways of seeing and understanding the Torah that make sense to the modern mind and facilitate a deeper connection with our traditions and our Creator.

You may be thinking: Is all this just apologetics then? In its everyday usage, being an apologist has a negative connotation, referring to the process of conjuring up a host of justifications that avoid or excuse the issue at hand and fail to address deeper concerns. However, the technical definition of apologetics is the defense of some value, cause, or religious belief through systematic argumentation and discourse. This is exactly

3. Berakhot 58a; see also Rosh HaShana 18a.

4. Yehudah Henkin, *Equality Lost: Essays in Torah Commentary, Halacha, and Jewish Thought* (Urim, 1999), 6.

what I want to do here. The book responds to modern challenges to the Torah by making a case based on well-researched and reasonable arguments. Over the next twelve chapters, I try to be a passionate and even-handed advocate for Judaism who takes questions very seriously.

Of course, my arguments have strengths and weaknesses. I am deeply committed to Judaism, but that does not mean I am unaware of substantial challenges to its principles. Indeed, it is my commitment that makes me open to hearing these challenges. I am intrigued to understand how our Jewish sources might be formed into responses. It has always seemed to me that we are meant to grapple intelligently with God about living and finding meaning in a religious life, as it says in Isaiah, “Come now, let us reason together, says God” (Is. 1:18).

My approach to researching and responding to each question is inspired by a comment of Maimonides concerning the proper way of studying rabbinic texts:

When you encounter a word of the sages which seems to conflict with reason, you should pause, consider it, and realize that this utterance must be a riddle or a parable. You should sleep on it, trying anxiously to grasp its logic and context, so that you may find its true intellectual intention.⁵

This takes time, but I have found that it is well worth the effort. My faith that our tradition has resources designed to respond to changing times makes me confident to address each question, mull it over, and present some reasonable responses. I have tried to be clear and compelling, and never to sacrifice my critical faculties in the process.

I am not expecting to provide definitive proofs to you, the reader. There are no incontrovertible answers to these kinds of questions. But what I can do is present rational responses that make belief possible and that ground commitment on meaningful foundations. The process of researching and responding to each question has forced me again and again to rethink simplified answers. My approach is to present

5. Maimonides, *Introduction to Perek Helek, Commentary on the Mishna*.

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innovative applications and interpretations of traditional texts that show their relevance for today.

I have ordered my responses to twelve questions into three parts. The first part concerns the Torah's origin narratives; the second, some of its ethical positions; and the third, its presentation of God and belief. Taken together, these interpretations offer a way of being a committed Jew today and being able to embrace, rather than avoid, the huge impact of modernity.

Each is a considered response requiring a methodical analysis of the issues. It takes time to build the argument. A range of sources, both classical and modern, are marshaled and interwoven. Each response is a journey with many stages along the way. I hope you take the time to read through them and think about them. Nothing worthwhile should be rushed, but this advice is often under-appreciated. Maimonides makes this point with an incisive parable:

Suppose you awaken any person, even the most simple, as if from sleep, and say to them, "Do you desire to know what the heavens are? What is their number and form?... How did the creation of the whole world happen? What is its purpose? How are its various parts related to each other? What is the nature of the soul?..." And so on. They would undoubtedly say "Yes," and show a natural desire for the true knowledge of these things. But they would want to satisfy that desire and to attain to that knowledge by listening to just a few words from you. And if you ask them to interrupt their usual pursuits for a whole week, until they learn all this, they would not do it. They would be contented to remain with misleading notions. They would refuse to believe that there is anything which requires so much preparatory study and persevering research.⁶

We all want answers, but who is willing to give up a week of their lives to get them? Maimonides reminds us to invest the time needed to gain a decent understanding of a topic.

6. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* 1:34.

The Age of Doubt

The European Enlightenment caused a radical shift in human thought. Cherished beliefs of the devout, Jews and Christians alike, came into question. Long-held assumptions firmly rooted in biblical teaching were challenged by new sources of knowledge. For the deferential and religiously minded European society of the nineteenth century, the rapid succession of discoveries and realizations in numerous fields of study was devastating.

