

Does Revelation Satisfy the ‘Why Be Jewish’ Question?



This is the seventh essay of 18Forty's new "Faith in Reason" series with Rabbi Steven Gotlib, released every month. Sign up for it [here](#), and read the sixth essay [here](#).

This series has until now focused on broad philosophical questions. From here on, though, we are applying that methodology to important topics within Judaism itself. The question of why be Jewish is most fundamental.

It's so fundamental a question that recent discourse has largely switched from asking why *be* Jewish to why *do* Jewish. One example is a recent book by Zack Bodner, CEO of Palo Alto JCC, literally titled just that: *Why Do Jewish?* He argues that Judaism should not be passive, but "has to be action-oriented, as Judaism is so much more fulfilling when one embraces *doing* it." That realization led Bodner to suggest "a model for.., how to "plug-in" Jews of all backgrounds to meaningful and joyous Jewish experiences, and how to make it relevant for any age" that he defines through the acronym "TACHLIS": Tikkun Olam, Art and Culture, Community, Holidays and Rituals, Learning, Israel, and Shabbat and Spirituality.

Lest one assume this is only the case within liberal Jewish denominations, Orthodoxy perennially faces questions about how to handle the "socially Orthodox" within our own communities. Perhaps there is something to this argument. Judaism, after all, often stresses the value of doing things not for their own sake leading to doing them for their own sake. One may also argue, as Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin does, that "Religious integrity is not determined by the door through which you enter, or even the length of your stay. Our momentary religious experiences are meaningful, regardless of their motivations or durations." As he asks in the same piece, though, "If religion is only a blanket to provide warmth from the cold, harsh realities of life, did concerns of theological truth and creed even matter?"

For Judaism to be more than just a series of actions that one can engage with sometimes and disregard the rest of the time, it needs to be more than just a lifestyle choice. It has to be rooted in a certain threshold of confidence that it is *the* proper way for a Jew to live. Is it possible to construct an understanding of Judaism that takes this into account and also stands up to skeptical scrutiny?

Two Roads to Objectivity

Without utilizing subjective arguments or invoking some form of relativism, I would say that there are two primary ways to defend adherence to Judaism over other religions: One is that Judaism is the *most efficient* (though not the exclusive) path to connect with and channel divinity in our lives while also achieving a level of true understanding of reality, and the second is that Judaism is the *only* acceptable path to that end.

Many identify the first position with Maimonides, who wrote in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:51)

that “all such religious acts as reading the Law, praying, and the performance of other precepts, serve exclusively as the means of causing us to occupy and fill our mind with the precepts of God, and free it from worldly business; for we are thus, as it were, in communication with God, and undisturbed by any other thing.” This can be read as saying that there may well be other ways to reach that same end but that Jewish practices are uniquely designed to get us there quickly and naturally.

The second position presents Judaism as the ideal mode of worship and the only correct theology but also provides room for categories like *Bnei Noach*, *Ger Toshav*, etc. Non-Jews, in other words, to still fit into the religious framework. I will present an argument for this second position below.

Judaism Starts With the Beginning

In one of our initial essays, we discussed several arguments for God’s existence. (For a full unpacking, visit that essay.) One of them, the Modal Ontological argument, could be used to get from the *possibility* of a Necessary Being, which grounds reality and wants the best for it, to the *certainty* of such a Being. From thereon, it’s a relatively simple assumption that such a being would communicate their will to humanity.

An all-good being, after all, would no doubt want to maximize goodness in the world and the most effective way to do so would be making their will known. So if one believes that God intervenes in history (by, for example, freeing the Jews from Egypt or supporting the creation and blossoming of the State of Israel), then it, in the words of Christian philosopher Richard Swinburne, is “very hard to see how it would be of great use to us for God to reveal himself in history... unless we could understand the cosmic significance of what happened... And how are we to know that unless with the history God provides its interpretation?”

It makes sense, as well, for such a revelation to be given in a language that humanity could understand and respond to. Heschel articulates this well in *God in Search of Man*:

Some people may wonder: why was the light of God given in the form of language? How is it conceivable that the divine should be contained in such brittle vessels as consonants and vowels? This question betrays the sins of our age: to treat lightly the ether which carries the light-waves of the spirit. What else in the world is as capable of bringing man and man together over the distances in space and in time? Of all things on earth, words alone never die. They have so little matter and so much meaning.

