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# ❧ BELIEF IN GOD ❧

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## Is There a Mitzvah to Believe?

The cornerstone of Jewish belief is that God created the universe *ex nihilo* with the Torah as His Divine plan, and that He continually guides and supervises His creation. The goal of this class is to examine whether or not Judaism features a specific mitzvah commanding us to believe in God. Since some students may find the topic of “Why Believe in God” as too “frontal,” this class analyzes whether or not there is a mitzvah to believe in God and allows the students to ask “why believe?” on their own.

This class addresses the essential question:

~ Is there a mitzvah to believe in God?

### Class Outline:

- Section I. Definition of the Mitzvah to Believe in God
- Section II. The Approach of Maimonides in his List of Mitzvot
- Section III. The Approach of Behag
- Section IV. The Approach of Nachmanides
- Section V. The Approach of Maimonides in his Mishneh Torah

## SECTION I: DEFINITION OF THE MITZVAH TO BELIEVE IN GOD

Rather than an “active instruction,” the opening to the Ten Commandments that the Jewish people were given at Sinai is a statement: “I am the Lord, your God.” All opinions concerning whether faith is a mitzvah or not (which are discussed in later sections) concur that this belief is central to the entire Torah.

### 1. Shemot (Exodus) 20:2 – The opening to the Ten Commandments.

I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me.

אֲנִכִּי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים: לֹא-יְהִיֶּה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל-פְּנֵי

### 2. Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 25 – Our fundamental belief.

The mitzvah to believe in God is to believe that there is a single unitary God Who brought into being all that exists by His power and desire, and that He is eternal. Furthermore, that He brought us out of Egypt and gave us the Torah.

מצות האמונה במציאות השם יתברך:  
להאמין שיש לעולם אלוה אחד שהמציא כל הנמצא,  
ומכחו וחפצו היה כל מה שהוא, ושהיה ושהיה לעדי  
עד, וכי הוא הוציאנו מארץ מצרים ונתן לנו התורה.

### 3. Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Makkot 24a – Faith is the central principle of the Torah.

Habakkuk came, and condensed all of them [all of the mitzvot of the Torah] into one, as it says, “The righteous person lives according to his faith.”

בא חבקוק והעמידן על אחת שנאמר וצדיק באמונתו  
יחיה.

## SECTION II: THE APPROACH OF MAIMONIDES (RAMBAM) IN HIS LIST OF MITZVOT

### 1. Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Asei # 1. – Believing in God as the Originator of the universe is the first of the 613 mitzvot of the Torah.

The First Commandment is the commandment in which we were commanded to believe in God. That is, we must believe that there is an Originator and Cause, Who is the Catalyst for all of existence. As God said, “I am the Lord your God” (Shemot 20:2 and Devarim/Deuteronomy 5:6).

And at the end of Tractate Makkot (23b) it is written: 613 mitzvot were said to Moshe (Moses) at Sinai. What is the verse [that hints] to this? “Torah was commanded to us through Moshe”

המצווה הראשונה היא הציווי שנצטוונו להאמין  
באלהות, והוא: שנאמין שיש (שם) עילה וסיבה, שהיא  
הפועל לכל הנמצאים. וזהו אמרו יתעלה: “אנכי ה'  
אלקיך” (שמות כ, ב ודברים ה, ו).

ובסוף גמרא מכות אמרו: “תרי”ג מצוות אמרו לו  
למשה בסיני. מאי קרא? תורה ציווה לנו משה” (דברים  
לג, ד) כלומר: מנין תו”ר ה’.

(Devarim 33:4). That is to say [that the] numerical equivalent of Torah [was given to us through Moshe].

The Gemara then asks the following [rhetorical] question: “How much does the word ‘*Torah*’ equal in gematria”?

[To which it answers] “611” [So where are the other two?]

And the explanation is that [the two commandments of] “I am the Lord your God” and “You shall have no other God” were heard directly from the “mouth” of God.

Thus it is made clear that “I am the Lord ...” is part of the count of 613 mitzvot.

And this is the commandment to believe, as I have explained.

והקשו על זה ואמרו: “תורה בגימטריא הכי הוי?”

שש מאות וחד סרי הוי!”.

ובאה התשובה: “אנכי ה' אלקיך' ו'לא יהיה לך' מפי הגבורה שמעום”.

הנה נתבאר לך, שאנכי ה' מכלל תרי"ג מצוות,

והוא ציווי להאמין, כמו שביארנו

## SECTION III: THE APPROACH OF BEHAG

1. **Nachmanides (Ramban), commentary to Sefer HaMitzvot – According to Behag, the principle of belief cannot be enumerated among the 613 mitzvot because it precedes the mitzvot, forming the foundation upon which all the other mitzvot are built.**

It seems that the view of the Baal Halachot Gedolot (Behag) is that the count of 613 commandments are His decrees, may He be exalted, that He decreed upon us to do or to refrain from doing.

But belief in His exalted existence that He made known to us with signs and wonders and the revelation of His Presence before our very eyes, this is the central point, the root from which [all] the commandments are “born” – this was not listed [in the 613].

והנראה מדעתו של בעל ההלכות שאין מנין תרי"ג מצוות אלא גזירותיו יתעלה שגזר עלינו לעשות או מנענו שלא נעשה אבל האמונה במציאותו יתע' שהודיע אותה אלינו באותות ובמופתים ובגילוי השכינה לעינינו הוא העיקר והשורש שממנו נולדו המצוות לא ימנה בחשבונן.