Geological research by Charles Lyell extended the age of the world far beyond what the Bible implied.⁷ The discovery of ancient hand tools by John Evans and Joseph Prestwich proved that humanity was much older than Adam.⁸ Charles Darwin's theory of evolution challenged the account of species formation in Genesis.⁹ Ancient inscriptions translated by the Assyriologist George Smith and others questioned the uniqueness of the Creation and Flood narratives.¹⁰

The growing influence of philosophers such as Spinoza (1632–1677) and Voltaire (1694–1778) on leading nineteenth-century scholars led to a dismissal of the Torah's description of a personal God who communicated with humankind.¹¹ Victorian novels, like those of George Eliot, focused on character-driven narratives that championed human agency and the capacity to love over religious belief.¹² The German

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7. Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology* (Penguin Classics, 2005). Originally published 1830–1833.
 8. Clive Gamble, *Making Deep History: Zeal, Perseverance, and the Time Revolution of 1859* (Oxford, 2021).
 9. Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (Penguin Classics, 2009). First published in 1859.
 10. George Smith announced his discovery in 1872. T. C. Mitchell, *The Bible in the British Museum: Interpreting the Evidence* (The British Museum, 2004), 26–27, 80.
 11. See, for example, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity* (Schocken Books, 2009).
 12. See, for example, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, which was first published in 1872. On Eliot's turbulent life and attitude to religion, see David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (Allen Lane, 2015), ch. 7. On the rise of the modern novel, see Joshua Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought* (Oxford, 2008), 135–37.

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biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen confronted the unity of the Torah, portraying it as a synthesis of four independent narratives.¹³

The emerging field of anthropology revealed the remarkable similarities between biblical rituals and those of other ancient cultures, thereby also throwing doubt on the divinity of the Book of Books.¹⁴ Founders of social science, such as Emil Durkheim and Max Weber, recast religion as nothing more than a human construct.¹⁵ And Sigmund Freud's research into psychoanalysis, especially the unconscious, undermined the biblical emphasis on human choice and personal responsibility.¹⁶

All this intellectual richness caused a growing crisis of faith:

Never has an age in history produced such a detailed literature of lost faith, or so many great men and women of religious temperament standing outside organized religion.¹⁷

So many of the challenging issues we have concerning the Torah today can be traced back to this age of doubt:

The debates about religion and science that flared in nineteenth-century Britain predate by almost two centuries the "new" atheism that has evolved today, undermining many of its claims for originality.¹⁸

13. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). First published in English in 1883.

14. See, for example, James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (Oxford, 2009). First published in 1890.

15. See, for example, Ian McIntosh, *Classical Sociological Theory: A Reader* (Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

16. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Penguin, 1991). First published in 1900.

17. Quoted in Christopher Lane, *The Age of Doubt: Tracing the Roots of Our Religious Uncertainty* (Yale University Press, 2011), 3.

18. *Ibid.*, 4.

Initially, the religious establishment dismissed, downplayed, or simply ignored the results of all this new research. However, as the new ideas and discoveries gained wider recognition, such reactions could not be sustained. Priests and rabbis needed to respond to mounting questions from their congregants. Some doggedly continued to deny or deride what they portrayed as newfangled theories or dangerous ideas. They retreated from modernity, preferring to intensify their religious practice. Others were unwilling to reject the mounting evidence and research and, over time, have learned ways in which to accommodate many aspects of this knowledge into their religious outlooks. Rather than weakening belief, they find that understanding these new discoveries and ideas uncovers creative avenues to reinterpret ancient texts and renew religious commitment.¹⁹

Of course, this does not mean uncritically embracing all the fruits of ongoing research. Modern religious leaders, scholars, and academics continue to engage thoughtfully with new findings, in evolving fields such as neuroscience, thermodynamics, and artificial intelligence, seeing their potential for explaining and energizing the meaning of faith and the purpose of tradition.²⁰ For me, the process of investigating challenging questions has uncovered fresh readings and insights that have had a transformative effect on my understanding of Judaism. They have led to a reassessment of many topics and allowed me to see them in a new light. In the end, my thinking moved me from a defense of Judaism to a reevaluation of it for the modern age.

19. See, for example, Geoffrey Cantor, "Anglo-Jewish Responses to Evolution," in *Jewish Tradition and the Challenge of Darwinism*, ed. Geoffrey Cantor and Marc Swetlitz (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 23–46; Jeremy Brown, *New Heavens and a New Earth: The Jewish Reception of Copernican Thought* (Oxford, 2013), 274–86; and Tova Ganzel, Yehudah Brandes, and Chayuta Deutsch, eds., *The Believer and the Modern Study of the Bible* (Academic Press: Boston, 2019).

20. See, for example, Mario Beauregard and Denyse O'Leary, *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul* (HarperOne, 2007); Jeremy England, *Every Life Is on Fire: How Thermodynamics Explains the Origins of Living Things* (Basic Books, 2020); and Harris Bor, *Staying Human: A Jewish Theology for the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (Cascade, 2021).

