

# Torah From Sinai

by Rabbi Yisroel Chait

## Introduction

Judaism, as seen through the eyes of the scholars of the Talmud, has its own unique religious orientation. While basing itself on a cataclysmic event—revelation, it does not look to miracles as the source of its intimate relationship with God. God's revelation at Sinai was a one-time occurrence never to be repeated. This is expressed in Deuteronomy 5:19, "a great voice which was not heard again."<sup>1</sup> In the mind of the Talmudic scholar God continuously reveals himself not through miracles but through the wisdom of his laws.<sup>2</sup> These laws manifest themselves in Torah— the written and the oral law— and in nature.

The Psalmist expresses this view most clearly. He speaks freely of the wonders of nature and the awe-inspiring universe as in Psalm 8:4, "When I look at the heavens, the work of Your fingers; the moon and stars which you have established". Psalm 104, dedicated to the wonders of nature, climaxes with the exclamation, "How many are Your works, O Lord! You have made them all with wisdom." Regarding the sheer intellectual joy one derives from studying Torah, he states, "The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the

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<sup>1</sup>see Rashi, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra on this verse.

<sup>2</sup>In his description of the Torah scholar, Rav Soloveitchik states, "He does not search out transcendental, ecstatic paroxysms or frenzied experiences that whisper intonations of another world into his ears. He does not require any miracles or wonder in order to understand the Torah. He approaches the world of Halakhah with his mind and intellect just as cognitive man approaches the natural realm. And since he relies upon his intellect, he places his faith in it and does not suppress any of his psychic faculties in order to merge into some supernal existence. His own personal understanding can resolve the most difficult and complex problems. He pays no heed to any murmurings of [emotional] intuition or other types of mysterious presentiments."

soul, the testimony of the Lord is trustworthy, making wise the simple person. The precepts of the Lord are upright, rejoicing the heart, the commandment of the Lord is lucid, enlightening the eyes...The statutes of the Torah are true; they are all in total harmony. They are more to be desired than gold, even fine gold, and they are sweeter than honey and the honeycomb."

When speaking of man's search for God the Psalmist states, "The Lord, from heaven, looked down upon the children of man, to see if there were any man of understanding searching for God(14:2)." Man discovers God only through understanding. Accordingly, the righteous are depicted as being constantly involved in this process of searching for and discovering God. "But only in the Torah of the Lord is his desire, and in His Torah he mediates day and night"(Psalms 1:2). Maimonides sharply criticizes those who consider themselves religious and search for God through the miraculous. "Say to a person who believes himself to be of the wise men of Israel that the Almighty sends His angel to enter the womb of a woman and to form there the foetus[sic], he will be satisfied with the account; he will believe it and even find in it a description of the greatness of God's might and wisdom; although he believes that the angel consists of burning fire and is as big as a third part of the Universe, yet he considers it possible as a divine miracle. But tell him that God gave the seed a formative power which produces and shapes the limbs... and he will turn away because he cannot comprehend the true greatness and power of bringing into existence forces active in a thing that cannot be perceived by the senses."<sup>3</sup>

While Judaism is based on a supernatural event, it is not oriented toward the supernatural. The essence of Judaism is not realized through religious fervor over the miraculous but through an appreciation of God's

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Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*. (Philadelphia: 1983, Jewish Publication Society of America) p.79.

<sup>3</sup>Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide For The Perplexed*. Trans. by M. Friedlander. (London: 1951 Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd) p. 161.

wisdom as revealed both in Torah and the natural world. A miracle, being a breach of God's law, does not contribute to this appreciation. This distinction is crucial since it gives Judaism its metaphysical uniqueness.

