

The Nature and Pursuit of Truth in Different Cultural Contexts¹

JEREMY KAGAN

I. THE FRAMEWORK

Leo Strauss carves out a space of legitimacy for the Torah within the framework of Western thought. He states that we cannot know that the Torah is true and it therefore lacks compelling certainty, what he describes as “the binding power peculiar to the known.” He argues, however, that it is still valid for us to believe it. For although the truth of the Torah cannot be proven through logic, it also cannot be refuted by logic. This is because the Torah works with different premises than our Western worldview and premises are not the product of logic.

There is much to say about the technical strengths and weaknesses of this approach from the perspective of the Western reasoning that is the context and basis of Strauss’ argument. I will leave that discussion to other contributors to this book. I wish to focus instead on the distortion of Torah that is introduced by judging it in this manner.

For when we attempt to justify the Torah using this kind of argument we view it as a piece, however incongruous, of the large puzzle of Western rationality. This both misrepresents and compromises the Torah. The Torah is part of a different puzzle. The Torah is not distinguished from

1. This essay is both a synopsis and further development of material I presented in the first half of my most recent book, *The Intellect And The Exodus: Authentic Emuna For A Complex Age* (Koren, 2018). A number of points raised are discussed in more detail in my previous book, *The Choice to Be: A Jewish Path to Self and Spirituality* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 2011), which is referenced periodically in this essay.

the Western philosophical vision merely by its differing premises. Rather, it emerged from a cultural context that engaged reality in a completely different way.

Western culture, beginning with the Greeks, anchored human consciousness in the intellect so that we structure our perception of reality through that capacity, with its very specific view of truth. Implicit in that mode of truth is the manner in which truth is reached – abstract reason and its more recent extension, scientific experimentation. The Torah's origins, however, reach back to the ancient civilizations of the Near East, when our consciousness was centered in a more essential area of personality, experiencing and interpreting reality through a very different lens.

That radically different experience implied its own concept of truth and how to attain it, which remains the defining mode of truth in the Torah. Rational thinking plays an important role in that quest, one of growing significance under the influence of Western society. But that rationality is and always will be part of a much larger picture and is deployed within a very different context of experience and thought.² This ancient form of truth has no less of a claim to validity than that of the Western model.

For although our present intellectual center has given us enormous power to manipulate our physical environment – something we interpret as establishing its objective authenticity – whatever truth modernity has is incomplete. More precisely, it is the truth of an incomplete engagement of reality. Processing experience through the intellect has cut us off from much of the depth and richness of human personality, the facets of reality accessible by these deeper aspects of self, and the forms of truth and modes of affecting our environment consistent with these depths.³ Rather than

2. *Shabbat* 31a–b: “Rabbah bar Rav Huna said, ‘All who have Torah but lack the fear of heaven are like a manager who was given the inner keys but was not given the outer keys. How will he enter?’ Rabbi Yannai announced, ‘Pity the one who has no house but has made a gate to the house.’” In this passage, *Torah* means understanding. Rabbah bar Rav Huna's position is that true understanding is only accessible when it comes in a context of man's awareness of his utter dependence upon God for existence. In other words, one cannot truly understand what he knows except in that context. Rabbi Yannai goes much further. He identifies the fear of heaven as the house (his dwelling, meaning his actual existence or being) with understanding no more than a gate to that house. Maharal in *Tiferet Yisrael* ch. 10 identifies Western rationalism with one that “has no house but has made a gate to the house.” See note 10.

3. The Torah's vision of reality is also validated by man's ability to powerfully impact

struggling to justify Torah in Western terms, we would do better to let the Torah be our gateway to these aspects of self – which have become obscured by Western consciousness – and allow Torah to justify itself on its own terms.

I do not mean by this to suggest that we somehow regress to a more ancient form of consciousness. Even were such a thing desirable, it is not possible. We have no choice but to live in the age into which we are born, experiencing reality refracted through the prism of that facet of personality which structures self in our time. In our case, this means through abstract rationality and autonomous individuality. But we need not be restricted to these exclusively. We can relate to them with sufficient detachment that they add perspective rather than confining and truncating our engagement of reality.

The historian Thorkild Jacobsen, in an effort to nudge people toward more openness in this regard, begins his masterpiece on ancient Mesopotamian religious experience, *The Treasures of Darkness*, with a quote from the seventeenth-century theologian Thomas Traherne: “Men do mightily wrong themselves when they refuse to be present in all ages and neglect to see the beauty of all kingdoms.” The Torah would have us formulate this thought more strongly saying that it is *imperative* that we “see the beauty of all kingdoms.” This is because we cannot recognize purpose in the long history of civilization’s cultural development without seeing that it has given us distinct experiences of self and reality that have forced us to uncover new layers of meaning and truth.⁴

What is this “more essential area of personality” that centered consciousness in earlier times and provided the basis for religious consciousness? What defines truth for that mode of awareness? How is it attained

his physical environment in the manner consistent with Torah – that is, indirectly through his relationship with God (at least, according to Torah). In this chapter we will not discuss this aspect because it would require us to rely on testimony from the Torah, the truth of which is our topic. It is, however, an important consideration because if the Torah’s claim on this point is accepted, it counters the Western claim to unique truth based on the success of science and technology.

4. See, for example, Rav Tzadok Ha-Kohen, *Resisei Laylah* ot 57, based on *Pesachim* 87b, that the Jews were exiled to gather converts. Rav Tzadok understands “converts” to also be figurative, referring to the unique strengths of the nations which need to be transformed to the service of sanctity. In *Pri Tzaddik, Balak* ot 2, Rav Tzadok interprets this to mean the unique understanding of each society and the need to transform and harness it to Torah.

and what is the basis of its legitimacy? To answer these questions in a way that will allow us to appreciate the relevance of this past form of awareness and the validity of its approach to truth, we need to address these questions in the context of the changing nature of consciousness over historical time, the process driving this change, and its influence on our assumptions about reality. First, however, we must examine our present cultural context to understand how it biases our view of our topic.

II. THE PERSPECTIVE OF MODERNITY

Every civilization has certain fundamental premises upon which its outlook is founded. The cultural history of a civilization is the process through which these underlying premises work themselves out in increasingly unadulterated forms artistically, socially, and intellectually.⁵ Karsten Harries, a towering genius I encountered at Yale, identifies the defining characteristic of modernity, the present iteration of Western culture, as the awareness of perspective: that all outlooks, whether visual, intellectual, or moral, are determined by a point of view.⁶

Copernicus revealed the power inherent in perspectival awareness when he revolutionized our sense of space by determining that only because we view the Sun's movement from the earth does it appear to go around us while, in actuality, the functional center of our solar system is the Sun. The ideal of transcending individual perspective that Copernicus built on so successfully introduced a new concept of truth that unleashed modern science.

While awareness of perspective empowers the sciences, its implications extend far beyond our understanding of physical reality. By revealing that our vantage point lacks privilege, any truth ascribed to man's views is undercut. For though awareness of perspective in physical settings invites us to attempt to remove subjective influences, there is a difference when investigating moral and philosophical issues. In matters of thought, once subjectivity is removed little or nothing is left. So regardless of how clear, fundamental, or universally held a moral ideal might be, modernity eliminates our ability to designate it as true or sacred in any meaningful sense.