Keeping My Faith

As the dean, my day job is teaching at the London School of Jewish Studies. The school dates back to 1855, when it was established as Jews' College by Chief Rabbi Dr. Nathan Marcus Adler and Sir Moses Montefiore. Ever since, it has been Anglo-Jewry's premier center of teacher training, Jewish scholarship, and adult learning. It is an Orthodox establishment that appreciates the value of studying Jewish texts in their historical context. When I read the books and articles of the scholars who have worked and taught here, I am amazed at their breadth of knowledge and capacity for providing fascinating insights and clear explanations. I only hope to be able to continue this tradition.

Many people are afraid to ask probing questions. They are worried about being judged or condemned for raising them. There is an apocryphal story about Galileo, the seventeenth-century Italian astronomer, who was convicted of heresy by the Catholic Church for publishing a book asserting that the earth revolves around the sun, rather than the reverse. Galileo questioned the accepted view of his day: that the earth was the unmoving center of the universe created by God. He was publicly forced to recant his views. After he confirmed his allegiance to the church, he is said to have defiantly muttered under his breath, *Eppur si muove*, "And yet it moves!"

On a visit to the Museum of Enlightenment and Modernity in Valencia, my family and I watched a dramatic retelling of this moment, but in truth Galileo never spoke those words.²¹ Nonetheless, the many times the story has been retold certainly highlights the historic tension and fear of recriminations and reprisals that occurred between dogmatic traditionalists and those promoting new discoveries. In the West today, we are not forced to hide or retract our questions and doubts about religion. Yet many Jews are still nervous to rock the religious boat by challenging accepted beliefs in any serious way. And when their rabbi says something which they find unconvincing or questionable, they just ignore it or mutter under their breath. "Better to keep *shtum* about such questions" is the attitude I come across.

21. Jeremy Brown, *New Heavens and a New Earth: The Jewish Reception of Copernican Thought* (Oxford, 2013), 239.

Over time, though, unanswered questions eat into faith, eroding it from the inside. This is another reason why I wrote this book: to shine a light on challenging questions and make it more acceptable to talk about them. Religious belief and practice can only really flourish in an atmosphere of openness that values questions, rather than being anxious and embarrassed of them. Hillel, the first-century BCE sage, used to say: “A person who gets embarrassed cannot learn.”²² Rabbi Obadiah Bartenura (1445–1515, Italy) explained: “He refers to one who is embarrassed to ask questions for fear of being made fun of, for they will always remain with their questions.”²³ Our sages had no desire to shut down questions. Through their teaching they hoped to create an atmosphere in which the questioner was gently encouraged rather than promptly dismissed.

Should there be any limits to questioning belief? In 1787, Thomas Jefferson wrote to his nephew concerning religion:

Your reason is now mature enough to examine this.... Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, He must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blind-folded fear. Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable not for the rightness but uprightness of the decision.²⁴

Five years later, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft addressed the same issue with an even more positive conclusion:

It is not impious thus to scan the attributes of the Almighty: in fact, who can avoid it that exercises his faculties? For to love God as the fountain of wisdom, goodness, and power, appears to be the only worship useful to a being who wishes to acquire either virtue or knowledge.²⁵

22. Mishna Avot 2:5.

23. Commentary of the Bartenura on this mishna.

24. <https://tjrs.monticello.org/letter/1297>.

25. Penguin, 2004, ch. 3.

Questioning Belief

The words of Jefferson and Wollstonecraft remind me of the experience of Moses on Mount Sinai, when he displayed his inquisitiveness to God: “Let me know Your ways, please, so that I may know You.... Show me, please, Your glory” (Ex. 33:13, 18).

God was not at all perturbed by these questions and proceeded to respond to Moses in a way he could understand.²⁶ It seems that since we have been created with the power of thought, God expects us to use it.

In researching and writing this book, I have no doubt made some errors along the way, and I apologize for them. There is always the danger of misunderstanding. Some biblical verses and rabbinic texts can be notoriously difficult to comprehend fully. I take comfort from the criticism that the sages of the Talmud leveled at one another:

If you read this text once, then you certainly did not read it a second time in greater depth; and if you read it a second time, then you certainly did not read it a third time; and if you read it a third time then it was not adequately explained to you, as it is clear that you do not understand it properly.²⁷

There are wonderful writers who have addressed modern challenges to the Torah, and I have quoted some of them in my responses. This book, however, reflects my own thought process. It represents my personal outlook and the fruits of a long journey. It contains many of the reasons why I keep my faith. If you have comments or questions, please contact me. I welcome and value your thoughts. It would be good to talk. My sincere hope is for this book to be helpful to you and to anyone, religious or not, Jewish or not, who is questioning belief.

26. Berakhot 7a examines the contents of this conversation.

27. R. Yehuda HaNasi said this to R. Hiyya in Moed Katan 16b, and R. Hiyya said it to R. Yonatan in Berakhot 18a.

Part I

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