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FAITH

# The State of Orthodox Belief

JA STAFF

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A group of young Jewish day school graduates—all of whom were raised in Orthodox homes—were recently asked about their belief in God. Not a single one could explain why he believes in God or why believing in the Torah differs from believing in any other belief system.

Imparting *emunah* has never been a simple matter. But in the post-modern age of Instagram and ever-present distractions, instilling in our youth a deep and abiding faith that will guide them through the inevitable vicissitudes of life is more challenging than ever. How can we bring God into the classroom, into our homes, and most importantly, into our children's hearts and minds?

In this symposium, we asked a diverse group of prominent rabbis and educators to respond to one or more of the following questions.

1. We tend to identify Jews as Orthodox by their behavior rather than by their beliefs. (For example, we refer to an individual as a “*shomer Shabbat*” or a “*shomer mitzvot*,” rather than a “*ma’amin*” or a

“*ye’reh Hashem.*”) Is having *emunah* integral to being a Torah Jew, or is observance of halachah far more critical, and thus deserving of more attention and education?

2. Have we sufficiently taught the underpinnings of our faith to our children? If not, is there a valid reason for this? Do our schools emphasize knowledge of and skills in Tanach, Gemara and halachah without providing students with a foundation in the fundamentals of Jewish belief? Is there a reason why our educational institutions in the past focused on the practice of Yiddishkeit more than the tenets of *emunah*, and if so, are the reasons still applicable?

3. What are the challenges when it comes to imbuing our students with *emunah* in this post-modern, technological era? Do we need to teach it differently in contemporary times? What would you tell a student experiencing a crisis of faith?

4. Do you have suggestions for how to introduce the concepts of *emunah* into the contemporary American Orthodox experience? How should a teacher or rabbi intent on doing so begin?



#### Ahron Lopiansky

There are oversimplified slogans that tend to come back to haunt their formulators. For the longest time, we have proclaimed religious superiority over Christianity and Islam with the following formula: “Those religions are all about believing, with action a mere appendage. Believe in Yeshu; believe in Muhammad and his teaching, and you will be saved. Judaism is about what you have done and accomplished. Even if you ‘believe,’ if you have transgressed and not accomplished you will go to *Gehinnom*.”

This slogan was transmuted into the following caricature: “Judaism has no beliefs, just action.”

This is nonsense for two reasons. One has to do with the faith part of the equation, and one has to do with the action part of the equation.

The Mishnah in *Sanhedrin* clearly states that one who denies that the resurrection of the dead is alluded to in the Torah has no place in the World to Come. When seen through the perspective of the preceding *mishnayos*, it is clear that the Mishnah is telling us that the denial of *techiyas hameisim* is worse than all the previous sins—for those sins are punishable by death, yet the sinner does not lose his share in the World to Come.

Similarly, we have terms like *min*, *apikores* and *kofer*, which may be subject to various specific interpretations but are clearly sins of disbelief or misbelief.

Even *avodah zarah*, arguably the “worst sin,” which requires an act in order to be judged, is at its core a question of belief. The actions that constitute *avodah zarah* are all acts of reverence; they are means of expressing a false belief. Thus, to say that Judaism does not mandate beliefs borders on the absurd.

But I would like to go a step further and say that good deeds—despite the fact that they are good—are not *mitzvos*!

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**The lesson a child learns when seeing his or her mother shedding a tear while lighting Shabbat candles goes much farther than a lesson in philosophy.**

Let us look at the core definition of a *ger toshav*—a gentile who has not converted to Judaism but has accepted and fulfills the Seven Noahide Laws. He is considered a righteous person and has a share in *Olam Haba*. The Rambam [end of *Hilchos Melachim* 8] qualifies this with the following: “This is only if the person has accepted these *mitzvos* because Hashem commanded them in the Torah and taught us through Moshe that Noahides are obligated in this. But if he did it because it seems reasonable, he is neither a *ger toshav*, nor of their righteous, nor of their wise people.”

Here we have a scene of two people acting and committing to act the same way, yet one is righteous and wise; the other is not. The difference lies in the underlying belief of the individual performing the mitzvah. How do we understand the individual’s belief or lack thereof?

