

# How Do We Know Judaism is the True Religion?

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On Shavuot we celebrate *Zman Matan Torateinu*, God's giving of the Torah to Israel, which has served throughout the ages as the most cogent basis for belief. Throughout history, philosophers have attempted to uncover various theological proofs, based on deductive reasoning or philosophical speculation. One of the most well-known arguments, the Argument by Design, claims that the sophistication and intricacies of the universe could not have happened by chance and, therefore, *implies* the existence of a Divine designer. Each of these proofs speculates that, because of our experience in this world, there must be a God, but none conclusively demonstrate the existence of the Deity. God's mass revelation on Sinai, however, was witnessed by all of Israel and, therefore, demands no speculation.

Yehuda HaLevi (also referred to by his acronym, Rihal, 1075-1141) argues that one cannot achieve religious truth solely through philosophical speculation, but rather arrives at belief as a result of historical experience. For HaLevi, ideal faith is that which is clear without philosophical speculation, exemplified by the faith of the Jewish People which is based on eye-witness testimony and, therefore, requires neither proof nor [philosophical] demonstration. In his book, *Sefer HaKuzari*, HaLevi juxtaposes Judaism to the other prevalent religions of the medieval period through the story of a foreign king's search for the true religion. In this tale, the king reports to having persistent dreams in which an angel of God reveals to him: "Your (intention) is indeed pleasing to the Creator, but your way of acting is not pleasing. (Kuzari 1:1)"

Due to the lowly status afforded to the Jewish people at the time, the king investigates Aristotelian philosophy, Christianity, Islam and only then Judaism, in pursuit of a religion to call his own. The king initially approaches the Philosopher who discounts the angel's message on three grounds: God cannot disfavor human actions, God is not concerned with the individual, and human contemplation (intentions) is superior to physical actions.

*There is no favor or dislike in God, because He is above  
desire and intention. For an intention intimates a desire in*

אין אצל הבורא לא רצון ולא שנאה כי הוא  
נעלה מכל החפצים ומכל הכונות, כי הכונה

*the intending person: by the fulfillment of this desire he becomes complete; as long as it remains unfulfilled, he is incomplete. In a similar way God is, in the opinion of the philosophers, above the knowledge of individuals, because they change with the times and there is no change in God's knowledge. He does not know you, much less your intentions and actions, nor does He listen to your prayers or see your movements... Endeavor to reach true knowledge of things, in order that your intellect may become active.*

**Kuzari 1:1**

מורה על חסרון המכוין וכי השלמת כונתו שלמות לו ובעוד שלא תשלם הוא חסר, וכן הוא נעלה אצל הפילוסופים מידיעת חלקי הדברים מפני שהם משתנים עם העתים ואין בידיעת הבורא שנוי. והוא אינו יודע אותך כל שכן שידע כונתך ומעשיך וכל שכן שישמע תפלתך ויראה תנועותיך ... וכללו של דבר בקש זך הלב באיזה אופן שיתכן לך אחרי אשר תבין כללי החכמות על אמתתם. ואז תגיע אל בקשתך, ר"ל הדבק ברוחני ר"ל השכל הפועל.

**ספר הכוזרי א:א**

The Philosopher explains that the king should not heed the angel's message and concern himself with finding a religion of deeds since the contemplative life will enable him to achieve perfection. Unsatisfied with that response, the king approaches the Christian who attests to the divine origin of the Torah, but not its continued validity. He claims that while Israel had been the chosen nation, due to their sins, they have been rejected by God and replaced by the Christians, led by their prophet, Jesus.

*In short: I believe in all that is written in the Torah and the other books of the Israelites, which are undisputed, because they are generally accepted as everlasting and have been revealed before a vast multitude. Subsequently, the Divinity became embodied in the womb of a noble Israelite virgin; she bore Him having the semblance of a human being, which concealed nevertheless a divinity, seemingly a prophet, but in reality a God sent forth. He is the Messiah, whom we call the Son of God, and He is the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.*

**Kuzari 1:4**

וכללו של דבר בכל מה שבא בתורה ובספרי בני ישראל אשר אין ספק באמתתם, בעבור פרסומם והתמדתם והגלותם בהמונים גדולים. ובאחריתם ובעקבותם נגשמה האלהות, והיה עובר ברחם בתולה מנשיאות בני ישראל, וילדה אותו אנושי הנראה אלהי הנסתר, נביא שלוח בנראה, אלוה שלוח בנסתר, והוא המשיח הנקרא בן אלהים והוא האב והבן והוא רוח הקדש

**ספר הכוזרי א:ד**

The Christian's argument failed to convince the king since Christianity originated in Judaism and Christian beliefs were based on the hearsay of revelations presented to one individual. The king then approaches the Muslim, who, like the Christian, attests to the Divine origin of the Torah. He, too, claims that while Israel had been the chosen nation, Muhammed became the 'seal' of the prophets. Additionally, he argues that the beauty and sophistication of the language of the Koran reflects Divine authorship.