## I

The foundation of our faith is the belief that God revealed himself to the people of Israel a little over three thousand years ago. The revelation consisted of certain visual and audible phenomena. The elements of fire, clouds, smoke pillars, and the sound of the Shofar were present. God produced an audible voice of immense proportion that He used to speak to Moses and then to the people. The voice conveyed intelligible Laws of great philosophic and halakhic import. The event left no doubt in the minds of those present that they had witnessed an act of God. The Torah describes the details of the event in two places, first in Exodus 19 and then in Deuteronomy 4, where Moses recounts the event to the people before his passing. What was the objective of the event? In both places the Torah very clearly tells us the purpose of the revelation. The statement that God made to Moses immediately before the event reads as follows:

*I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that  
all the people will hear when I speak to you.  
They will also then believe in you forever.*

-Exodus

19:9

When Moses recounts the event to the people he says,

*Teach your children and your children's  
children about the day you stood before God  
your Lord at Horeb. It was then that God said*

*to me, "Congregate the people for Me, and I will let them hear my words. This will teach them to be in awe of Me as long as they live on earth, and they will also teach their children.*

Deuteronomy 4:9-10

God clearly intended the event to be a demonstration that would serve the present and all future generations. Nachmanides and others consider it one of the 613 commandments to teach the demonstration of the event at Sinai to every generation. We are therefore obliged to understand the nature of this demonstration and how it was to be valid for future generations. An understanding of the foundations of a system offers insight into the character and philosophical milieu of that system. Comprehension of Torah from Sinai provides the most rudimentary approaches to the entire *Weltanschauung* of Torah.

## II

The very concept of a proof or evidence for the occurrence of the event at Sinai presupposes certain premises. It sets the system of Torah apart from the ordinary religious creed. The true religionist is in need of no evidence for his belief. His belief stems from something deep within himself. Indeed, he even senses in the idea of evidence for his belief, a mixed blessing as it were, a kind of alien ally. He does not enjoy making recourse to reality. Judaism, on the other hand, doesn't just permit evidence; it demands it. If one were to say he believed in Torah from Sinai and does not need any evidence, he would not be in conformity with the Torah. The Torah demands that our conviction that it was given to us by God be based on the specific formula of the demonstration He created for us. Nachmanides states further that were it not for the event at Sinai we would not know that

we should reject a false prophet who performs miracles and tells us to abandon any of the laws or ways of the Torah. It is written in Deuteronomy 8:2-6 that we should not follow such a prophet. But, says Nachmanides, were it not for the demonstration at Sinai we would be totally in a quandary, unable to know whether we should follow the Torah based on miracles that occurred in Egypt or follow the false prophet based on his miracles.<sup>4</sup> The event at Sinai resolves this dilemma. After the event at Sinai the Jew remains unimpressed even by miracles that would lead an ordinary person to conclude that the words of the false prophet are true. We shall return to this point later.

Clearly then, the basis on which one's religious convictions are built differ in the cases of the strict religionist and the man of Torah. The difference might be stated in the following manner: The religionist believes first in God and then in his mind and senses, while the man of Torah, who bases himself on evidence, accepts his mind and his senses and then proceeds to recognize God and His Torah by means of these tools. Only the man of Torah perceives God as a reality as his ideas concerning God register on the same part of his mind that all ideas concerning reality do.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>From both Maimonides and Nachmanides who concur on this point, as well as from the plain meaning of the Bible itself with regard to the objective of Revelation, it is clear that Judaism does not give credence to the existence of an authentic inner religious voice. Were this the case, there would be no need for the demonstration at Sinai in order to discredit the false prophet (Deuteronomy 8:2-6). On the contrary, this would be the exact test spoken of, to see if one will be faithful to this inner voice. For Judaism this inner voice is no different from the subjective inner feelings all people have for their religious and other unwarranted beliefs. It stems from the primitive side of man's nature and is in fact the source of idolatry. This is clearly stated in Deuteronomy 29:17, 18:

*Today, there must not be among you any man, woman, family or tribe, whose heart strays from God, and who goes and worships the gods of those nations...When [such a person] hears the words of this dread curse, he may rationalize and say, "I will have peace, even if I do as I see fit."*

Why does the Torah here as in no other place present to us the rationalization of the sinner? The Torah is describing the strong sense of security these primitive inner feelings often bestow on their hosts and is warning of the tragic consequences that will follow if they are not uprooted.

<sup>5</sup>It is imperative that the reader examines the passages in the Torah relevant to this notion. These include Exodus 19:4, Deuteronomy 4:3,9,34,35, and 36.