The Bible does not deal with divinity but with humanity. Addressing human beings about human affairs, whose language should be employed if not man’s? And yet, it is as if God took these Hebrew words and breathed into them His power, and the words became a live wire charged with His spirit. To this very day they are hyphens between heaven and earth.

Additionally, as he wrote elsewhere, we believe that “the infinite God is intimately concerned with finite man and his finite deeds; that nothing is irrelevant in the eyes of God... If we are ready to believe that it is God who requires us “to love kindness,” is it more difficult to believe that God requires us to hallow the Sabbath and not to violate its sanctity?” Indeed, “if God is real, then He is able to express His will unambiguously.”

But Judaism is not the only religion that believes in Divine revelation! How, then, can we know which of the many reported revelations of God to humanity is the true one?

Evaluating the Revelation Proof

In his kiruv classic, *Permission to Receive: Four Rational Approaches to the Torah's Divine Origin*, Rabbi Lawrence Kelemen argued that “those who wish to evaluate a religion’s credibility can begin by examining its revelation narrative. They need only ask how difficult it would be to fabricate such a story.” Judaism’s particular narrative, in which God reveals Himself to over two million individuals, would seem quite difficult to fake. Harder to fake, in fact, than any other report of miracles or divine revelation in any religion currently known to us. This argument is most famously associated with Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi’s *Kuzari*.

However, that argument alone is circular since the only historical source of such a narrative is the Torah itself. While it makes a fair amount of intuitive sense that one could have disproved the Torah’s tale at any time by simply asking older generations for confirmation, it is not exactly a philosophically rigorous argument. Recently, philosopher Tyron Goldshmidt has proposed an augmented version of the argument as follows:

A tradition is likely true if it is (1) accepted by a nation; (2) describes a national experience of a previous generation of that nation; which (3) would be expected to create continuous national memory until the tradition is in place; is (4) insulting to that nation; and (5) makes universal, difficult, and severe demands on that nation.

This argument (also utilized by philosopher Sam Lebens in his various arguments for Judaism) escapes circularity by presenting a list of features one can compare in historical documents. If these five criteria are matched, one can safely assume it is true. If they do not, one can safely assume it is false. The value of this argument is that it is empirical—it can be researched and tested ad nauseam.

This is still not a perfect argument. Philosopher Yehuda Gellman is one notable critic. Acknowledging that it points towards “an intuitive likelihood that *something* of utmost religious importance took place back then,” he does not think it goes so far as to prove the historicity of any particular narratives in the Torah for various reasons (outlined by me here).

But our concern in this essay is not whether everything in the Torah happened exactly as reported, but whether or not the Torah can be said to represent a legitimate revelation from God to humanity. On that note, even ardent biblical critics like professors James Kugel and Benjamin Sommer believe in good faith that God revealed Himself to the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai.

From there, Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi noted that “the miracles experienced by the Children of Israel [including said revelation] are the entire proof to any believer in the Bible that there is a God in the world” including all variations of Christianity and Islam, both of which include the Torah itself in their scriptures and attempt to use it in support of their later additions. Swinburne acknowledges that as well, writing that “the major Western religions all claim that God has intervened in history in order to reveal truths to humans; and they normally add that he has established a mechanism which to some degree or in some way will ensure the preservation of these truths among humans. Jews

claim that God intervened in history with Abraham and Moses, and that he revealed truths preserved subsequently by the Jewish people in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Christian Old Testament). Christians accept that... [and] Islam also recognizes to some degree Jewish and even Christian claims.”

Given that the Torah itself explicitly states that it will never be superseded, altered, or replaced, there are inherent philosophical defeaters against any of the non-Jewish interpretations that have attempted to use it for support. Religions like Christianity, which assume the Torah's laws are no longer binding, or religions like Islam, which significantly alter the text, then do not even get off the ground.

A Necessary Caveat

The above position assumes that the revelation of God to the People of Israel from atop Mt. Sinai was a literal, historical event that led to the Jewish people accepting the Torah as the word of God and committing to live according to its dictates. That is the minimal assumption for this position to get off the ground. If one is prepared to make that assumption (as even many non-Orthodox scholars are), then one can follow the above logic to understand Judaism as to how God wants humanity to live. Other religions simply do not get off the ground if the Torah can properly be understood as reflecting the Divine will.

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