Let us imagine three people standing on the beach doing the exact same act: waving a white towel. One person is desperately trying to dry the towel before he goes home. The second one is chasing away annoying insects. The third one is surrendering to the enemy. The exact same physical act—but three very different actions!

*Hilchos Shabbos* is replete with examples of the concepts of “*eino miskavein*” (an action done without intent), “*eino tzericha legufa*” (an action not needed for its result), “*misasek*” (preoccupied or unaware), et cetera. This is because a human being is a “*bar daas*” (creature of intellect); therefore, all of his actions are expressions of understanding and intention. A human act is never seen solely in physical terms but rather as an expression of its cognitive context.

This understanding of the complete picture of a mitzvah is almost explicit in our daily mission statement of Kerias Shema. Shema consists of two paragraphs that seem redundant. The first is called “accepting the Yoke of Heaven”; the second is “accepting the Yoke of *mitzvos*.” They are not synonymous; they are complementary. The first paragraph provides the context for our world of *mitzvos*: acknowledging an all-encompassing God who is the sole Moral Force, and Whose moral proclamations are the source of all *mitzvos*. And only then do we commit ourselves to the fulfillment of the *mitzvos* themselves.

Rashi (Bamidbar 15:23) cites a *Sifri* that conveys this very point: “This teaches us that he who admits to serving idols is as if he denies all of Torah.” This obviously is referring to one who observes all of Torah, but his beliefs are ascribed to some other system. The *pasuk* is teaching us that those *mitzvos* are no longer considered *mitzvos*.

I would like to clarify one point. I am not suggesting that rabbis or educators administer a “faith test” to determine who believes and who does not. In any case, making a big splash tends to exaggerate

people's positions.

What should, however, be taken from the above is the following:

1. An unequivocal understanding that *mitzvos* are first and foremost a Divine command, and they lose their identity as such if there is no “*metzaveh*” (Commander).
2. Most people are complex. Total believers and total non-believers rarely exist as such.
3. Every Jew has a “point of belief” deep inside. The more we involve the person in the world of *mitzvos*, and the more he lives *Yiddishkeit*, the more likely his “beliefs” will fall into place.

Indeed, let us encourage keeping *mitzvos*, for as the *Sefer HaChinuch* writes (mitzvah 16), one's inner self is affected greatly by his external actions. But let us never cease to remind ourselves that the world of *mitzvos* is preceded by the world of *kabbalas ol Malchus Shamayim*!

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#### **Netanel Wiederblank**

Rambam begins the *Mishneh Torah* by declaring that we must “know (*leida*) that there is a First Being Who brought into being all existence.”<sup>1</sup> How are we meant to know? While the matter certainly is debated, many Jewish thinkers emphatically argued in favor of seeking proof for the existence of God, if one is capable of doing so. Thus, Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda declares, “It would show want of zeal for anyone to rely on tradition alone who can obtain certainty by method of rational demonstration.”

How do the scientific and philosophical advancements of the modern era affect this search? Some maintain that while belief in God remains compelling in the modern world, it should no longer be based on the types of proofs that were once offered to establish the existence of God. In the modern world, the religious person should seek other means to know that God exists. It should be stressed that this group of thinkers would not agree that science or philosophy have refuted religion in any way. There is nothing in modern science that disproves the existence of God. However, we can no longer turn to science and philosophy, as we once did, to prove the existence of God.

Not all contemporary religious philosophers and scientists accept the above concession. A second school of thought argues that we can still turn to science and philosophy to demonstrate that belief is the most reasonable worldview, insofar as it alone can explain everything we observe. While the arguments they offer may lack the elegance of the Medieval syllogistic proofs, they are nevertheless powerful evidence for God's existence. The brevity of this forum does not allow us to fully develop these arguments; however, let us briefly consider the impact of contemporary science upon faith.



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**Likewise, having students share *hashgachah* stories at the end of the week encourages making Hashem's presence a reality in their lives.**

Instead of conceding that modern physics dispenses with the need for God, the opposite case can be made. Until the middle of the twentieth century, one could deny that the existence of the universe was proof that God exists, by simply claiming that the universe always existed. However, with powerful scientific evidence supporting the Big Bang theory, this is no longer plausible. Accordingly, with universal scientific acceptance that our universe is not eternal, it is

easier than ever to corroborate the existence of God. Indeed, with all that modern science has taught us, there still are many questions that cannot be fully answered without resorting to God. First and foremost, why does anything exist? What started the process that caused our universe to come into existence? The Big Bang theory does nothing to answer these questions. Rather, it describes the process by which our universe developed following the Big Bang. What triggered the Big Bang in the first place is not addressed. Likewise, the theory of evolution does nothing to address these questions. Rather, it seeks to explain how life on earth could naturally evolve from simpler building blocks. It does not consider the root of existence.