Let us proceed to the demonstration that took place at Sinai. We must understand not only how this event would serve as proof for those immediately witnessing it but for future generations as well, as it is stated in Deuteronomy, "and they will also teach their children." We must define at the outset what we mean by proof. The term proof as it is commonly used has a subjective meaning. We mean proof to the satisfaction of a given individual. As such it is subject to a wide range of definitions and criteria. There are those for whom even the world of sense perception is doubtful. In order not to get lost in the sea of epistemology let us state that the Torah accepts a framework similar to the one a scientist employs. It accepts the world of sense perception and the human mind. The events that occurred at Sinai are according to Torah valid evidence from which a rational person would conclude that a). there exists a deity, b). this deity is concerned with man, and c). this deity entrusted Moses with the task of conveying his system of laws to the people. To anyone who maintains that even if he were at Sinai he would remain unconvinced, the Torah has little to say.

The Torah addresses itself to a rational mind. It must be remembered that every epistemological system that is defensible from a logical standpoint is not necessarily rational. Rationality demands more than logical consistency; it requires clear intellectual intuition. One may argue, for instance, that we possess no real knowledge of the atom. One might contend that all electrons and protons conspired to act in a certain way when they were being observed. It may be difficult to disprove such a hypothesis, but it is easy to see that it does not appeal innately to the human mind.<sup>6</sup>Our intuitive intellect rejects it.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>As a classic example, metaphysical solipsism may be logically irrefutable but is to the human mind absurd.

<sup>7</sup>We may even be able to discover why we reject it, let us say, due to Occam's razor, the maxim that assumptions introduced to explain a thing must be as few as possible, but our rejection is not due to a knowledge of Occam's razor but rather Occam's razor is based on our rejection. It is part of the innate rationale of our mental system. Occam's razor, a rather marvelous formula, does not rely on deductive logic. It shows that the natural world somehow conforms to our mental world. The simplest idea is the most appealing to the human mind and is

### III

Let us now proceed to the question of how the events at Sinai, which occurred over three thousand years ago, were to serve as evidence for all succeeding generations. We may begin by asking what kind of event, if any, could possibly be performed that would qualify as evidence long after such an event has transpired? What criteria could we set forth that would satisfy such a requirement? Let us analyze how we as human beings gain knowledge. What methods are available to us? It would seem that there are two methods we use to obtain knowledge. The first is by direct observation. This course seems simple enough and for our purpose requires little analysis. Very little of our knowledge, however, is obtained through direct observation. We would know little or nothing of world history if we limited ourselves to direct observation. Even in science little or no progress could be made if one were limited to direct observation. We could not rely on textbooks or information given to us by others. Instead, each scientific observer would have to perform or witness all experimental evidence of the past firsthand. Knowledge in our personal lives would be equally restricted. When we place ourselves on the operating table for surgery we have very little firsthand knowledge about our physical condition or even whether the practitioner is indeed a physician. We put our very lives on the line with almost no firsthand, directly observed evidence.

Why do we do this? Are there any criteria we use that can rationally justify our actions? Here we come to the second class of knowledge available to us— secondhand knowledge. Secondhand knowledge seems to us quite reasonable provided certain criteria are met. When secondhand knowledge comes to our attention we are immediately faced with the question: Is this piece of information true or false? We cannot directly know whether or not it is true since we have not witnessed it directly; we can,

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usually the most correct one. The world is in conformity with the mind. In the words of Albert Einstein, "The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible."

however, know if it is true by way of inference. If we can remove all causes of falsehood we can infer that it is true. How can we remove all causes of falsehood? The rationale is simple. If the information that others convey to us is false, it is so for one of two reasons. Either the informer is ignorant and mistaken in what he tells us, or his statement is a fabrication. If we can rule out these two possibilities, there remains no cause for the information to be false. We then consider it to be true.

How can we eliminate these two possibilities? For the first one, ignorance, we only need to determine whether the individual conveying the information to us is intellectually capable of apprehending it. We deal here with a direct relationship. If the information is simple we may trust an average person. If it is complex or profound we would only trust someone capable of understanding such matters. The more complex the matter, the more qualified a person is required to be; the more simple the matter, the less qualified an individual needs to be. If an ordinary person would tell us it was raining we would be inclined on the basis of the first consideration to believe him. If he would tell us about complex weather patterns we would doubt his information. If, however, an eminent meteorologist would describe such patterns to us, we would believe him. The day President Kennedy was assassinated word spread almost instantly that he was shot. This report remained accurate although it passed through many hands. The details about how or where he was shot were confused. The shooting was a simple item of news capable of being communicated properly even by many simple people. The details of how and where were too complex for ordinary people to transmit properly.