5. As heard from Karsten Harries.

6. Professor Harries led an interdisciplinary class I took when I was at Yale. He was then the head of the Graduate Department of Philosophy. See Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001), p. 19.

Reacting to Copernicus, Kant sought to recover a semblance of broader truth by shrinking it to mean the intrinsic structure of observation. But Nietzsche, explicitly referencing Copernicus, declared all truth and morality arbitrary and meaningless.⁷ The awareness of perspective which defines modernity and is the basis of its power comes hand in hand with nihilism. They are born of the same womb.

When Nietzsche equated modernity's loss of truth with the death of God he made explicit the fundamental opposition of modernity to faith.⁸ It is important to be aware of this as we try to understand the foundations of the Torah and faith generally, but especially when analyzing Strauss' effort to give legitimacy to faith. For Strauss' suggestion that the issue rests upon subtle logical arguments misses the fact that the topic is being explored in a context in which we are culturally determined to dismiss faith as nostalgia.⁹ We unthinkingly associate the beginning and basis of civilization with the Greeks. They identified existence with thought, which leaves us with intellect as the only conceivable tool for the pursuit of truth. In this context, modernity's perspectival awareness, though it "kills God," must be accepted as the latest stage in man's process of enlightenment. Faith would require the intentional forgetting of this truth, an ignoble lie.

Understanding Western cultural development in the larger context of civilizations stretching back to the ancient Near East, however, gives a new perspective on perspective. More than marking off modernity, perspectival awareness is revealed to be the purified expression of the essential kernel of Western civilization's general turn to the intellect. Rather than an incapable advance in enlightenment, it is the logical conclusion of a specific manner of engaging reality. Though it has genuine strengths in terms of the control it gives us over the physical world, on its own it restricts our focus to a shallow subset of existence – something akin to examining a clothed person with our eyes alone and concluding he is made of cotton.

Any substantive defense of faith, then, must reach beyond the Greeks to the earlier Near Eastern cultures out of which Torah emerged. Because those cultures identified reality with the experience of being rather than

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 155.

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking, 1959), pp. 95–96.

9. Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, p. 3.

thought, they determined truth through means other than the intellect. In this view, faith rests not on dishonest, nostalgic forgetfulness – quite the opposite, it comes through remembering that which has been forgotten: how to engage being, our experience of existence, rather than confusing or conflating it with rational thought.¹⁰

In order to gain any understanding of these ancient societies and the process by which our present cultural milieu has developed, it is important to know that Copernicus' reliance on perspective, which marks such an important transition into modernity, was not modernity's true beginning. For perspective was not an isolated or fortuitous discovery of Copernicus.¹¹ It grew out of developments that were in motion beginning hundreds of years before him – in changes in the conceptualization of God and self, the application of mathematics to visualization in art, and advances in philosophy.¹² In other words, perspectival awareness, like all foundational cultural innovations in history, emerged organically from changes in the whole manner of our perception of reality and self.

This is because the sum total of a culture's engagement of reality forms the inner context to all of our thinking and prepares, catalyzes, and determines our understanding and convictions about the nature of reality and truth. If there is a change in the defining character of culture it can only be because the nature of people's engagement of reality has changed.¹³

10. See Maharal, *Tiferet Yisrael*, *Perek* 10. Maharal here discusses the gemara *Shabbat* referenced in note 2 – that someone with knowledge but lacking fear of heaven is like one who lacks a house but has built a gate to a house. Fear of heaven is compared to one's dwelling, his actual existence. Fear of heaven essentially means minimizing the ego awareness in order to clear the path to allow one to experience God as All-Being and, therefore, the basis of all being including one's own, while the purpose of knowledge is to expand our ability to grasp this. Self and understanding are pared down to a portal through which God is manifest and a basis for recognizing/experiencing the omnipotence of God. See also *Shabbat* 88a with Maharal, *Tiferet Yisrael*, *Perek* 29. We will explore this more fully later in this essay when we define Torah's mode of pursuing truth.

11. Op. cit. pp. 15–19. Here Harries is arguing with Alexander Koyré's position laid out in *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* that sixteenth-century science was the origin of the modern mindset rather than its consequence. The distinction is subtle but crucial to the argument advanced in this chapter.

12. Among others, Prof. Harries examines the sermons of Meister Eckhart, Leon Battista Alberti's *On Painting*, and the philosophical works of Nicholas of Cusa, an early fifteenth-century cardinal.

13. In this essay I wish to extend this insight of Karsten Harries to our understanding

This means that to appreciate these ancient civilizations and understand the transition to the more familiar cultures of the West, we will need to penetrate to the essential basis of this underlying engagement of reality and the forces driving it to change.

III. CHANGES IN CONSCIOUSNESS

We will investigate the evolving nature of consciousness across history using a Torah framework. I learned of the Torah's approach to this topic from Rav Moshe Shapira (d. 2017), the second towering genius whose path I crossed. He was one of the most influential Orthodox thinkers of his age in the philosophic and esoteric branches of Torah.

The Torah approach to the development of consciousness focuses on the succession of empires that dominated civilization and conquered the Jews, forcing them to adapt monotheism to an ever changing cultural context and mindset. Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome each remade civilization in the image of its national culture.¹⁴ Each was animated by a different primary character trait or inclination, engaging and interpreting reality through the lens of that trait.¹⁵

With this formulation the Sages identify aspects of human personality as the underlying quality that Karsten Harries had spoken about as uniquely defining a culture. With this the Torah interprets reality through the prism of humanity as opposed to the more abstract treatment I was used to from Yale. This humanistic approach, so opposite the ideal of modern rationalism to eliminate human perspective, is characteristic of the Torah vision generally and is a consequence of the fundamental divide between the Torah and the Western worldview – the Torah identifies reality and truth with being rather than ideas or rational structure. Torah pre-

of Torah and its place in the engagement of reality that characterized civilization at the time of Torah's emergence. Extending this approach over such a vast expanse of time produces a different kind of result because the shift in the nature of our engagement of reality is of another order of magnitude than that dealt with by Harries.

14. The sequence of four kingdoms is mentioned explicitly in Daniel chapters 2 and 7. The concept is ubiquitous in Midrash, see for example *Bereshit Rabbah* 2:4. See Maharal *Ner Mitzvah* [standard Israeli edition. pp. 7–21].

15. Outlining this in sufficient detail to be meaningful would redirect this chapter away from its intended purpose. For an extensive discussion see my book *The Choice to Be*, section III.

sumes that interpreting reality specifically through the being of humanity is both appropriate and necessary because Torah understands that God creates in *Tzelem Elokim* (His image) both existence as a whole and man in particular.¹⁶ So man's being parallels and models that of reality.¹⁷

What makes this Torah approach to cultural evolution particularly fitting to our topic is its added level of context relative to a classic Western view. In my day at Yale, with the exception of a few exotic courses, any discussion of civilization began from the Greeks. The view of the Sages, however, stretches back to include the Near Eastern societies that created and developed civilization during the thousands of years that preceded the Golden Age of Greece. We need this added context to both investigate the roots of the Torah and to bring into focus the particularity of the West's vision of truth.