Significantly, these scientific gaps are not minor holes, but major questions that science does not appear to be on the verge of answering. Suggestions, such as Dr. Stephen Hawking's idea in *The Grand Design* (p. 180), that matter can spontaneously generate, are not only farfetched but simply kick the can down the road, as they leave one wondering who created the magnificent laws that allowed our universe to burst into existence. (The above presentation is a bit of an oversimplification. In my forthcoming book, *Illuminating Jewish Thought: Faith, Philosophy, and Knowledge of God*, I elaborate on the strengths and weaknesses of this argument.)

However, even if science plays a role in belief, *emunah* must stem from much more than science. Knowing that God exists differs from religion, because even if we could definitively demonstrate God's existence, it would not serve as the basis of a passionate relationship with the Ribbono Shel Olam. Indeed, the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 39:1) records that even though Avraham arrived at awareness of God's existence through a teleological argument, it did not end there. Belief in God yielded a conversation, and ultimately a relationship, with the Master of the universe. Thus, Rambam (*Yesodei HaTorah* 2:2) writes that contemplation of God's wondrous universe must leave a person on fire—filled with an intense desire (*ta'avah gedolah*) to intimately know God. Consequently, we must couple scientific and philosophical investigation with Torah study and experiential activities that cultivate such a bond.

That there are so many non-believing practicing Jews is tragic. Not only is *emunah* of paramount importance, but many Rishonim (e.g., Rambam, Introduction to *HaChelek* and Ramban, Introduction to *Iyov*) presume that observance of *mitzvot* is of little value when it does not stem from belief. How then can educators and parents transmit *emunah*? Partly through traditional educational models, including texts, classes, and discussion—studying works like *Kuzari* and openly considering the implications of science upon faith is crucial. We must show both children and adults that science and philosophy have not disproven the existence of God. Mostly, however, transmission of faith occurs through living a life of

*emunah*. The lesson a child learns when seeing his or her mother shedding a tear while lighting Shabbat candles goes much farther than a lesson in philosophy. If we live a life of *emunah*, with all that it entails (no small task), then with God's help our children will follow in our path.

## Notes

1. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (*Al HaTeshuvah*, p. 196; *On Repentance*, p. 131) adds that the word "*leida*" should not be translated as "to understand," as if to imply that a person is obligated to philosophize about the nature of God's existence. We cannot understand God. Rambam does not maintain that there is a mitzvah to be a philosopher or theologian. What then does "*leida*" mean? Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests an unconventional understanding of the word—the mitzvah mandates constant awareness of His existence: "a level of consciousness never marred by inattention." Clearly, an extraordinary level, but one towards which we must strive.

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## Shira Smiles

Migratory birds have a homing instinct that enables them to return to the very tree they left months earlier. Likewise, every Jew has an innate sense of direction towards Hashem, notes Rabbi Moshe Wolfson,<sup>1</sup> *mashgiach ruchani* of Mesivta Torah Vodaath and *rav* of Beis Medrash Emunas Yisrael in Brooklyn. This hereditary belief, stemming from Avraham Avinu, is part of the deepest recesses of an individual's soul. Therefore, the mitzvah of *emunah*, according to the Rambam, is not to believe in Hashem (we already believe!); rather, it is to nurture this innate *emunah*. Dovid Hamelech teaches us "*Re'eh emunah*,"<sup>2</sup> we must take care of this *emunah*, cultivate and guard it. Just as the physical body needs a balanced diet to keep it in shape, one needs to have a healthy spiritual diet as well.

Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, *Hy"d*, notes that the source of the prohibition against believing in heresy is learned from the *pasuk*, "Do not follow after your hearts and your eyes."<sup>3</sup> The obvious question is: shouldn't it say, "Do not follow after 'your minds,'" rather than 'your hearts'? Rabbi Elchanan gleans from the word usage in this *pasuk* that the reason people don't believe is not because of an intellectual doubt but rather that the desires of one's heart blind a person from believing. The desire to pursue physical pleasures is so strong, it blocks one from accessing and acting upon his or her innate *emunah*. In our technological world that is bent on the pursuit of pleasure, is it any wonder that our *emunah* has become weakened?

Acknowledgement of these two principles is key in the educational arena. Educators often shy away from topics of *emunah*, afraid they won't know how to answer students' questions. A teacher needs to know that inherently the students believe; it is the fabric of their souls, as natural as breathing. Indeed, Rav Matisyahu Salomon warns against using "proofs" as it relegates *emunah* to the level of logic and opens the possibility that one could just as easily "disprove" what he hears.<sup>4</sup> *Emunah* is something far deeper than our minds; it reaches to the very essence of our spiritual depths. The teacher's mission is to fan the existing flame of *emunah* and allow it to ignite within the student.

Elementary school teachers should focus on making Hashem real in the lives of their students. The Chazon Ish recommended telling *hashgachah pratit* (Divine Providence) stories to enable students to feel emotionally connected. Likewise, having students share *hashgachah* stories at the end of the week encourages making Hashem's presence a reality in their lives. Teachers could also introduce "gratitude journals" and encourage daily entries. High school students should have a course in the six constant *mitzvot*; there are excellent books that explore these *mitzvot* and their relevance.<sup>5</sup> There are new innovative curricula now being created to help teenagers explore and strengthen the basic fundamentals of faith. This should be coupled with an approach to teaching Tanach in which lessons gleaned are clearly applicable to the students' lives. "*Devarim hayotzim min halev nichnasim el halev.*" Teachers should realize that at the same time that they are teaching their students' minds, they need to be igniting their own hearts. Students need to see that their teachers feel a genuine *simchah* for their Judaism and are passionate about what they teach. This will perhaps have the farthest effect in fanning the flames of *emunah*.

The Gemara in *Makkot*<sup>6</sup> notes that the Nevi'im distilled the 613 *mitzvot* into smaller categories to enable people to have an easier time focusing on serving Hashem. Chavakuk taught that the main mitzvah upon which to focus is "*Tzaddik be'emunato yichyeh*—the righteous person shall live through his faith."<sup>7</sup> It is imperative that adults, not only children, work on strengthening this mitzvah. Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein, the famed *mashgiach* of the Ponevezh yeshivah, noted that any day he did not work on this mitzvah was not counted as a day of his life. Books like *Living Emunah*, by Rabbi David Ashear, help people to begin developing a mindset of *emunah* that can impact their lives on a daily basis. Children need to see that their parents take their Judaism seriously, and that the enticements of life pale in comparison to the spiritual dividends of a religious life. When Hashem is alive in a child's home, He becomes more alive and vibrant in the child's heart.

## Notes

1. *Wellsprings of Faith*, Rabbi Moshe Wolfson, p. 10.
2. Tehillim 37:3.
3. Bamidbar 15:36.
4. As quoted in *The Heart of Emunah* by Rabbi Reuven Schmelczer, pg. 237.
5. *The Six Constant Mitzvos* by Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz; *Constant Connection* by Rabbi Yitzchak Coopersmith.
6. *Makkot* 24.
7. Chavakuk 2:4.

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## Menachem Schrader

The so-called crisis in *emunah* may well be exaggerated, or more likely, misunderstood. I would like to focus on two points in this regard: the nature of *emunah* per se, and the impact of religious leadership on *emunah* through their actions and personality.

1. Our Torah does not begin with a proof of the existence of God. It starts by taking God for granted as the Creator. Proofs and arguments about God and

Torah appear nowhere in the Torah itself. The Torah is a paradigm that Orthodox Judaism takes for granted. Belief in God and His Torah is a work in process. The term used by the Rishonim, “*ketanei emunah*” (those of minimal belief), indicates that *emunah* is not a checklist. Belief is not a “yes-or-no” question. Belief is qualitative, and is indicated much more by activity than by proclamation. It is the study of Torah generally, and observance specifically, that brings people to fall in line with the belief in the principles upon which their study and practices are based (see *Parashat Tzitzit*, Ramban end of *Parashat Bo* and *Sefer HaChinuch*, mitzvah 17). It’s not that *emunah* is the backbone of our mitzvah observance but that our mitzvah observance impacts our *emunah*, which in turn encourages us to be more observant, thereby fortifying our *emunah* further. Fluidity is intrinsic in *emunah*.