Sometimes our criteria are fulfilled in concert with each other. We may believe a lay person's testimony that another individual is a well-qualified physician and then take the physician's advice. In another case we may accept a lay person's assertion that a text is the work of notable scientists. We would then proceed to accept as true ideas stated in this text even

though they seem strange to us. We would not accept these very same ideas from the original simple person. Our acceptance of the information found in textbooks is always based on this process.

Now we come to the consideration of fabrication. Here again we operate through inference. We may rule out fabrication when we trust the individual or think he has no motive to lie. If we do not know the individual we work with a second criterion. We accept the information if many people convey it, and we doubt it when its source is only one individual. The rationale is based on the assumption that one individual may have a motive to lie, but it is unlikely that a group of people would have a collective motivation to lie. If we met someone who told us that the 8:30 train to Montreal derailed we might at first be doubtful, but if several passengers gave us the same report we would accept it. We deem it unreasonable to assume a universal conspiracy. Our acceptance of the authorship of books by those named on the covers is based on this assumption. The moment we hear information our minds automatically turn to these two factors. We ask ourselves if the informant is capable of apprehending the information he is conveying and if there is any reason to assume fabrication. If we can answer in the affirmative to the first question and in the negative to the second question, we accept the information as true.

These are the criteria which guide our lives. They determine the choices we make in both our most trivial and most serious decisions. With this *modus operandi* we conclude that so and so is a highly qualified physician. If we suspect his integrity or his capabilities we consult a second physician or even a third. If all of them agree we would submit to even a serious operation on the grounds that a universal conspiracy is absurd.

Our acceptance of all historical data is based on the previous considerations. We are satisfied with the verisimilitude of certain historical events and unsatisfied with others depending on whether or not our criteria

for reliability have been met. We are quite sure of simple well known facts. For example, no one would dispute the claim that World War I occurred. Again, we are quite certain that George Washington existed, but we are not so sure of what size shoe Washington wore. A simple fact readily observable by many individuals we accept as true. Details we doubt. For these and for complex information we require qualified individuals. By ruling out fabrication we accept their communications as true. Because of our system we often arrive at grey areas when our criteria have not been adequately fulfilled. To the degree that they are not satisfied we are infused with doubt.

We are now in a position to determine what event could be performed that would retain its validity for future generations. Since future generations cannot observe the event directly, it would have to be an event that rules out in its process of communication the causes of doubt due to the ignorance of the communicators and due to fabrication. A simple event grasped easily by the senses that occurs before a mass of people who later attest to its occurrence would fulfill the requirements. Such an event would have all the credibility of the most accepted historical fact. If we doubt either a simple event attested to by masses of people or a complex event attested to by qualified individuals, we would *ipso facto* have to doubt almost all the knowledge we have acquired in all the sciences, all the humanities, and in all the different disciplines existing today. Moreover we would have to desist from consulting with physicians, dentists, lawyers, mechanics, plumbers, electricians, or specialists in any field who work from an accepted body of knowledge.

The event at Sinai fulfills the above requirements. The events witnessed as described were of a simple perceptual nature so that ordinary people could apprehend them. The event at Sinai was structured with the same built-in ingredients that cause us to accept any historical fact or any kind of secondhand knowledge. Moses himself points this out (Deuteronomy

4:9-13,32-36). Moses notes that those events that transpired before the entire nation were clearly perceived. He states,

*You are the ones who have been shown,  
so that you will know that God is the  
Supreme Being and there is none besides  
Him. From the heavens, He let you hear His  
voice admonishing you, and on earth He  
showed you His great fire, so that you heard  
His words from the fire.*

