

Good shabbos

A few months ago, you may have noticed in the Sunday NYT a two-page advertisement by the Templeton Foundation. It posed the question whether science made belief in God obsolete, and provided snippets of answers from a number of prominent thinkers. They collected 13 essays on the topic, all worth reading, and I commend you to the Foundation's website, www.templeton.org, and urge you to read the essays collected there after *shabbos*. This is a big question and an important one – one that many (perhaps most of us) have confronted in late-night dormitory conversations or quiet moments of private reflection. Is faith compatible with reason?

It's a question that has been much in vogue recently. The Templeton materials followed on the heels of a spate of books that came out in late 2006 and early 2007 – *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins, *God is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens, and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, by Sam Harris. The books differ from one another in tone, in erudition, and in theory to some degree, but all of them argue in essence that to believe in God, today – in the 21st century of the common era – 400 years after Isaac Newton – more than a century after Einstein's breakthroughs – nearly 40 years after man vaulted himself into the heavens and walked on the moon – is a defiance of reason. A defiance born of ignorance, or of delusion.

All of these books see religion, and belief in God as a primitive state in the development of the human intellect. They view the developments of science since the Enlightenment as settling the question once and for all. They are mystified, even angered, by the persistence of the “primitive” state of faith in light of the triumph of reason.

But the question – and the history of humans’ struggle with it -- is older than the advance of reason that settles the question for Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and their ilk. Our parsha today – its very name, *chukkas* – was for our sages the jumping off point for confronting this very question two millenia ago.

Chukkat, is a form, of course, of the root *chok* (*chet-ko- heh*), meaning “engrave”, which we encounter often in our davening, before and after the *shema*. In particular, we thank God, in the *ahavas olam b’racha* of *ma’ariv*, for *chukkim u’mishpatim*.

Depending on which siddur you consult, you’ll see different translations for *chukkim u’mishpatim*. Art Scroll translates it as “ordinances and decrees”; Sim Shalom has it as “statutes and laws.” But what’s striking about the translations, whether you look in Art Scroll or Sim Shalom, or some other, is that the two words are translated into English with words that seem like synonyms. It seems a kind of lawyerly excess verbiage like “give, devise, and bequeath.”

But the rabbis in reading scripture hold that every word has a distinct purpose – God, unlike we lawyers, does not waste words. And so too with the *berakhot*. In the Talmud, and thus in the Torah itself, *chok* and *mishpat* are not synonyms. Each is a type of *mitzvah* – and every *mitzvah* is one or the other – either a *chok* or a *mishpat*. The latter, *mishpatim*, are those *mitzvos* whose rationale is apparent – the bans on murder and theft, for example; the command to establish judges; the requirement to pay damages for harming another’s property. These commands would be part of any enlightened society, God or no God. But by far the larger class are the *chukkim*, those of God’s commandments whose rationale is opaque to us. (*Bavli, Yoma 67b*; Rambam, *Hilchos Me’ilah 8:8*) And today’s parsha, concerning the laws of the *parah adumah*, the red

heifer, is about perhaps the ultimate *chok*. The tradition holds that even King Solomon, the greatest *chochom* of them all, could not fathom a rationale for these laws.

How is the rational mind to respond to such a command? Even at two years old, I am lately reminded, a child is unsatisfied when the response to her plea of “why” is an imperious “because I said so.” Even more so then, might an intelligent adult struggle when told – commanded, in fact – that she may not have not have ice cream for dessert if she had chicken for dinner, or may not wear a garment made of wool and linen..

One response – the only reasonable one according to the Hitchens/Harris/Dawkins argument – is to reject those commandments and the belief system which gave rise to them out of hand

The tradition, however, recognizes no distinction in obligation between *chok* and *mishpat*. We are required to keep them all. Is this not a rejection of reason? Doing not because the thing makes sense, but merely because it is what we are told to do?

The question occurred to the Rambam 900 years ago. And if you know anything of the Rambam, it must be this: the cornerstone of his entire philosophical edifice was that reason and faith not only can be reconciled, but must be. He is part of a philosophic tradition stretching back to Aristotle, and having its Catholic cognate too, in St. Thomas Aquinas. His commentary on the *chukkim* in the *Mishneh Torah* refutes the argument that faith is incompatible with reason.

The Rambam describes four attitudes toward the *chukkim*, only one of which is, in his view, correct. [*Hilchos Temurah*, 4:14]. He ignores a fifth possibility, but more on that in minute. He describes three groups of people who relate incorrectly to the *chukkim*.

1. Those who, perceiving no rational reason for the *chukkim*, keep them grudgingly, denigrating them as less important than the *mishpatim*
2. Those who, perceiving no rational reason for the *chukkim*, speculatively ascribe mystical, ethereal, supernatural reasons to them, elevating them in importance above the *mishpatim*.
3. Those who observe the *chukkim* perfunctorily, without complaint or much thought about them at all.

What have they in common? – all three fail to engage the *chukkim* with reason. The first group see God as commanding whimsically, without reason; the second group see Him as commanding mysteriously with reasons that can be apparent only to divine, and not human intelligence. The third group, perhaps the greatest sin of them all, don't even bother to wonder about the reasons.

What then is the correct attitude, according to the Rambam? To bring all the reason, and intellect, and logic one can muster to bear on the question of what God's reasons are, so that when we keep the *chukkim*, we can perform them as if they were commanded by our intellect. That's not to say that it's easy to do, and I won't attempt to do so today. I haven't half the *chochma* or the learning to do it.

But I do want to suggest that the struggle to do it, to understand Gods' mind, has been the occupation of thinking Jews since long before the Enlightenment, before the Renaissance, before the rise of Greece and Rome. If we, after all, are created *b'tselem elokhim*, in the image of God, then so too were our minds created in the image of his

mind. He gave us the gift of reason so that we could know His mind. Our God is a rational God.

Now I mentioned that the Rambam did not even consider a fifth possibility – that of rejecting the whole system because of its obvious irrationality. How could he? For him, for observant Jews today, God's existence is what legal philosophers sometimes call a *Grundnorm*, a foundational principle accepted without proof. But the Rambam's reasoning is, I think, a compelling demonstration that when we gather together in this beautiful and sacred space to engage our Creator, we need not – indeed we must not – check reason at the door. We must engage him not only with our hearts and souls but with our minds.

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