THE MATURING OF HUMANITY

The progression of traits that characterize these empires roughly parallels those centering an individual as he develops from childhood through adulthood.¹⁸ In other words, over historical time humanity, in the context of civilization, goes through a developmental process which echoes that of an individual.¹⁹ The succession of empires that conquered civilization imposed cultures that reflected this advancing "maturity" of humanity.²⁰

16. Genesis 1:27. In this context *Tzelem Elokim* refers to the structure of our humanity paralleling the qualities which God reveals in and through creation. See Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Daat Tevunot* 80.

17. *Peirush Ha-Malbim Tehillim* 139:16; Malbim, *Ramzei Ha-Mishkan* in *Shemot Parshat Terumah*. Intellect and free will (a deeper level of *Tzelem Elokim* than that referenced in the previous sentence) are the prerequisites for fulfilling the purpose of creation. Since in creation man uniquely possesses these qualities, existence is designed around our needs. Existence and man are structured in parallel so that we can understand and develop ourselves through understanding and developing the world, seeing ourselves mirrored in the world and the world mirrored in us.

18. Maharal, *Ner Mitzvah*, p. 10–11.

19. For a detailed discussion of this see *The Choice to Be*, section III.

20. As we will explain in a moment, the process of maturation is one in which the center of personality shifts to ever higher (meaning less physical) aspects of personality. From a Torah perspective this increasing "maturity" is not to be confused with improvement. The Torah judges a society by the degree of purity with which it connects to monotheism. The ascending anchor of personality brought by the

The specific location of self in the structure of personality is not fixed. As individuals mature it moves to ever higher aspects. When our self first emerges in childhood, it is integrated and identified with our physical needs and desires. When a child says, "I want a piece of chocolate," he is totally present in the desire. But as we develop, the focus of our self slowly shifts to higher aspects. In adolescence we identify primarily with our sense of autonomous selfhood, and our need to assert individuality becomes paramount. Later still we can come to identify with our intellect to the point that our interpretation of reality becomes synonymous for us with our self.

This shifting of self also occurs in humanity as a whole over historical time in the context of civilization. When the center of personality moves in a society, it results in changes in the entire manner in which reality is engaged: our conscious interests, the nature of our experience of selfhood and reality, the form of our understanding, and our perception of truth and how to attain it. For these changes to be realized in a society's culture, new cultural forms and norms are needed. But culture possesses a lot of inertia. So significant movement in the location of self often requires a regime change before it is fully reflected in culture. The successive empires which conquered civilization each imposed a culture on civilization based on the character trait of its age, effectively bringing culture into sync with humanity's development.

Like the early development of an individual, as civilization was born in the Near East and mankind first entered into cities, our consciousness was enmeshed with our physical being and dominated by its influences. This firmly grounded our awareness in our material environment and blocked pure abstraction. Ideas were conceived in images – that is, together with their actual physical expression in specific form.²¹ For example, though we

maturity of civilization does not necessarily bring it closer to true monotheism. Actually the opposite is the case. The early empires practiced idolatry whereas the later societies moved increasingly toward a spiritually empty materialism. This represents a decline as the earlier societies at least worshipped even if that worship was misdirected (See *Bereshit Rabbah* 68:14). As mentioned earlier, the significance of this process lies in the ever changing challenges the cultural environment presents to those seeking pure monotheism and the different facets of personality those people are forced to develop as a result.

21. Frankfort, "Myth and Reality," in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*.

could be aware of seven bushels of wheat being seven bushels, the abstract idea of the pure number seven would have been challenging to grasp.

Paradoxically, this very physicality made us more “spiritual.” Our physically-based consciousness fostered a mode of comprehension which lacked the sharpness of abstract thinking. This left room in our awareness to experience a richness of being that extended beyond understanding. Because we were unable to clearly grasp or define our sense of self, our awareness was integrated with levels of consciousness that extended beyond individuality that were rightly perceived as the root of self. Because of our need to remain connected to our source, this fostered worship.

Academics often contend that worship originated from man projecting his internal experience outward. This is anachronistic – at least in relation to the overall religious instinct – as it overlooks the profound difference in the nature of consciousness in ancient times in contrast to the present. Since in ancient times the root of selfhood which transcends individual identity was experienced along with awareness of self, there was no need for projection. Rather than transcendence being a consequence of our projecting consciousness, our conscious self was intrinsically experienced as an extension from some transcendent source.

But this was the case only with respect to the general awareness of the transcendent connection. Because at this time we conceived our reality through concrete physical expressions, we projected each aspect of this inner experience onto concrete external phenomena or objects such as agriculture, storms, or the sun. This need to identify specific phenomena with transcendent awareness skewed our interpretation of that awareness toward polytheism, which universally characterized Near Eastern spirituality in its early period. The need for a physical base to all understanding also fostered the idolatrous form of the worship of that period.

But our awareness of levels of reality beyond individual self also provided the foundation for the eventual development of a more advanced form of spirituality. This development would have to await the emergence and application of some degree of abstract thinking, with its liberation of thought from specific expressions.

Though abstract thinking did not come to dominate human cognition until the time of Greek hegemony, we possessed the capability from early

human history, with its influence increasing with the passage of time. A thousand years before Greece, abstraction was applied to the spiritual sense natural to the age. Perceiving our Source through abstraction freed us from identifying that Source with physically-based gods. This allowed us to conceive and, therefore, recognize the purely transcendent root and basis of self and reality generally. This application of abstraction to the innate spirituality of the Near East marks the birth of true, transcendent monotheism and with it a revolution in spiritual experience, understanding, and worship. We identify this achievement with Abraham.²²

The Two Sides of Abstract Reason

The merging of abstraction with intuitive spirituality inaugurated a period that was the sweet spot of human development of spiritual experience and understanding. Earlier we had been too mired in the physical world to conceive of a truly transcendent Source. But later, as the role of abstraction grew in our conscious process and our understanding sharpened, our awareness of self became increasingly defined and demarcated. More and more we came to experience ourselves as isolated, autonomous individuals. This began to obscure the roots of personality that extend beyond individual awareness. Eventually, a watershed was crossed and man's intuitive sense of himself as an extension of something greater was weakened sufficiently that we lost our instinct for worship. The Sages refer to this transition as an annulment of the inclination to worship idols, which is synonymous with the loss of the inclination to worship at all.²³ This coincided with the rise of the Greek empire and the transfer of the basis of civilization from East to West.²⁴ In other words, Greece, by imposing its culture of the intellect on civilization, brought civilization in line with the increasing domination of our consciousness by abstract thought.

This shift was reflected in a dramatic change in the understanding of what defined man. Near Eastern cultures had understood man first and foremost as a worshipper and servant of the gods. The Bronze Age

22. See Maimonides, *Hilchot Avodat Kochavim* 1:3; Rabbenu Bachya, Genesis 15:7.

23. *Yoma* 69b. See *The Choice to Be*, pp 257–259.