Someone may ask how we know that these events were as described in the Torah, clearly visible, and that they transpired before the entire nation. Perhaps this itself is a fabrication? The answer to this question is obvious. We accept a simple fact attested to by numerous observers because we consider mass conspiracy absurd. For the very same reason no public event can be fabricated, for we would have to assume a mass conspiracy of silence with regard to the occurrence of that event. If someone were to tell us that an atomic bomb was detonated over New York City fifty years ago, we would not accept it as true because we would assume that we would have certainly heard about it had it actually occurred. The very factors which compel us to accept as true an account of an event of public proportion safeguards us against fabrication of such an event.<sup>8</sup> Were this not so all of history could have been fabricated. Had the event at Sinai not actually occurred anyone fabricating it at any point in time would have met with the stiff refutation of the people, "had a mass event of that proportion

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<sup>8</sup>It should be understood that the mere claim that an event was a public one and its acceptance by people does not qualify the event as fulfilling our requirements; it is only if the people who accept the information are in a position to reject it that their acceptance is of value. If a person from Africa claims to people of Sardinia that a public event transpired in Africa, the acceptance by the Sardinians is no indication of reliability as they are not in a position to confirm or deny the event. It is only if the claim is made to the same people who were in a position to observe the event that acceptance is of value. Claims made by early Christians about public miracles of the Nazarene do not qualify, as the masses of Jews before whom they were supposedly performed did not attest to them. The same is true of claims made by other faiths (though, as we will see, after Sinai miracles have no credibility value).

ever occurred we surely would have heard of it." Fabrication of an event of public proportion is not within the realm of credibility.

History corroborates this point. In spite of the strong religious instinct in man, no modern religion in over two thousand years has been able to base itself on public revelation. A modern religion demands some kind of verifiable occurrence in order to be accepted. For this reason the two major Western religions, Christianity and Islam, make recourse to the revelation at Sinai. Were it not for this need and the impossibility of manufacturing such evidence, they certainly would not have based their religions on another religion's revelation.

#### IV

We now face one question. One may argue that we are to accept Torah much as one would accept any major historical event, and we may put our lives on the line based on no stronger evidence, but doesn't religion demand a certitude of a different nature? Here we are not looking for certitude based on some formula which we are forced to employ in our daily lives but certitude which gives us conviction of an absolute and ultimate nature.

To answer this question we must proceed with an examination of the tenets involved in the institution of Torah from Sinai, to which the rest of this paper is dedicated. Maimonides states that the nation of Israel did not believe in Moses because of the miracles he performed.<sup>9</sup> Moses performed these miracles out of simple necessity. They needed to escape from Egypt, so he split the sea, they needed food, so he brought forth manna. The only reason the people believed in Moses and hence God and Torah was because of the event at Sinai where they heard a voice that God produced speaking

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<sup>9</sup>see Maimonides, Code of Law, Chapter VIII, Laws Concerning the Foundations of Torah.

to Moses and instructing him to teach the people. But we may ask, weren't the miracles in Egypt enough to convince the people of Moses' authenticity? Didn't they follow him out of Egypt based on what they observed of God's miracles? And doesn't the Torah itself state at the splitting of the sea (Exodus 14:31),

*The Israelites saw the great power that God had unleashed against Egypt, and the people were in awe of God. They believed in God and his servant Moses.*

But Maimonides is thoroughly supported by the Bible itself since after this very statement, after the splitting of the sea, God says to Moses (Exodus 19:9),

*I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that all the people will hear when I speak to you. They will then also believe in you forever.*

It is clear, as Maimonides concludes, that there was something lacking in the previous belief for if it were complete the very motive for the Revelation, as stated clearly in the Torah, would be lacking.

A belief instilled by miracles, even miracles of cataclysmic proportion forecasted in advance and occurring exactly when needed, is lacking according to Maimonides. They do not effectuate total human conviction. It is, in the words of Maimonides, "a belief which has after it contemplation and afterthought." It may cause one to act on it because of the profound improbability of coincidence but it is not intellectually satisfying. The mind keeps returning to the event and continues to ponder it. God wished Torah to be founded on evidence that totally satisfies the human mind—*Tzelem Elokim*— which He created. He wished Judaism to be based on a sound

foundation of knowledge which would satisfy man's intellect completely. Miracles may point to something. We may be convinced that coincidence is improbable but such conclusions are haunted by afterthoughts. When the voice produced by God was heard from the heavens there was no further need for afterthought. It was a matter of direct evidence. Only then could it be said that the people knew there is a God and that Moses was His trusted servant. The requirements for knowledge were complete.