Here is the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle as applied to *emunah*: “The more we know about and focus on the state of belief of an individual or community at any moment, the less we know about the direction and velocity that individual or community is moving in and towards.” The question of direction is much more important than the question of one’s current state. A youngster who is currently lacking in belief, but wants and expects to go to Israel or a university where he will solidify his commitment through a strong environment or community, will not be measured properly based on current state of belief.

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**The decline in trust in authority in real life can also make it difficult for some to accept God as an absolute Authority. Furthermore, technology reinforces our inability to be still, to be alone with our thoughts; yet stillness is such an important prerequisite for connection with God.**

2. A crucial matter regarding *emunah* is its direct connection to *emunah* in the human beings who are expected to represent God and His Torah in this world. The Maharal explains that *chillul Hashem* is always based on *talmidei chachamim* (*Derech HaChaim*). The various scandals involving charismatic rabbinic figures that have come to light these last past twenty years, both in the United States and in the State of Israel, have taken their toll on the confidence Orthodox Jews worldwide have in their religious leadership. This, together with the tendency of some rabbinic leaders to defend or protect the rabbis accused, rather than concerning themselves with protecting the congregants and students of these rabbis from their abuses, has resulted in a general

decrease in the dignity of the rabbinate in the eyes of the Orthodox Jewish community.



Our core beliefs (*emunah!*) are in people. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein tells us in *Mevakshei Panecha* that he had religious problems as a youngster. He did not resolve them. He dealt with them in the following way: “No doubt Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik and Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner are aware of these difficulties. Either they have answers to these problems, or they do not feel these problems are severe enough to bring essential doubt to Torah” (quote from memory).

What this comes down to is that Rabbi Lichtenstein believed in Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik and Rabbi Hutner, and thus in God and the Torah they taught. If our teachers, men and women alike, inspire personal confidence in our community, young and old alike, belief will move in the direction of fullness and certainty in God and His Torah. To the extent that they prove themselves to be unworthy of this trust and confidence, belief will wither. “*Vaya’aminu baHashem uv’Moshe avdo.*” If people do not have the confidence that their leaders are honest, true, sincere and have their religious and personal best interests in mind, they will not only stop believing in their leaders, they will stop believing in the Torah the leadership claims to stand for, with all that that implies.

*Emunah* is a process rather than a checklist, and we should be working on direction rather than measuring absolutes. The moral quality and honesty of our religious leadership will greatly impact the potential for advancing us in the right direction, rather than *chas veshalom* setting us back. And the encouragement of a Torah-true way of life based on Tanach and Chazal, including Torah with *derech erez* in its contemporary form, will likely lift the Jewish people’s attitude towards Hashem and His Torah.

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## **Ayala Berney**

*As told to Bayla Sheva Brenner*

We cannot assume *emunah* is just going to seep in from the environment. In years past, *emunah* in Hashem was discussed at the Shabbos table; it was absorbed at home via osmosis. For the most part, this is not the case anymore. Therefore, schools need to teach *emunah* and make it part of the curriculum.

I attended Prospect Park High School in Brooklyn when Rabbi Yoel Kramer served as principal. He exposed us to the *Ikrei Emunah* of the Rambam, which I found fascinating. A few years later, when I became a teacher, I created a curriculum teaching these principles—a curriculum that has evolved over the past thirty-five years.

People crave purpose, mission and meaningfulness in their lives. They don’t want to live a life of haphazardness, where nothing has any purpose. When you offer students truth, it speaks to them.

In my classroom, we open up Ramchal's *Derech Hashem* and Rambam's *Hilchos De'os*. These works are a salve to the soul, infusing my students with a sense of meaning and purpose. When you work on a 1,000-piece puzzle, the first thing you assemble is the rim, the outer parts, and then you can fit all the other pieces inside. *Emunah* is the framework, after which you can connect all the other pieces: Chumash, Navi, Jewish history, halachah, et cetera.