24. *Yoma* 69a. The source referenced in the previous note tells us that the nullification of the inclination to worship idols occurred in the first year of the Second Temple. This source tells us that Shimon Ha-Tzaddik, the second high priest of the Second Temple, met Alexander as he moved through the Near East conquering Persia.

Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish* tells us man was created in order to relieve the lower gods of their menial agricultural responsibilities. The Torah, while obviously not framing it in such physical terms, clearly understands man to be created for and defined by the obligation of worship.²⁵ Aristotle, on the other hand, defined man as the rational animal, framing humanity around its own quest for understanding. Though ancient Greece was a multi-faceted culture, the aspect of Greek culture that primarily impacted the world and influenced the future of civilization was the rationality reflected in Aristotle's understanding of man.

We see here the two sides of the gift of abstract reason. Before the emergence of abstract understanding, consciousness was inseparable from direct perception of the material world, which gave a very restricted window on reality. Achieving abstraction allowed us to go beyond the limits and particularity of matter. But reason is voracious and is inclined to dominate consciousness with its clarity, obscuring any dimensions beyond its reach. So abstract reason eventually came to define our engagement with reality, crowding out awareness of the deeper, incomprehensible sources of self which transcend our individuality. We conflated or confused being with thought and were left isolated in our selves.²⁶

This is not to say that the domination of consciousness by intellect ended spiritual development. Reason's liberation from the limitations of material-based understanding when combined with extreme humility and properly applied can elevate individuals even beyond the possibilities of intuitive spirituality.²⁷ This is the discipline of the Oral Torah. But in terms of general human experience, mankind's visceral awareness of the incomprehensible underpinnings of reality had passed. Though after this transition there were periods of tremendous religious ferment and creativity, because they were born of a human consciousness that was dominated by the ego, the epiphanies upon which they were built were often distorted.

IV. CHANGES IN UNDERSTANDING

The hardening of the self that came with the domination of reason was mirrored in changes in our relationship to knowledge and understanding.

25. Deuteronomy 10:12–13, Ecclesiastes 12:13, *Berachot* 6b, Maharal, *Derech Chaim* 2:14 (among many other places).

26. See note 2 and note 10.

27. Maharal, *Tiferet Yisrael*, Perek 57.

Before our capacity for abstraction developed and we gained the ability to clearly and distinctly grasp pure ideas, we retained in the act of thinking an awareness of the emerging intuition behind any given thought. We therefore perceived ideas as a handle on something essentially incomprehensible. According to the Torah, it was this open bridge between these two levels of reality – the comprehensible world and its incomprehensible, boundless root – that allowed for prophecy.

We still bump up against this unbounded source of understanding in the inexplicable “aha!” moment when intuition emerges from the unknowable and crystallizes into specific insight.²⁸ But with the clarity afforded by abstract reason we quickly forget the unknowable origin of an idea, and with our full focus on its comprehensible portion we perceive the idea as completely understood. Historically, this decoupling of thought from its transcendent root reinforced the isolation of our experience of autonomous selfhood. Our increasing oblivion to the other side of the bridge eliminated prophetic experience.²⁹ We became trapped in the natural reality of our comprehensible universe.

The switch to abstract reason had another important effect on understanding that was more subtle but affected our ability to connect to transcendence just as profoundly. When our engagement of reality was mediated through our physical senses, reality was experienced as something outside us, surrounding and containing us. At any given moment we were conscious of ourselves as aware of one small part of the totality of existence which fostered the sense of vulnerability and awe so essential to worship.

When reason took over and reality was mediated through our understanding and ideas, though we recognized that there was a world outside ourselves, the arena of engagement shifted into our minds. Rather than our awareness being confined to one small piece of a perplexing whole stretching boundlessly beyond us, we now contained the comprehensible totality of reality in our thoughts and framed all experience in that larger context.

28. *Bava Batra* 12a states that though prophecy was taken away from the prophets it was not taken from the Sages. *Chiddushei Ha-Ramban* there explains that the intuition of the Sages is prophetic in origin. Rav Tzadok Ha-Kohen, in *Pri Tzaddik II*, Hanukkah 4 states that the difference between prophecy and the insights of the Sages is that the Sages can no longer perceive that the origin of their insights is prophetic. See also Rav Tzadok Ha-Kohen *Machshavot Charutz* 17.

29. *Sanhedrin* 11a; *Peirush Ha-Gra* on *Seder Olam* 30. *Seder Olam Rabbah* (Jerusalem, 1954), p. 98 states that formal prophecy ended with the rise of Greek hegemony.

Initially this sense of connection to reality as an integrated whole created a push toward monotheism. At the same time, however, the vulnerability so essential to worship was undercut by our sensing that we comprehended – and therefore in some sense contained – all of reality.

Shift in the Location of Reality

This shift in the arena of our engagement of reality had another consequence, perhaps its most profound. With the world now encountered through understanding, our sense of what was real also changed. Since we began to identify as real that which mirrors our experience, reality itself became identified with ideas. This is exemplified in Plato's philosophy of the forms, which ascribes genuine existence to concepts alone. Once again, we speak here of the intellectual tradition of Greece as opposed to its mystical side, as it is this intellectual aspect which was carried into the future by the development of civilization.

Up until this time, as we mentioned before, the intensity and immediacy of physical experience allowed only incomplete understanding, leaving us aware of and connected to the incomprehensible dimension of our existence – what we call the spiritual realm. The physical and the spiritual were experienced as inseparable and both were considered real. Once abstraction allowed these two realms to be distinguished – when true monotheism first emerged – the root of reality was identified with the spiritual realm, with the physical seen as its medium of expression (the Torah view). When clear abstraction came to dominate understanding, man was cut off from the incomprehensible realm of experience, so the root of reality was transferred in our experience to that which was comprehensible from an intellectual perspective – ideas.

Since abstract concepts are intangible and universal, under Greece we still perceived ourselves as part of a reality larger than ourselves and our physical environment. So Greece was a relatively soft transition from the Near Eastern engagement with transcendence. But though concepts are not material, they are intelligible – at least potentially. So despite their elevation above material reality, they are still part of our comprehensible universe. Man could still experience realms that go beyond self, but those realms were limited to extensions of our finite reality rather than something truly infinite and other. Existence shrank to something within man's reach, further undermining the dependence and vulnerability that is the basis of worship.

This was institutionalized in the Greek concept of God, which was severely reduced from its Near Eastern equivalent. The Greek identification

of reality with ideas coupled with Greece's deduction that there must be a basis to existence led to recognition of a source to existence – the Greek equivalent of God but understood as the Thinker of the ideas that are genuine existence. Since man can also comprehend those ideas, for all the distance the Greeks attributed to this being, it was still part of our universe, transcendent in only a very limited sense.³⁰

Since the abstract ideas that comprise existence are independent of any particular expression, this God who Thinks these ideas was seen by the Greeks as utterly detached from the mundane particulars and happenings of physical reality. This rendered worship irrelevant.³¹ So with this concept of God, the Greeks also softened the transition from the worshipful Near East to the worldview that would eventually emerge under Rome, a materialism that is, in its unadulterated form, completely secular.