Maimonides concludes, "Hence it follows that every prophet that arises after Moses our teacher, we do not believe in him because of the sign he gives so that we might say we will pay heed to whatever he says, but rather because of the commandment that Moses gave in the Torah and stated, 'if he gives you a sign you shall pay heed to him,' just as he commanded us to adjudicate on the basis of the testimony of two witnesses even though we don't know in an absolute sense if they testified truthfully or falsely. So too is it a commandment to listen to this prophet even though we don't know if the sign is true...Therefore if a prophet arose and performed great wonders and sought to repudiate the prophecy of our teacher Moses we do not pay heed to him...To what is this similar? To two witnesses who testified to someone about something he saw with his own eyes denying it was as he saw it; he doesn't listen to them but knows for certain that they are false witnesses. Therefore the Torah states that if the sign or wonder comes to pass do not pay heed to the words of this prophet because this (person) came to you with a sign and wonder to repudiate that which you saw with your own eyes and since we do not believe in signs but only in the commandments that Moses gave how can we accept by way of a sign this (person) who came to repudiate the prophecy of Moses that we saw and heard."<sup>10</sup> The Jew is thus tied completely and exclusively to the event at Sinai which was formulated to totally satisfy the human mind.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>ibid. Chapter VIII.

<sup>11</sup>This point is crucial. It contradicts popular opinion. The Jew remains at all times unimpressed by miracles. They do not form the essence of his faith, and they do not enter the mental framework of his creed. Though the

This explains the main idea of the chapter of the false prophet given by the Torah in Deuteronomy 13:2-6.

*If there arise among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder of which he spoke to you comes to pass, and he says, "Let us go after other gods which you have not known and let us serve them."*

*Do not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. God your lord is testing you to see if you are truly able to love God your Lord with all your heart and all your soul.*

What is this test? The test is to see if your love<sup>12</sup> of God is based on true knowledge which He has taught you to follow and embrace or if you are to fall prey to the unsound primitive emotions of the moment that well up from the instinctual source of man's nature. The faith of the Jew can never be shaken by dreamers or miracle workers. We pay no attention to them. Based on the rationally satisfying demonstration of Sinai we remain faithful to God through His wisdom and knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Our creed is that of His

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most righteous prophet may perform them, they instill no belief. His credence harks back to only one source—Sinai.

<sup>12</sup>See the concept of love of God as described by Maimonides Code, Laws of the Foundations of Torah Chapter II 1,2, and our elaboration on this theme in "Why one should learn Torah."

<sup>13</sup>When visiting the Rockefeller Medical Institute, Albert Einstein met with Dr. Alexis Carrel, whose extracurricular interests were spiritualism and extrasensory perception. Observing that, Einstein was unimpressed. Carrel said, "But Doctor what would you say if you observed this phenomenon yourself?" To which Einstein replied, "I still would not believe it." (Clark, Ronald W. *Einstein: The Life and Times*. (New York: 1971, Avon Books) p. 642). Why would the great scientist not capitulate even to evidence? It is a matter of one's total framework. The true man of science who sees knowledge permeating the entire universe from the smallest particle to the largest galaxies will not be shaken from his view by a few paltry facts even though he

eternal and infinite law. When we perfect ourselves in this manner we can say that we truly love God with all our hearts and with all our soul. We then serve God through the highest part of our nature, the Divine element He placed in our soul.

## V

We have so far dealt with the actuality of the event at Sinai and with the nature of this event. We must now concern ourselves with the purpose of this event. When the Jews received the Torah at Sinai they uttered two words, *naaseh v'nishma*, we will do and we will hear, the latter meaning we will learn, understand, and comprehend. The commitment was not just one of action or performance but was one of pursuit of knowledge of the Torah. Rabbi Jonah of Gerundi asks,<sup>14</sup> How can one do if he doesn't understand? A performance of a rational person requires as a prerequisite knowledge of that performance. Rabbi Jonah answers: The event at Sinai served as a verification of the truth of Torah. The Torah set up a system of scholarship to which its ideas are entrusted. "We will do" means we will accept the authority of the scholars of Torah concerning proper religious performance until we can understand ourselves by way of knowledge why these performances are correct. The commitment of *naaseh* is preliminary until we reach the *nishma*, our own understanding. Our ultimate objective is the full understanding of this corpus of knowledge known as Torah. We gain knowledge of Torah by applying our intellects to its study and investigation. The study of Torah and the understanding of its principles is a purely rational and cognitive process. All Halakhic decisions are based on human reason alone.