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**Research points to the fact that family is the most influential factor in the religious development of children and adolescents.**

In teaching *Ikrei Emunah*, I have three goals: my students should develop a relationship with Hashem; believe in the truth of Torah; and have a sense of accountability for their actions. These are the three foundational principles of *emunah*.

The first foundation is that God created the world and continues to sustain the world; He is non-corporeal, and Infinite and All-Knowing, and only to Him do we direct our prayers because He is the only One Who can really effect anything.

The second principle is the truth of Torah; we look to the Torah as the Word of God. How do we know what God wants from us? The Torah is the Divine Word that guides us in living Godly lives.

The last foundation is the recognition of reward and punishment. We have to be accountable to ourselves, to God and to our nation. We need to understand that we do make a difference and that our actions reverberate for eternity.

What I'm actually introducing to my students is their own greatness. When they become aware of their purpose, their mission, and their responsibility to the world and to our nation, it's very exciting for them. Instead of feeling insignificant, they feel empowered.

By the time we complete the course, my students have a thick binder full of sources from the Rishonim and contemporary commentators. Some of my students take their binder with them to seminary and refer back to it. One student told me about a friend of hers who lost a close relative. She went to be *menachem avel* and took her binder along to give her friend *chizuk*.

Another student told me that she was coping with a difficult family situation and struggling with making a decision about which college to attend. She took out a card I had handed out that read: "Any *nisayon* I'm going through is coming from the One Above. I realize that [all that happens to me is part of] my designer life, designed by the Master Designer."

I teach my students that in examining the minute details of their lives, the wonderful as well as the difficult parts, they should stop and say, "Hashem, I know that this is happening because it's Your design." Hashem doesn't expect you to love the *nisyonos*; He knows it's painful. Nevertheless, we need to say to Him, "Even though I'm not sure what to do with this situation, I recognize that it's from You."

Ayala Berney is the principal and founder of Pe'er Bais Yaakov, a high school for girls that opened two years ago in Rockland County, New York. Mrs. Berney speaks nationally on topics including *emunah* and *chinuch*.



### Jay Goldmintz

*As told to Steve Lipman*

I don't know if students struggle with *emunah* more today than years ago, but I do see a greater desire for connection. Any number of reasons or symptoms point to a decrease in passionate commitment to Judaism:

- Having bucked the trend for decades, the United States has joined other Western countries in seeing a decline in identification with institutional religion. The increase in the desire and tolerance for personal choice (one gets to choose the version of news he wants to listen to or the gender he wishes to be) makes religious absolutes harder to accept. The fact that religion is on the decline in this country is not only an issue for Orthodox Jews. See David Kinnaman's *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith*.
- The concomitant rise in individualism (versus religion's focus on something bigger than oneself), the emphasis on one's needs versus those of the community, and the value placed on individual expression can all be challenges to maintaining a religious worldview. The challenge is exacerbated by technology, which overtly and subtly reinforces these values (that are antithetical to a Torah lifestyle). The incessant selfie postings, for example, can lead to a heightened sense of individualism and an increased sense that it's okay to be me and to express myself in the way I feel most comfortable even if that goes against the norms of community. The decline in trust in the authority of what one reads on the Internet, to say nothing of the decline in trust in authority in real life, can also make it difficult for some to accept God as an absolute Authority. Furthermore, technology reinforces our inability to be still, to be alone with our thoughts; yet stillness is such an important prerequisite for connection with God. I do not wish to lay blame on technology but only to suggest that, like other forces of modernity, technology has its pluses and its minuses which we ignore at our spiritual peril.
- The increased concern with materialism can also lead to a decreased focus on spiritual matters.
- Our community's increased focus on halachic observance, which is laudable and exemplary, has, in some circles, led to a preoccupation with the letter of the law to the exclusion of its spirit. That may work well for those with an already deep and abiding relationship with God, but it would be a mistake to assume that all individuals know how to draw the spiritual meaning along with that observance.

In short, we cannot rely on society at large or on our own community to contain the inevitable questions that come with normal religious development. Instead, we need to be proactive and intentional in educating our children about passion and connection.