Differing Concepts of Truth and its Attainment

These shifts in understanding and the perception of reality led to a new definition of truth. Since a primary goal of this essay is to establish the validity of the Torah's concept of truth we need to look closely at this change.

Our intuitive definition of truth is an understanding that conforms to what actually exists. To be more modern, post-Kant, it is an understanding that conforms to the necessary structure of reality as perceived by an observer.

Actually, the intuitive definition is also, relatively speaking, modern. The concept that truth is an understanding of reality distinct from reality itself is new. In the ancient world, "truth" and "reality" were synonymous. This was the case in the ancient Near East and also for the Greeks. As we mentioned, the Greeks viewed ideas as more than mere understandings of reality – in the Greek view, they *are* reality. If reality is ideas, then true reality is embraced through the clarification of thought through reason. For the Greeks because an idea is true it is real.

The Torah, which emanates from a much earlier era, moves in the opposite direction. For the Torah rather than reality being a consequence of truth, truth is a consequence of reality. According to the Torah because God is real He is truth. In fact God is the only thing that is fully real – He

30. This allows us to understand how Christianity could confuse the biblical vision of the utterly incomprehensible God with one that conflated God with man.

31. Robert Mayhew, "Aristotle on Prayer," *Rhizai: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 2:295–309 (2007).

is All-Being – and, therefore, God is all truth: *וה' אלקים אמת* (And the Lord God is truth; Jeremiah 10:10). Effectively “what is” – God – is true. Falsehood “is not,” and therefore does not exist.

For the Greek philosophers, even God is a consequence of truth – they “discovered” their version of God through logical deduction. Philosophically it was untenable that there was not a basis to reality, so out of logical necessity God must exist. Effectively logic generates God. Not surprisingly, the Greeks understood that God was bound by logic, for they saw logic as primary to God.

In the Torah, however, God is the beginning and basis of everything, not a consequence. The equivalent of Descartes’ bedrock *cogito* “I think therefore I am” is, “In my awareness of a self and reality emanating from beyond I am aware of the existence of the Source/Creator.” This was the first awareness upon which all else was based and in it one was more aware of his Source than of one’s self. Abraham, whom we credit with rediscovering God, searched for decades to identify Who this Source is. But characteristic of his age, the fact that the Source exists was assumed with absolute conviction by Abraham from the start.³²

For the Torah, God is also existentially prior to logic. Abraham identified the Creator as utterly transcendent, necessary Unity. God’s existential unity means that God/truth *cannot* be fully grasped through reason, for our understanding comes through distinctions, whereas God is One. So how could God be bound by our perception of logic? Moreover, God creates all from utterly nothing. As well as being unfathomable to us, this means He is the *unrestricted* Author of the very concepts of understanding and logic that man perceives as the absolutely necessary structure of understanding and reality (*Bereshit Rabbah* 68:9). Rather than being bound by logic as the Greeks assumed, God is the limitless Creator of logic. For the Jews, God is necessarily on the other side of the curtain, utterly unrestricted and incomprehensible.

But if God is reality/truth, and He is utterly unfathomable, how does one approach, engage, or embrace truth? The answer is through *participating in* God. This is primarily achieved through character development – the removal of egotistic aspects of self that block awareness of this participation. Intellectual clarity plays an important role, but is most accurately viewed as a crucial component of personal purification coming in the context of a much broader effort to develop and purify one’s character.

32. Rabbenu Bachya, Genesis 15:7.

This puts in stark relief how different the Torah and Western philosophy are in their visions of truth and how it is attained. For the West, truth is a purely intellectual pursuit. Though the Greeks recognized that character played a role, it was only because of its influence on intellectual clarity.

Levels of Participation in God

In the Torah's mode of attaining truth through participation in God, there is a continuum of levels to which this can be achieved, distinguished by the extent to which a false sense of autonomous self gets in the way. Thus the person who came closest to truth in its purity was Moses (Numbers 12:6–8), who was *ענו מכל האדם* (Numbers 12:3), the person who achieved the ultimate degree of humility humanly possible. Humility is the elimination of false aspects of self that define a person independent of God, as opposed to those aspects of self that allow for the unique expression of God which is the essence of true individual humanity (*צלם אלקים*, the Image of God; Genesis 1:27).

This leads to an even more radical distinction between the modern concept of truth and its attainment as opposed to the Torah view. Modern man seeks to eliminate the subjective element in order to achieve pure, disinterested understanding, which is viewed as objective logic and perception completely distinct from our humanity. In Torah, truth can only be achieved by immersion in our subjective experience – for truth is existence and existence is being. As we mentioned before, this works specifically for man's subjective experience of being for he, like creation, is created in *Tzelem Elokim*, the Image of God. Therefore, the human self both mirrors creation and moves us toward God. This is only true when the subjective experience is pure: egoless subjective experience of self or subjective experience of egoless self. We must labor toward Moses' humility to reach an "objective" experience of our subjectivity; this unshareable subjective experience of *Tzelem Elokim* is the only path to truth.

This is the only path to God because God is not physical. So though we may be able to see His works and workings in the material world, we cannot embrace Him through that medium directly. Our only gateway to God and, therefore, to true existence is through our non-physical internal awareness – our engagement of our being through which we are connected to the incomprehensible Being which is our root, centered far beyond the limits of our comprehension.³³

33. The *mitzvot*, though physical actions, give form to our actualized self in such

This is actually a more *honest* understanding of truth than that of Western understanding. For our only access to what something is as opposed to how it appears is our experience of self. This, then, is and has always been our reference point and standard for reality and, therefore, for truth, whether we are conscious of it or not. Western thinking prides itself on approaching objective truth through its relentless use of logic. It conveniently ignores that all logical argument begins with premises – self-evident truths. The origin of the “self-evident-ness” of premises is precisely this subjective experience of self, our reference point for reality. In the Torah, we embrace and explore this subjective moment, rather than masking it in logical extension.

The Torah conviction that the path of truth travels through the self is further reflected in the Torah view of understanding, the deepest form of which is called *daat*. This refers to understanding that is completely integrated into the self of the person, as opposed to understandings that are filed away in our memory to be called up when needed to serve as frameworks through which to view the world (a form of understanding called *binah*).

Rav Moshe Shapira once described *daat* as an understanding that I have that were I to cease understanding that way I would not recognize my self as my self. The reason this is such a deep form of understanding is that this integration with self allows for a flow of intuition that transcends the reach of human understanding and guides it (Rashi, Exodus 31:3). Since we are trying to reach God, Who transcends human understanding, we can only reach toward Him through a purified connection to our underlying root connection to Him as the Source of our being, which opens a flow of untainted intuition emanating from there.