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may not be able to explain them. Only the ignorant are moved by such "evidence." In a similar manner miracles do not affect a man of Torah who is rooted in Sinai and God's infinite wisdom. His credo is his cogito.

<sup>14</sup>Rebbeinu Yonah Avos III 9.

Until rather recently the greatest minds of our people devoted themselves to Torah study. Since the tradition of our people has lost popularity, the great intellectual resources of our people have been directed to science, mathematics, psychology, and other secular areas from which eminent thinkers emerged. In former years our intellectual resources produced great Torah intellects like Maimonides, Rabbeinu Tam, and Nachmanides. In modern times these same resources produced eminent secular giants like Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, and Sigmund Freud. I mention this so that the layman may have some understanding of the intellectual level of our scholars, for just as it is impossible to appreciate the intellect of an Einstein unless one has great knowledge of physics, it is impossible to appreciate the great minds of Torah unless one has attained a high level of Torah knowledge.

The greatest thinkers of science all share a common experience of profound intellectual humility. Isaac Newton said that he felt like a small boy playing by the sea while the "whole ocean of truth" rolled on before him. Albert Einstein said, "One thing I have learned in a long life: that all our science measured against reality is primitive and childlike—and yet it is the most precious thing we have." The human mind can not only ascertain what it knows, it can appreciate the extent and enormity of what it does not know. A great mind can sense the depth of that into which it is delving. In Torah one can find the same experience. The greatest Torah minds throughout the centuries have all had the realization that they are only scratching the surface of a vast and infinite body of knowledge. As the universe is to the physicist, Torah is to the Talmudist. Just as the physicist when formulating his equations can sense their crudeness against the vast reality he is attempting to penetrate, so too the Talmudist in formulating his abstractions comes in sight of the infinite world of Halakhic thought. As the Midrash states, "It is far greater than the earth and wider than the sea, and it increases infinitely." The reason for both experiences is the same. They both derive from God's infinite knowledge.

Let me elaborate further on this point. When the scientist ponders the phenomena of nature and proceeds to unravel them, he finds that with the resolution of each problem new worlds open up for him. The questions and seeming contradictions he observes in nature are gateways that guide him to greater understanding, forcing him to establish new theories which, if correct, shed light on an even wider range of phenomena. New scientific truths are discovered. The joy of success is, however, short-lived, as new problems, often of even greater immensity, emerge on the horizon of investigation. He is not dissuaded by this situation because he considers his new insight invaluable and looks forward with even greater anticipation to future gains in knowledge. The scientist is propelled by his faith that nature is not at odds with itself, that the world makes sense, and that all problems, no matter how formidable in appearance, must eventually yield to an underlying intelligible system, one that is capable of being grasped by the human mind. His faith is amply rewarded as each success brings forth new and even more amazing discoveries. He proceeds in his infinite task.

When studying man-made systems, such as United States Constitutional Law or British Common Law, this is not the case. The investigator here is not involved in an infinite pursuit. He either reaches the end of his investigation or he comes upon problems that do not lend themselves to further analysis; they are attributable to the shortcomings of the designers of the system. The man-made systems exhibit no depth beyond the intellect of their designers. Unlike science, real problems in these systems do not serve as points of departure for new theoretical insights but lead instead to dead ends.

Those who are familiar with the study of Torah know that the Talmudist encounters the same situation as the scientific investigator. Here difficulties do not lead to dead ends; on the contrary, with careful analysis apparent contradictions give way to new insights, opening up new highways

of intellectual thought. Wider ranges of Halakhic phenomena become unified while new problems come to light. The process is infinite. The greatest human minds have had this experience when pondering the Talmud; indeed, the greater the mind, the greater the experience. We are dealing with a corpus of knowledge far beyond the ultimate grasp of mortal man. It is this experience, this firsthand knowledge of Torah, that has been the most intimate source of faith for Torah scholars throughout the ages.