*We acknowledge the Unity and Eternity of God and that all men are derived from Adam and Noah. We absolutely reject embodiment (of God), and if any element of this appears in the Writ, explain it as metaphoric, serving to make the doctrine acceptable to our comprehension. At the same time we maintain that our Book (Koran) is the Speech of God,*

אנחנו מקיימים האחדות והקדמות לאלהים ית', והחדוש לעולם, והיחס אל אדם ונח, ונרחיק הגשמות בכלל, ואם יראה ממנו שום דבר בדברינו, נפרשהו ונאמר כי הוא דרך העברה וקירוב, עם הודאתנו, כי ספר תורתנו דברי אלהים, והוא בעצמו מופת, התחייבנו בקבולו

*being itself a miracle which we are bound to accept for its own sake, since no one is able to produce anything comparable to it, or to one of its verses. Our prophet is the Seal of the prophets, who abrogated every previous law, and invited all nations to embrace Islam.*

**Kuzari 1:5**

בעבור עצמו, מפני שאין אדם יכול לחבר ספר אחר כמוהו, ולא כפרשה אחת מפרשיותיו, ושנביאנו הוא חותם הנביאים ומבטל כל תורה שקדמה, וקורא כל האומות אל תורת ישמעאל  
**ספר הכוזרי א:ה**

The king is not persuaded by the Muslim since Islam, like Christianity, has Jewish origins and the Divine nature of the language of the Koran is not perceptible to he who is illiterate in Arabic. Unsatisfied with the responses of each of the respective religions' adherents, he feels compelled to inquire about Judaism and the Old Testament, despite its despised status, since it had been acknowledged by the Christian and Muslim respondents as the origin of their respective faiths. The Jew's convincing argument of the legitimacy of his religion to the king is not based on philosophical proofs, but rather based on the collective national experience of God's intervention throughout Jewish history.

*I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the Israelites out of Egypt with signs and miracles; who fed them in the desert and gave them the [Holy] Land, after having made them traverse the sea and the Jordan in a miraculous way; who sent Moses with His Law, and subsequently thousands of prophets, who confirmed His law by promises to those who observed, and threats to the disobedient. We believe in what is contained in the Torah- a very large domain.*

**Kuzari I:11**

אני מאמין באלהי אברהם יצחק ויעקב אשר הוציא את בני ישראל באותות ובמופתים ממצרים וכלכלם במדבר והנחילם את ארץ כנען אחרי אשר העבירם את הים ואת הירדן במופתים רבים ואשר שלח אליהם את משה בתורתו ואחריו אלפי נביאים שכלם קראו אל תורתו ביעדם שכר טוב לכל שומרה וענש לכל עובר עליה אנחנו מאמינים בכל הכתוב בתורה הזאת והדברים ארכים:

**כוזרי א:יא**

HaLevi argues that the superiority of Judaism over other religions is demonstrated by the fact that the Jews were the only nation to experience a mass Divine revelation which has been recounted throughout the generations by an unbroken chain of tradition, (which HaLevi equates with experience). Therefore, the chosenness of the Jews cannot be disputed because it was publicly seen and transmitted without dissent by thousands of people, as opposed to the more private revelatory experiences of the other major contending faiths, in which there were few (if any) witnesses. Everyone, including Christians and Muslims, concede that God had participated in the history and redemption of the Jewish people. This authentic and undisputed historical tradition of the Jewish faith provides the most certain foundation for truth.

HaLevi chose to describe the God of Judaism as He who redeemed the Jews from Egypt and revealed His Torah to them on Sinai, instead of the Creator of Heavens and Earth, since the Divine creation is speculative and, unlike the former, has not been experienced or proven. HaLevi elaborates how experience and tradition, the preservation of that experience, reflects the truth through an analogy. He explains to the king that one would only be convinced of the existence, beneficence and justice of another king if one had personally experienced demonstrations of such

attributes. For instance, if a messenger brought him presents which were only procurable in that king's particular country, including drugs to cure diseases and preserve health, accompanied by a letter in which it was explicitly stated from whom it comes, he could be persuaded about the concern and generosity of such a monarch. HaLevi reveals that the king of another country represents God, his country reflects God's dominion, the messenger who brings the goods is Moses, the letter testifying to its authenticity is the Torah and the medicine to cure disease is the commandments prescribed in the Torah. Just as it would be incumbent upon the recipient king to acknowledge his indebtedness, appreciation and intentions to use such goods for their intended purpose, so too, HaLevi argues, we must recognize our indebtedness and appreciation to God and our commitment to act in the world according to His commandments. Convinced that Judaism must be the way of life with deeds that would be pleasing to God, the king embraces Judaism and wins over many members of his nation.