This integration of self with understanding that we are describing achieves a much more profound connection to truth than the “binding power of the known,” which Strauss attributes to philosophical truth. Strauss’ “binding power” refers to the sense of externally grounded necessity inherent in a logical deduction. The Torah allows us to go beyond this. With Torah one can “be” the veracity of God’s existence, where it is inextricably bound up in our experience of being – the gateway to God, Who is the ground of all being.³⁴

a way that it resonates with our deepest spiritual root, altering the nature of our internal experience.

34. This is reflected in the mitzvah of faith coming in the form of a statement of

This is a form of truth that, like the aperspectival truth of modernity, is available to all observers – that is all human observers, at least theoretically.³⁵ Specifically *human* observers have access to this truth because reality can only be understood accurately through the lens of our humanity, our *Tzelem Elokim* or the Image of God within us. It is only theoretically reachable by everyone because it is a truth that cannot be proven through argument and, therefore, shared. For that matter it cannot even be articulated. The Sages would guide worthy individuals along a path of self-exploration to uncover within themselves an objective experience of subjective self, that is, purified being – a direct extension from the Source of all being.³⁶ Only individuals in complete control of their egos and with the strength to stay a long and difficult course are capable of reaching this in an undistorted form and, so, are candidates for this guidance. The rest of us must content ourselves to approach this level of truth, each to the extent of his effort and talent, through Torah and personal development.

The Age of Reason

The changes in awareness and thought that the rise of the Greek empire heralded ruptured the mindset of the peoples of the Near East in a way that can be seen in their effect upon the Jews. The Jews became subject to the rational, mind-centered vision of the Greeks when Alexander swept through Israel during his conquest of the Persian Empire. Their *internalization* of the Greek worldview was not completed, however, until some eighty years later, at the time of the writing of the Septuagint. This is the

fact rather than as a command. Since faith in the existence of God is inseparable from our awareness of our own existence, it is experienced as a fact integral to being rather than something so external as a command. See Maharal, *Tiferet Yisrael*, ch. 37. 35. It is indicative of the depth of the Torah and the greatness attributed to man that this universal truth, though the same for everyone, will nevertheless be perceived in a manner unique to each observer. Our vision is colored by the individual complex of character traits we each possess such that as we put our understanding of reality together each individual creates his own personal unified understanding of reality (Maharal, *Derech Chaim* 1:1). If we penetrate deeply enough, we all reach the same essential truth, which we each perceive in our own way. Thus, in earlier times there was no argument in *halachah* (Tosafot, *Chagigah* 15a from the Yerushalmi) even though each individual understood the *halachah* in a different light. See *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:1.

36. Mishnah *Chagigah* 2:1, *Chagigah* 13a. Maharal, *Gevurot Hashem* ch. 28 his explanation of *Niddah* 30b.

translation of the Torah that the Sages were forced to write by the Greek king Ptolemy II.³⁷

We see this from the Sages' evaluation of this translation as an apocalyptic disaster. They compare its impact to that of the building of the Golden Calf, an act that distanced the Jewish people from God and profoundly transformed the nature of our relationship with Him.³⁸

The Sages found the translation of the Septuagint ruinously inadequate. The reason they give for this inadequacy was that the Torah "*could not* be sufficiently translated."³⁹ Though no translation ever completely captures a great piece of literature, the lack here was to a critical degree. The Greek language was a well-honed instrument for describing a comprehensible man-centered reality. Greek words, with their nuances of meaning, could not contain the most essential level of Torah, which relates to reality as ultimately incomprehensible and existing in God.

At first glance, it is hard to understand why this translation was so disastrous; the Jews could just ignore it. The answer is that the translation marked a watershed in the development of the consciousness of the Jews. Rav Moshe Shapira explained this through a paradox: the same Sages who recognized the tragic inadequacy of the translation also declared this translated version of the Torah a legitimate Torah scroll – it was halachically acceptable for fulfilling obligations to read the Torah!⁴⁰

The only way to understand this is to recognize that we were no longer *able* to read the Torah in the original – even when we read it in Hebrew. We had come to understand reality in a Greek way, so that even when we would read the Torah in the original Hebrew, the Hebrew terms had become for us translations of Greek equivalents; all the nuances of meaning that were part of a God-centered world had been lost from our understanding and the language. We were no longer stuck in a Greek world; rather, we had become stuck in a Greek worldview. We, as much as the Torah, had been translated.

Rav Moshe Shapira illustrated the significance of this point with a simple yet compelling example. The word "*davar*" is today translated as "thing." "Thing" is a completely neutral designation leaving the meaning and

37. *Masechet Sofrim* 1:7.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Megillah* 9b.

purpose of the object fully open to our arbitrary appropriation. But the Hebrew term “*davar*” is related to the word “*dibbur*,” which means “speech.” Were we to relate to Hebrew without an overlay of Greek assumptions we would be cognizant of this meaning when using the term in the context of what we today call a “thing.” This tells us that what we today relate to as a world composed of arbitrary “things” empty of intrinsic meaning and context is, according to Torah, a reality composed of words. They are elements in a conversation with the Creator spoken with intention. We have to interpret the meaning of the words, but they must be understood in the context of a Divine conversation. Imagine how natural and integrated faith would be if we interpreted and experienced reality in this way.

Davar, understood to mean “word,” was part of the original language of the Torah. But from the time of the Septuagint on, even when we say “*davar*” in Hebrew, we think “thing.” A world of “things” leaves little room for an integrated engagement of existence as creation. This conveys something of the radical nature of the change in our understanding of reality that occurred as our minds became dominated by abstract reason. It compounds the challenge introduced by changes in the nature of awareness that shut us off from any transcendent awareness. How is genuine faith a possibility when God is no longer integrally structured into our understanding and perception of reality or experienced as the basis of the self?

V. THE ARRIVAL OF ROME

Greek idealism was short-lived, providing a transition from the spiritually charged Near Eastern cultures to Rome which was characterized by stark materialism. The ascent of Rome to power and to the role of arbiter of civilization marked yet another shift of humanity’s center. Under Rome, the self moved from its Greek anchor in the intellect and ideas to full identification with our awareness of ourselves as isolated individuals.

Identification with our “I” holds great possibility. The “I” as an experience of subjective being is a very deep level of the self. As we shift our focus from awareness of structured reality to purely private and personal awareness, we taste being and existence. In its purified form, this “I” is almost egoless, utterly representative of its transcendent root,⁴¹ the source and

41. For this reason the word *ani*, “I,” is a name of God. Mishnah, *Sukkah* 4:5 with Rashi, *Sukkah* 45a, *Sukkah* 53a; as heard from Rav Moshe Shapira.

basis of all being.⁴² This modern experience of transcendence is different from the ancient one, however, in that in the ancient world man identified with his physical being and so was not tied up in self. In such a context the self is transparent, functioning as a conduit of its transcendent root. In the modern version we experience the transparency differently, for we engage a deeper self and identify with it. In addition to being a conduit, we have the potential to experience self as a representative of its root, still receiving from and fully dependent upon our Source yet personally embodying It and reflecting It back to God. This emulation is a much more profound engagement of transcendence.⁴³

But achieving this self in its purified form is very challenging and dangerous. For if we miss and instead identify with this “I” in its impure form, we are acutely conscious of ego, which shuts out all sense of connectedness to a Source beyond the individual. In other words, our anchor in subjective experience allows for the possibility of the heights of spiritual experience or its depths without much in between.