The ultimate conviction that Torah is the word of God derives from an intrinsic source, the knowledge of Torah itself. Of course this source of conviction is only available to the Torah scholar. But God wants us all to be scholars. This is only possible if we do the *nishma*, the ultimate purpose of the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

The revelation at Sinai, while carefully structured by the Creator to appeal to man's rational principle to move him only by his *Tzelem Elokim*, is only a prelude to the ultimate direct and personal realization of the Torah as being the work of the Almighty. The revelation at Sinai was necessary to create the *naaseh* which is the bridge to the *nishma* where anyone can gain firsthand knowledge of Torah and the truth it contains. As Rabbi Soloveitchick once said, the study of Torah is a "rendezvous with the Almighty". When we begin to comprehend the philosophy of Torah we may also begin to appreciate how the revelation at Sinai was structured by God in the only way possible to achieve the goals of the Torah—to create a religion, forever secure, by means of which man worships God through the highest element in his nature.

## Postscript

A statement of Nachmanides warrants inclusion here. Nachmanides says that we can infer the truth of the Torah from the principle that a person would not bequeath a falsehood to his children. At first sight this seems inexplicable. Idolatry could also avail itself of the same argument. We must obviously say that the principle, it may be true, must be amended to read *a person would not transmit intentionally a falsehood to his children*. How then does this show Judaism is true? All religious people believe their religion is true and that they are bestowing the greatest blessing on their children by conveying to them their most cherished beliefs.

The words of Nachmanides become clear when we realize that his inference is based on a certain level of Torah knowledge. Either the emotions or the intellect generates a belief. But Torah is a vast system of knowledge with concepts, postulates, and axioms. If such a system were fabricated it would have to be done so intentionally. Nachmanides therefore states his proposition that a person does not bequeath a falsehood to his children.

For the purpose of Nachmanides' inference, one would have to attain at least a basic familiarity with Torah. The ultimate recognition of Torah as a science would of necessity require a higher degree of knowledge. Nachmanides' proof is partially intrinsic, whereas the demonstration of Torah from Sinai is totally extrinsic. There are then three levels of knowledge of Torah from Sinai: the demonstration, the intrinsic verification through knowledge, and that of Nachmanides.

## Epilogue

Torah completely satisfies the needs of the *Tzelem Elokim* in man's nature. Every human mind craves Torah. Man was created for it (see tractate Sanhedrin 99b). Following the example of Maimonides, who said "Listen to the truth from whomever said it (Intro to Avos)," and his son Reb Avraham, who endorsed the study of Aristotle in the areas in which he does not disagree with Torah,<sup>15</sup> I take the liberty to quote Bertrand Russell: "The world has need of a philosophy or a religion which will promote life. But in order to promote life it is necessary to value something other than mere life. Life devoted only to life is animal, without any real human value, incapable of preserving men permanently from weariness and the feeling that all is vanity. If life is to be fully human it must serve some end which seems, in some sense, outside human life, some end which is impersonal and above mankind, such as God or truth or beauty. Those who best promote life do not have life for their purpose. They aim rather at what seems like a gradual incarnation, a bringing into our human existence of something eternal, something that appears to the imagination to live in a heaven remote from strife and failure and the devouring jaws of time. Contact with the eternal world—even if it be only a world of our imagining— brings a strength and a fundamental peace which cannot be wholly destroyed by the struggles and apparent failures of our temporal life."<sup>16</sup>

Torah makes our lives worthwhile. It gives us contact with the eternal world of God, truth, and the beauty of His ideas. Unlike Russell the agnostic, we do not have to satisfy ourselves with a world of "our imagining" but with the world of reality— God's creation. How fortunate we are and how meaningful are the words we recite each day, "for they [the Torah and mitzvos] are our lives and the length of our days."

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<sup>15</sup>Concerning books that are proscribed, this follows the precedent of the Talmud [Sanhedrin 110b], *mili mealyesah deis baih darshinon*—those true things that are contained in them we do study.

<sup>16</sup>Schlipp, Paul R. *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*. (LaSalle: 1989, Open Court Publishing). p.533.