How do you “teach” *emunah*? I am not sure it can be taught in the traditional understanding of that term. One can certainly answer questions, address doubts, deepen a student’s knowledge and the sophistication of his understanding; but these are all mostly cognitive tasks. A personal relationship with God and with Judaism requires something additional.

How does one teach love, friendship or connection to someone who has never experienced these things? Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik often lamented that despite his teaching abilities, he was unable to convey the passion of personal religious experience to his students. Yet, taking a cue from the Rav’s electrifying examples of self-disclosure, one can help guide people toward their own experience and relationship with the Divine.

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**These students often question their belief in their parent or rabbi, upon which their *emunah* hinged, and as they mature they seek to personally own their beliefs, not simply rely on the belief of others.**

I believe it means, in part, talking about God more in the classroom, sharing what our observance, our prayer, and our faith mean to us. This is not something that comes easily to all religious educators—no one really spoke to us that way very much when we were growing up or when we were training to be teachers. In schools we need to focus more on teaching kids and not just on teaching texts. Personal connection should flow organically out of personal interaction with the texts of the *masorah*. Teachers should be trained to enable students to personalize the Torah they learn within the existing curricula, without having to rely solely on

*Shabbatonim* or out-of-class discussions.

Parents, too, need to begin to parent more religiously—with intentionality. While we generally do not take a *laissez-faire* attitude when parenting our children intellectually, emotionally or socially, we similarly need to take a much more proactive posture when transmitting spirituality as well. One cannot leave it up to the schools. Indeed, all of the research points to the fact that family is the most influential factor in the religious development of children and adolescents.

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### **Sharona Kaplan**

Belief, by definition, can’t be taught because it exists beyond knowledge. Things we know with certainty do not require us to believe anything. But concrete, empirical data can only take us so far. It’s at that point where knowledge stops that belief begins.

It is also impossible to teach belief because it is something personal, owned by each individual. It is not an independent body of knowledge that can be

gifted to another; rather it is something experienced, individually felt and cultivated over time.

Rabbi Menachem Nissel, a well-known teacher and lecturer, explains that the reason our primary statement of faith is introduced with the verb “Hear [O Israel]” is because the process of acquiring faith is exactly that: a process. It therefore most resembles our sense of hearing, the only one of our senses that is not instantaneously experienced. Hearing requires patience, as letters form words, which then build sentences, which then communicate ideas. Belief, similarly, requires patience, as an individual receives input, listens and, over time, pieces it all together to form a bigger picture.

An educator can offer input by sharing some of the building blocks of our belief system in the form of historical narratives, spiritual content and broad-reaching philosophies. He can even elucidate the Thirteen Principles of Faith. He can, most importantly, model what it means to be a believer, sharing the lens with which he views the world and sensitizing students to recognize Divinity in their own lives. Yet it is up to the student to hear, absorb, apply and ultimately own their *emunah*.

This is in contradistinction to halachah, which is quantifiable and objective. Halachah can be concretized, taught and learned. In the early years of students’ development, there are likely some who actually believe in God while the majority, most likely, believe in the *masorah*, trusting the educator or parent who taught them about God.

The task faced during the college years is the personalization of beliefs, as students leave their incubated, simpler environment and have their belief system challenged in a more colorful, multi-dimensional environment. These students often question their belief in their parent or rabbi, upon which their *emunah* hinged, and as they mature they seek to personally own their beliefs, not simply rely on the belief of others.

The personalization of belief happens with sophisticated thinkers. It utilizes the knowledge they’ve gleaned and experiences they’ve had, and solidifies it with exploration and conversation that create a lens, which ultimately transforms the way one perceives life. Most importantly, acknowledging that belief begins where knowledge ends validates the need for a “leap of faith” amongst all believers, which may initially feel irrational and uncomfortable. Yet, sometimes it is exactly that acknowledgement that is the key element, as it offers a license to begin believing before one fully believes, enabling every individual to embrace the process which, over time, will unfold to offer a personal, founded, compelling system of belief.

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## **The Emunah Continuum**

*The following piece contains a story, told with permission, from a painful time in our lives. It does not*





*accurately reflect current feelings.*

*By Aliza Bulow*

There are times when I have felt alone in my *emunah* journey.

The Shabbos morning after our baby granddaughter died, my husband and I sat on the couch quietly reviewing the events of the week when I remarked, “It’s time to go to shul.”