The general experience of self under Rome was anchored in the impure “I.” Because the individual ego which dominates this experience is rooted in our discrete physical bodies and our reference point for reality is our experience of self, this led to the equation of reality with material substance. Ideas lost their identification with the self and therefore with existence, becoming mere handmaidens to more effective action. Thus, the pure science and metaphysics of Greece gave ground to Roman engineering and ethics.

In such a context, ideals, values, and morality – the sacred – slowly lose their compelling force, as all sense of reality for things that are not tangible slowly ebbs away.⁴⁴ The Sages see today’s Western culture as an

42. Rav Tzadok Ha-Kohen, *Tzidkat Ha-Tzaddik* 183.

43. See Maharal, *Tiferet Yisrael*, ch. 10 on the difference between a relationship of love and one of fear. See also Rav Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Me-Eliyahu* vol. 11, pp. 137–145 to appreciate the significance of the love relationship.

44. For the sake of simplicity I am purposely not mentioning the impact of Torah through Christianity on this process. The Torah introduced a force that strengthens morality and values. But in the end, it cannot stem the tide of growing nihilism in the societies that branch out from Roman culture, as it is not part of the actual Roman root. The Sages see Torah as a foreign influence on Roman culture (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:41). Carl Jung also saw it this way. He felt that the weakening of Christianity in modern Europe was a consequence of its foreign origin – it is not part of the

extension of Rome, for the materialism which defined Rome continues to define our society. In fact, as Western culture evolves, that materialism takes on an increasingly unadulterated form. More and more our age is characterized by the conviction that material existence is the locus of reality, with concepts and ideals viewed as at best arbitrary, convenient fantasy, or tools of social order.

This context fosters the perspectival awareness that Professor Harries identified as underlying modernity. Our physically based framework suggests the geometric awareness at the heart of perspective, just as it suggests the sanitized “I” devoid of all human interest and judgment as the ideal observer for determining truth.

In turn, this perspectival awareness has accelerated the domination of the materialist outlook. Interest in the humanities bleeds out, disparaged as “mere ideas.” Even those who take ideas seriously sense weakness in the humanities because of their inability to escape the prison of human perspective. Math, which can free itself from perspective, becomes the measure of human understanding, and science with its methodical production of ever-more-accurate reconstructions of physical reality becomes our best approximation of truth. With growing exclusivity, we engage reality in this technical manner and we become increasingly hollowed out as human beings.⁴⁵

The Substance of Consciousness

This materialist outlook leaves no place for faith and Torah. In this essay I have tried to show that our prioritization of physical reality which seems so compellingly obvious to us – worthy of the status of premise – is actually a consequence of cultural history. The nature of our awareness today and the views on reality it fosters are not truer than those of the past. Rather, they result from humanity’s shifting center. It is how things appear from the vantage of the specific facet of personality where our consciousness is located in this age.

But the fact remains that we *are* located in our awareness of distinct individuality, as a result of which we naturally develop the Western worldview. Torah and faith seem at first glance dishonest. Are we therefore shut out from any genuine connection to this alternative? We have spoken about

essential European collective unconscious. The manner in which Roman influence warps Torah into Christianity is discussed in my book *The Intellect and the Exodus*.

45. Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*.

our subjective experience of self as the door through which man originally connected with transcendence, and that door remains available to us. But our present cultural context complicates walking through that door.

In the eyes of the Torah, the significance of consciousness is self-evident for, as we mentioned earlier, the Torah intentionally understands reality through the framework of our humanity. Consciousness is the defining element of that humanity and, therefore, the primary arena for engaging reality. But because we as children of the West identify reality with the material realm, we intuitively doubt the significance of conscious experience. Our only possibility of recovering “faith” in our inner experience as a valid path to truth is to work through our intuitive doubt in its legitimacy by consciously examining that inner experience and asking what reality, if any, we can attribute to it.

For even if we accept that the transcendent dimension of consciousness that led the ancient Near Eastern civilizations to worship was structural, and even if we understand that it is only an accident of history that prevents us from reaching this level of awareness, the conclusions we draw from this will be dependent upon our attitude toward consciousness generally. We can only draw implications about the nature of reality from our conscious experience if we attribute reality to conscious experience. Is it real?

It certainly seems real – we identify self much more with our conscious awareness than with our bodies. Philosophically, however, we are led to question its reality by our inability to explain its integration with material existence, which today is our baseline for what is real. After all, we experience our consciousness as free, whereas we understand the causally determined nature of physical reality to be absolute. Western rationalism has wrestled unsuccessfully with this question in one form or another for 2500 years!

The Torah embraces this enigma as a defining mystery of being, a consequence of the roots of existence lying in the spiritual realm beyond comprehension.⁴⁶ The West, building on its Greek intellectual tradition, assumes the world to be comprehensible and cannot accept the existence of a question that cannot be answered.⁴⁷ Thomas Nagel, emeritus professor

46. *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 6:1. See Rav Yitzchak Hutner, *Pachad Yitzchak Pesach* (Brooklyn: Gur Aryeh Institute for Advanced Jewish Scholarship, 1984), 64–68.

47. Nachmanides, *Leviticus* 15:8.

of Philosophy at NYU, in his book *Mind and Cosmos* considers the failure to answer this question a fatal indictment of Western materialism, one so serious it obligates us to search for an alternative interpretation of reality.⁴⁸ Traditionally, however, the philosophical approach has been that if two mutually exclusive things seem to exist together, we must be mistaken in thinking they both exist.

In the past, philosophers were inclined to reject the reality of physical existence in favor of the immediacy of consciousness. More recently, the compelling control given us by technology has made the denial of physical reality uncomfortably far fetched, so philosophers have begun to question and even deny the significance of consciousness. In its extreme version, the very existence of consciousness is denied, a position made tenable by the materialism of Rome. In this view, all that exists is matter. Man is to be understood as a physical entity in physical existence affecting the world in physically measurable ways, reducible to a mere input/output system.

This position is often attributed to Daniel Dennett, a respected academic philosopher. Dennett's ideas represent the endpoint of Roman materialism – unadulterated expression in its rawest form. The implication of Dennett's stance is absolute moral relativism. Moral relativism is not new. But in the past, it was usually attributed to our inability to *distinguish* moral truth. Dennett, however, denies that there is any such thing as moral truth, along with denying any basis to ideas and ideals whatsoever. With such a worldview, the possibility of God's existence does not even merit consideration.

We can argue with Dennett, but the acceptability of Dennett's position is indicative of the extreme poverty of inner awareness in our times. This limited self is reflected in our shallow expectations of our relationships with others. Researchers find that people readily accept and sometimes even prefer robots with their computerized brains as stand-ins for human beings to provide care, comfort, and relationship.⁴⁹ If we find ourselves interchangeable with a chunk of silicon, how can we attribute reality to conscious experience?

