

## Why We Do Jewish Philosophy



This is the final essay of 18Forty's "Faith in Reason" series with Rabbi Steven Gotlib. [Read the first essay here.](#)

When I was part of the Conservative Movement, one of my biggest intellectual influences was Rabbi Dr. Neil Gillman. He wrote in his classic book, *Sacred Fragments*, that theology, more than any field, "stems from personal reflection on the core issues of human living" and that, therefore, "every one of us is an authority" on the subject since we know our internal thoughts and beliefs better than anyone. As he wrote,

There is not a human being who has not wondered about God's existence and nature, who has not speculated about why "bad things happen to good people," who has not worried about the ultimate purpose of human life or about what happens after death, who has not struggled with moral dilemmas. All of these questions are at the heart of any theological inquiry.

Gillman appreciated that most Jews were "doing their own theology" but lamented that they were doing so in isolation rather than in conversation with the broader Jewish community, "not convinced that their personal theology is worth serious consideration by anyone else" and worrying that their ideas "are inappropriate, inauthentic, or even heretical." His express, career-long goal was "to bring all this private theologizing into the open, to stimulate further thought and study, and to provide a more systematic context in which it can be pursued."

Gillman suggested that his readers and students could better pursue Jewish theology by working in groups, putting their thoughts on paper, searching out books and teachers for further study, and (most importantly) sharing those positions with others. He closed the book with invaluable advice:

Most of all, don't be intimidated. Acknowledge that you have something to say about these questions that has value, at least to you, and write it down on paper. The process may be difficult, even painful, but it can also be exhilarating, and the sense of accomplishment you will feel at the end will make the struggle eminently worthwhile.

This series was the result of my continuing attempt to articulate a theology that is, in the famous words of Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, "Halakhically legitimate, philosophically persuasive, religiously inspiring, and personally convincing." The goal was to present a complete theological approach from first principles to contemporary Orthodox Judaism that was capable of acknowledging its own weaknesses and steel-manning, rather than straw-manning, alternative perspectives.

Rabbi Bashevkin invited me to pen this series following an appearance on the podcast and a popular article arguing what a Jewish theology of human consciousness could look like. The amount of positive feedback that both garnered showed that there was something of benefit to my approach that I couldn't quite believe—after all, I'm just some 28-year-old rabbi with no advanced academic training. Additionally, I was clear that I would not pull any punches and would quote thinkers both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, Jewish and non-Jewish. To my surprise and astonishment, Rabbi Bashevkin invited me to write nonetheless and his editor, Sruli Fruchter, masterfully kept us on schedule as the chaos of rabbinic life took hold.

After an introduction sharing my own background as a religious questioner, I presented my first formal argument: Despite the fact that belief in God (and the conclusions that follow from that belief) may be justified even without a preponderance of evidence, I would attempt to demonstrate at least a 50% chance that God exists. Doing so successfully would render theism, and eventually Judaism, a valid rational position to hold. From there, I examined the most popular arguments for God, countered the problem of evil, reviewed Judaism's conceptions of the afterlife, and argued that Jewish theology can accept a wide variety of beliefs about free will.

With God in the picture and common arguments against God's existence responded to, it was time to address specifically-Jewish substance. If the revelation at Mt. Sinai could be shown as plausible, then Judaism naturally flows from that. Other Abrahamic religions based on the Torah simply don't get off the ground since they go against the Torah's timeless teachings. From there, the question of Jewish denominations was addressed, and Orthodox Judaism was shown to be the most natural continuation of our Sinaitic teachings. The need for labeling oneself as "Orthodox" specifically, however, was questioned. The final entry in the series brought us into modern times, arguing that Zionism is an inherent part of the Jewish tradition.

Of course, there are subjects that this series was unable to explore. Two particular subjects I was often asked to address were responses to Biblical Criticism and apparent immorality in the Torah. These are interrelated questions, since if Biblical Criticism can be proven then the question of morality is irrelevant since human authors are obviously not 100% moral in the way that God would be. Both of those subjects are deeply interesting and would have fit into this series nicely, but have been addressed at length by Jewish thinkers such as Rabbi Dr. Joshua Berman in his book *Ani Maamin* and Rabbi Dr. Raphael Zarum in his book *Questioning Belief*.

The purpose of this 10-article series was not to answer every conceivable question that one might

have about the rationality of Jewish theology but to demonstrate that rational arguments for Orthodox Judaism from first principles exist, hold water, and can work for a wide variety of beliefs on a given subject. While one *can* choose to embrace an Orthodox life for purely pragmatic or emotional reasons, one need not have to. It is my hope that the series sufficiently showed that, as opposed to what some might argue, there is no need to sacrifice critical thinking on the altar of religion.

As the timeless teaching of Winston Churchill goes, “this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” If this series encouraged you to think more deeply about these topics, I encourage you to continue that thinking. Expand your library, embrace your curiosity, and bravely face your questions with the knowledge that it is not only alright but encouraged to have *faith in reason*.