He looked at me and scowled. “I’m not going.”

“Wow, you sound angry.”

“I *am* angry. How could Hashem do that to our daughter? How could He kill an innocent baby?”

“Okay,” I ventured, knowing from decades of Torah teaching and guidance that this was not the time to bring up platitudes, “you don’t have to go. But I think I will.”

As I slipped out the door, I wondered, “What just happened there?”

Both of us were sad. Our daughter waited four years for this pregnancy. We were so happy that Hashem was “catching her up” with twins. But then one was born very sick. After two weeks of exhaustive efforts, tremendous hope and almost constant prayers, she died before she got a chance to live.

I walked alone.

In a way, I consoled myself, my husband’s silence added up to a strong expression of *emunah*. He wouldn’t be mad at something he didn’t think existed, or at something that had no agency. It must be that he believes that Hashem exists and that Hashem made a choice and took his granddaughter.

As I thought about how my understanding differed from my husband’s, I envisioned an “*Emunah* Continuum”:

- 1) There is a God.
- 2) He created the world.
- 3) He runs the world.
- 4) He runs the world for the *good*.
- 5) He runs *my* world for the good.

My husband was stuck right before the “for the good” part of the continuum. Hence, the silence. But he also knew I felt differently.

Of course I was sad. Watching a child lose a child is heartbreaking, apart from the tragedy of losing a grandchild. But I trust Hashem. I know that He knows what He’s doing, even if I can’t understand it, and even if I don’t like it.

As I watched my daughter *daven* so earnestly for her daughter in the weeks after the birth, I wanted to prepare her for what might lie ahead. I didn't want her to get lost in the common misunderstanding that trusting Hashem means believing that it will all work out "well." I reminded her that *Hashem* and *Elokeinu*, the two names for God in the Shema, have very different connotations: *Hashem* expresses our perception of *chesed*; *Elokeinu* expresses our perception of *din* (judgment), but both are *Echad* (One), flowing from the same source and leading to the same destination. Trusting Hashem means knowing that He knows what He's doing and that it's ultimately good, even when it doesn't make sense to us and even when we don't like it. Nevertheless, in the privacy of my own *tefillot*, now that "what might lie ahead" already lay in the past, it was hard for me to say the Shema without tears.

I arrived in shul still contemplating.

I was sure that most of the people around me, indeed most Orthodox Jews, would say that they agree with the components of the "*Emunah* Continuum." But then how could a butcher sell *treif* meat as kosher? How could people lie or cheat to hurt another's business? Is it due to a lack of *emunah*? Would a *frum* Jew in prison say he doesn't believe in God?

I realized that the "*Emunah* Continuum" is not just horizontal; it has vertical planes as well. One might believe some, or all, of those elements on the continuum, but the level of belief may need to be deepened and solidified. Even then, the path between belief and behavior is not always straight; nevertheless, it's so much harder to walk when *emunah* is weak. How can the necessary depth be acquired that will turn belief into knowledge?

The path flows in both directions: belief can lead to behavior, and behavior can affect belief ("*ha'adam nifal kefi pe'ulatah*—man is driven by his behavior"; see *Sefer HaChinuch*, mitzvah 16).

That's why I find "*na'aseh v'nishma*" helpful as a daily choice. First do it, then understand it. So I say the Shema even if I cry, I wash even when my hands are clean, and I dress in accordance with halachah even when it draws attention. Behaving according to the Torah keeps me anchored and grants me insight. But what really pulls me deep into the continuum is knowing that even *emunah* itself is not a one-way street. I believe in Hashem, *and He believes in me too*. He knows that whatever lies ahead, I can do it. That's why He gave me another day. For that reason, I start every morning with an expression of double *emunah*: after thanking Hashem for returning my soul to me with all the tools I need for the day, I continue with "*rabbah emunatecha*—great is Your *emunah*." That's referring to Hashem's *emunah*. In me. I don't walk alone. Even if I don't understand it, even if I don't like it. I trust Hashem and He trusts me.

We're in this together.

*Aliza Bulow is the founder and director of Core, providing chizuk for frum women. She attended Michlelet Bruria, served in the IDF in the early 80s, and has been a Torah educator and mentor ever since.*

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