48. *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

49. See Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York: Basic Books, 2011). Turkle is an MIT professor in the sociology of technology. The entire book is both disturbing and relevant to this essay, but pp. 1–11 suffices to make this point.

Our default center of consciousness is so shallow that we have difficulty even engaging our subjectivity. We said that in the last stages of civilization, humanity is anchored in a subjective experience dominated by ego that blocks awareness of transcendence. Paradoxically, this ego-self, which is so strong that it excludes transcendent awareness, is so shallow and insignificant that it dissolves into our awareness of the world around us. Rather than reaching ultimate being by merging with our transcendent core, we forget self and must exert concerted effort to escape relating to ourselves as objects, which is the underlying origin of perspectival awareness.

This was already evident in the early stages of modernity when Descartes argued, “I think, therefore I am.” With this he proved his own existence and launched modern philosophy. The extraordinary power of Descartes’ *cogito* masks an odd dysfunction. Why should we vacate our subjective experience, our engagement of being, and turn to reason to prove our existence to ourselves? It is like taking a picture of a snow-capped peak and gazing at the photo to measure the mountain’s majesty or asking a friend to decide if I love someone.

How can we build from this inner desolation to conviction in the existence of a transcendent dimension? We can explain the cultural history behind this state of affairs, discuss at length the shortcomings of materialism, and argue for the existence of a transcendent reality. But in our present state of impoverished inner experience we will not be able to shake doubt in the authenticity of faith. For that matter, with faith so unnatural, how can we be true to ourselves and choose to even make the attempt? This is the reason that Leo Strauss’ support of Judaism, as unsatisfying as it is, seems friendly as a first approach. We lack the basis and context for a more powerful conviction in faith.

Choosing Depth

Work on this must begin with probing the question we raised about the nature of consciousness.⁵⁰ I think most of us retain “faith” that our non-

50. For recognition of God to be an honest option we would need to also address a point raised earlier – that our post-Greek vision of the world leaves no space for God as Creator. The Oral Torah, which the Jews began to develop in earnest under Greek rule, serves this purpose. The Oral Torah dissects reality down to its minutest details, then understands those details in the context of our relationship with God, consciously reconstructing them into an integrated world vision. This alone, however, does not provide the basis of faith, leaving us like a musician with

physical, inner experience and awareness is a real dimension of reality – or is our opening to a real dimension of reality. Included in this is the conviction that ideals, values, and morality, whatever they might be, also have validity. We are compelled to say that someone harming another for no reason is not just an inconvenience for society – he is doing something *wrong*.

For most of us this remains, despite all our cultural baggage, a premise – an integral part of our reality. Torah would call such a conviction an aspect of our *daat*, an idea that were we to lose it we would no longer recognize ourselves. If we were to repudiate morality, an essential part of us would die.

The Sages would tell us this sensitivity is a consequence of the continuing vitality of our inner connection to God (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 5:2). That is not necessarily obvious to us, but from our perspective, moral conviction at least confronts us with unavoidable and burning questions: What makes morality a reality? What is the basis of its truth? What is this ineffable inner awareness that I am that holds this conviction? Moral right and wrong is anchored outside of me, so where does that leave my self, which is inextricably tied to conviction in morality?

These questions were the starting point of my journey to faith. Not only does Western materialism fail to answer these questions, at this point in our cultural development it cannot even address them. This opened me to alternate visions and compelled me to explore them.

And even though my self is relatively shallow, I have been able to grow and deepen it over the years. This indicates to me that there is more, that my shallowness does not penetrate to the full depths of self and being and, therefore, not to the full depths of existence. In other words, my subjectivity, my being, is not “objective subjectivity,” but my growth indicates to me in what direction that lies.

In the end, the significance of consciousness cannot be proven one way or the other, which makes the conclusion we draw on the question and our conviction in it a premise. I have argued that what we accept as premises are a direct outgrowth of the nature of our inner experience. While this changes over historical time, it can also be altered to a degree through

great technique and no passion. The body of the relationship can be recovered in this way, but its heart needs something more. This something more can only come through engaging consciousness on another level. See the Gaon of Vilna’s commentary on *Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:5.

concerted effort. We can develop our conscious awareness to the point where its significance is compelling.

When Strauss discussed the differing premises of the philosopher and the Torah Jew, he identified acceptance of the existence of God as the one that separates the two camps. A modern person not raised in religion – the philosopher – finds inexplicable the possibility that anyone would accept God's existence as a premise. How could anyone hold as compellingly obvious something we find utterly implausible, something that looks more like a convenient fantasy born of weakness and self-interest than a fundamental truth? Strauss' debate would be much more interesting if belief in God was seen as a conclusion rather than as a premise. The divergence in premises between the philosopher and the religious Jew is better located in their attitudes toward consciousness. Is it real? Is it the primary reality? We can all accept this as a relevant question. How we each answer it determines how seriously we take the universal awareness of transcendence that characterized consciousness in the ancient world and the possibility of honest, genuine faith today.

More Complete Self

The Sages view the historical process that has led to our present circumstances as purposeful. It expands the scope of meaningful choice to include recognition of spirituality and all that it entails. We must choose how we relate to the realities available to us – the modes of engagement of the world with their implications for who we are on the most fundamental of levels. In the eyes of the Sages, our loss of intuitive faith allows us to grow up and take responsibility for our relationship with God.⁵¹

We recognize how critical it is that we seize this challenge when we realize how much of ourselves is missing. The shift from Near Eastern spirituality to Western materialism is roughly comparable to switching from an artistic mode of engagement to a scientific one. When we contemplate a flower as a scientist, for example, we may discover a chemical that cures a dreaded disease. But if we cannot also look at it as an artist, something of immeasurable worth is sacrificed – the wonder of the flower's beauty. Forgoing the artistic perspective does not just diminish the flower; it fundamentally diminishes us. Our world is the mirror in which we see ourselves reflected. Whatever facets of our humanity are not enlisted in

51. *Yoma* 29a. See Rav Tzadok Ha-Kohen, *Resisei Laila* 53.

our perception of our world are lost to us. We forget who we truly are or can be.

We presume that our focus today on physical reality yields truth because our predictions about nature are born out, so we sense that a turn to faith is a turn from reality. What we have shown in this essay is that though the Western secular outlook may have truth, it is an incomplete truth. When we identify it as complete, we turn it into a lie. So much of us that is essential is missing. As a consequence, so much of what reality has for us is also missing. We do not need to be exclusive in our focus on physical reality in the manner that current Western culture directs us. There is an element of choice involved in the matter.

We can grow, accessing deeper recesses of the self. I mentioned earlier that Moses is our paradigm for an individual who fully participated in God, achieving a deeper truth with a clarity and certainty that went far beyond the “peculiar binding power of the known” mentioned by Strauss. The Torah tells us something that at first sounds to our ears very strange. Truth is not reached by logic, at least not logic alone. The path to truth runs through character. If we are willing to open ourselves to the possibility and seize upon the questions that compel us to investigate alternative approaches to reality, Torah can become a gateway to our hidden depths rather than an odd, forced fit in a foreign puzzle.