HaLevi wrote his work, which he subtitled, *The Kuzari: The Book of Argument and Proof In Defense of a Despised Religion*, for the Jews in his generation (late 11th century) who were the object of political oppression and religious disrespect in the wake of the bloody conflicts generated by the Reconquista and First Crusade. Through his book, he sought to restore to the Jewish people the exalted status that they had achieved on Mt Sinai. HaLevi's reaffirmation of the authenticity and superiority of Judaism was intended to strengthen the commitment of the Jews of his time and give them the fortitude to defend their beliefs against the rival truth claims and coercive proselytizing by the other religions. His book is not a defense of the despised religion, but rather in defense of the chosen religion.

While critics have characterized HaLevi's description of the exclusivity of the chosenness of the Jewish people to be racist, the Divine selection of the Jews need not be viewed in such a manner. HaLevi's understanding of Israel's eternal status as God's '*am segula*' [chosen nation] was to serve as a constant reminder of their historic experience as the only people of the ancient world worthy of God's public communication of His will to mankind. As such, HaLevi elaborates that the Jews' chosenness, as a result of their acceptance of the covenant on Sinai, does not make the Jewish people racially superior to other nations, but rather serves as a challenge for the Jews to be morally exemplary in order to fulfill their side of the mutual partnership with God. The covenant does not afford privileges to the Jews, but rather demands special responsibilities of them. To fulfill their commitment to God, Israel must worship God alone and obey His laws. In return, God assures Israel protection, national survival and prosperity in their homeland. It is this covenant that we commemorate on Shavuot. Not only do we celebrate God's selection of the Jewish people and bestowal of His Torah upon them, but we remind ourselves of our commitment to the *brit* with God that we sealed by our ancestors' response of '*naaseh v'nishmah*'. We can only maintain our exalted status as God's '*am segula*' if we live up to our promise of obedience to the Torah which has been continuously reaffirmed throughout the generations through an unbroken chain of tradition.

While HaLevi argues that religious experience is far superior to deductive reasoning in forming the basis for religious commitment, he does not discount philosophy altogether. Rather, he is warning the reader not to ground his faith solely in philosophical speculation which can be

inconclusive or unstable since philosophy cannot solve every theological problem. He explains that it is preferable to base one's faith on experience, or on the tradition of historical experience, and then seek philosophical or rational understanding to enhance or further substantiate one's commitment.

In contemporary Jewish philosophy, a distinction has been made between 'Belief That' and 'Belief In' theology. 'Belief That' is the intellectual acceptance that certain propositions about God are true, while 'Belief In' describes a feeling or a commitment to God based on experience. In the Medieval times in which HaLevi lived, the 'Belief That' theology became popular as philosophical speculation became more prevalent in the enlightened culture. HaLevi, feared that Jews would base their faith on such philosophical speculation which could be fragile and potentially harmful since it could lead to doubt. He, therefore, attempted to restore the 'Belief In' theology of Biblical and Rabbinic times, in which one believed because one had been experientially convinced of the truth. As Rabbi Norman Lamm explains in 'Faith and Doubt':

Hence, while it is a religious virtue (mitzvah) to adumbrate the rational foundations of Judaism, the way to regain a faith beset by doubts, where cognitive efforts have failed, is to reverse the situation of the believer-doubter from a belief-that frame to a belief-in situation, to go from the periphery to the core, to relocate himself from the outer world where the object of faith is an It to the inner sanctum of relation where the object of faith is not an object at all but the holy Thou.

After achieving the 'Belief In' commitment, one can then seek intellectual, philosophical understanding to further enhance religious meaning.

HaLevi wrote *The Kuzari* in order to reaffirm the imperative of the 'Belief In' theology based on experience and expressed through the perpetuation of that tradition. By contrasting Judaism to the other religions, HaLevi demonstrates that religious experience, the source of our faith, is precisely what makes Judaism the chosen and authentic religion. It is this 'Belief In' theology that we celebrate on Shavuot, as we reflect upon the mass Divine Revelation of *Matan Torah*. By reliving our historical experience every year, we act as a link in the unbroken chain of tradition and allow the legacy of our ancestors to live on.

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