Nachmanides (Rambam) then quotes the following Midrash (brought in the Mechilta):

A parable: A king enters a country and his servants tell him, “Make decrees for them!”

משל למלך שנכנס למדינה אמרו לו עבדיו גזור עליהם גזירות. אמר להם לאו כשיקבלו מלכותי אגזור עליהם

He responds, "If only they would accept my reign, I would make decrees upon them. Because if they do not accept my reign, how can they fulfill My decrees?"

So said God to Israel: "I am the Lord your God ... you shall have no other gods."

"...Just like you accepted My reign, so too accept My commandments, You shall have no other gods."

גזירות שאם מלכותי אינן מקבלים גזרותי היאך מקיימין

כך אמר המקום לישראל אנכי יי' אלהיך לא יהיה לך

... כשם שקבלתם מלכותי קבלו גזירותי לא יהיה לך.

Nachmanides then adds:

Accepting the Kingship [of God] is one matter, and the commandments and decrees ... are another matter.

קבלת המלכות עניין בפני עצמו והמצוות הנגזרות ... מעניין אחר

## SECTION IV: THE APPROACH OF NACHMANIDES (RAMBAN)

### 1. **Ramban, Shemot (20:2) – Nachmanides' (Ramban) own opinion is that belief forms the foundation of all the other mitzvot, yet it is also a mitzvah in its own right.**

"I am the Lord your God." This statement is a positive commandment.

He said, "I am the Lord" in order to instruct and command the Jewish people that they should know and believe that there is a God.

That is to say: He exists, and always existed, and everything came into being through His desire and ability. He is their God Whom they are obligated to serve ...

God said to the Jews, "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no [other Gods]." [In other words, God said,] "It is I Whose Kingship you accepted on yourselves in Egypt."

They (the Jews) replied, "Yes it is true."

[God then said,] "If you accept my Kingship you should accept my laws." That is, after you have accepted and agree that I am the Lord and I am your God [as you saw] from Egypt, now accept my mitzvot!" (Shemot 20:2).

אנכי ה' אלהיך הדבור הזה מצות עשה,

אמר אנכי ה', יורה ויצוה אותם שידעו ויאמינו כי יש ה', והוא אלהים להם,

כלומר הווה, קדמון, מאתו היה הכל בחפץ ויכולת, והוא אלהים להם, שחייבים לעבוד אותו ...

...אמר המקום לישראל אנכי ה' אלהיך לא יהיה לך, אני הוא שקבלתם מלכותי עליכם במצרים

אמרו לו הן,

כשקבלתם מלכותי קבלו גזרותי, כלומר אחר שאתם מקבלים עליכם ומודים שאני ה' ואני אלהיכם מארץ מצרים קבלו כל מצותי!

## SECTION V: THE APPROACH OF MAIMONIDES IN HIS MISHNEH TORAH

In the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides reiterates his position in the Sefer HaMitzvot quoted above in Section II, that the fundamental belief in God is a mitzvah. He also expands the definition of this fundamental faith to include the necessity, independence, and power of His existence.

### 1. Rambam, Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah (Laws of the Foundations of the Torah) 1:1-6 6 – God's is the only existence.

1. The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of [all] wisdoms is to know that there is a First Cause. And He created all that exists. All that exists in the heavens and earth and everything in between only exists due to the truth of His existence.
2. If it were imaginable that He did not exist, then nothing else could exist.
3. If it were imaginable that nothing else but He existed, He would continue to exist and would not be negated [in any way] through their negation. This is because all of existence needs Him, and He – Blessed be He – does not need them, not [even] one of them! Therefore, His Truth (or “reality”) is not like any of their truths.
4. ... This is what the Torah means when it says, “There is none other than He” (Devarim 4:35). That is, there is no true existence besides Him.
5. This Being is the God of the world, Master of all the earth. He is the Controller of the world with a power that is endless and limitless. The world turns constantly and it is impossible that it do so without a “Controller” (literally – Turner). He, the Blessed One, is the Controller who does so without a physical hand or form.
6. The knowledge of [all] this is a Positive Commandment, as it says, “I am the Lord, your God” (Shemot 20:2).

[א] יסוד היסודות ועמוד החכמות, לידע שיש שם מצוי ראשון. והוא ממציא כל הנמצא; וכל הנמצאים מן שמיים וארץ ומה ביניהם, לא נמצאו אלא מאמיתת הימצאו.

[ב] ואם יעלה על הדעת שהוא אינו מצוי, אין דבר אחר יכול להימצאות.

[ג] ואם יעלה על הדעת שאין כל הנמצאים מלבדו מצויים, הוא לבדו יהיה מצוי ולא ייבטל הוא לביטולם: שכל הנמצאים צריכין לו; והוא ברוך הוא אינו צריך להם, ולא לאחד מהם. לפיכך אין אמיתתו כאמיתת אחד מהם.

[ד] ... והוא שהתורה אומרת “אין עוד, מלבדו” (דברים ד, לה), כלומר אין שם מצוי אמת מלבדו כמותו.

[ה] המצוי הזה--הוא אלוה העולם, אדון כל הארץ. והוא המנהיג הגלגל בכוח שאין לו קץ ותכלית, בכוח שאין לו הפסק, שהגלגל סובב תמיד, ואי אפשר שיסוב בלא מסבב; והוא ברוך הוא המסבב אותו, בלא יד ולא גוף.

[ו] וידעת דבר זה מצות עשה, שנאמר “אנוכי ה' אלוהיך” (שמות כב; דברים ה, ו).