

אני מאמין

# I Believe

Faith in a world of doubt



chief

Rabbi Warren Goldstein

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Warren Goldstein", positioned below the printed name.

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## Introduction

I have a feeling that this may be the most important essay I've ever written. What could be more important than discovering the truth about the purpose of life?

In this essay, I explore faith in a world of doubt, applying science, philosophy, psychology and history to demonstrate that God created us and our universe with purpose, and that the Torah reveals what that purpose is, and how we pursue it.

Faith goes to the heart of how we understand what it means to be a Jew. Is our Judaism a quaint cultural heritage with heartwarming customs that provide a comfortable ethnic identity? Or is it the source of life's deepest truths? Is the Torah just a nice book of stories with good values? Or is it our Creator's blueprint for the meaning of life? When we sit in shul on Yom Kippur and ask God for forgiveness and pray for a good new year—is it just a social convention we follow out of habit, or is it real for us?

Instinctively, as Jews, we know that our faith is the most real thing we have. And that becomes clear at moments of crisis when life is stripped of all superficial trappings, when all we have is the truth. Amid the horrors of October 7, piercing cries of the *Shema* were heard coming from those in their last moments, and from those who, waiting to be saved by

the soldiers from their places of hiding, used these ancient words of faith as their way of identifying themselves as Jews.

On that dark day, the Jewish faith instinct kicked in, for both those who had been religious before that moment and those who had not—a reflex woven into the depth of our souls by our Creator, an identity emblazoned on our national psyche by thousands of years of history. How do we access this kind of faith? What does it mean to be a believing Jew? In the pages that follow, we will explore these questions, and more.

Thank you for giving your time to this essay, which I hope will be as much of a journey of discovery for you to read, as it was for me to write.

With heartfelt prayers for a new year of life, blessing and peace for all,



CHIEF RABBI

*Warne Goldstein*

## Faith in a world of doubt

“Do you believe in God?”

Albert Einstein was asked this in an interview shortly after his fiftieth birthday. I have always felt that the question itself is a chutzpah. It reminds me of a cartoon I once saw of two fish swimming in the ocean, and one asks the other: “Do you believe in water?”

And yet, atheism is an ideology with many adherents in Western society today, especially in academia and among those who regard themselves as intellectuals. So I thought a good place to start our discussion is to consider the answer given to this question of faith by one of the great scientific minds, a Jew who redefined humanity’s understanding of the universe through his groundbreaking theories. This was Einstein’s response:<sup>1</sup>

*“I am not an atheist. The problem is too vast for our limited minds. We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many languages. The child knows that someone must have written those books. It*

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), ch.17. All the references to and quotes from Einstein in this essay come from ch.17 in Isaacson’s book as cited here.

*does not know how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the arrangement of the books but doesn't know what it is. That seems to me, is the attitude of even the most intelligent human being toward God. We see the universe marvellously arranged and obeying certain laws, but only dimly understand these laws."*

It is significant that Einstein, through his profound comprehension of the complexity of the universe and the laws governing the natural world, acknowledged that the only rational explanation for it all is God. By implication, he rejects Darwinism, which posits that plant, animal and human life forms emerged by accident through random evolutionary processes, without intelligent design.

Einstein's implicit rejection of random evolution is gaining traction among many scientists today who refuse to attribute the perfection, precision and sophistication of the natural world, or the unfathomable complexity of the human mind, to blind chance or random accident. To be clear, the phenomenon of micro changes within a particular species of animal through an evolutionary process of adapting to its environment—like the length of a bird's beak—is not disputed or controversial. What is being challenged is that the theory of random evolution can explain the origin of life itself or the creation of complex living creatures from simple organisms.

One striking example of the trend towards intelligent design is found in a new book by Professor Stephen Meyer, *Return of the God Hypothesis: Three Scientific Discoveries that Reveal the Mind Behind the Universe*.<sup>2</sup> In this work, Professor Meyer, a widely respected Cambridge academic, explores the history of science and its relationship with belief in God, showing how faith in a Creator is making a comeback among scientists.

Meyer contrasts this resurgence with the perspective of the “new atheists”, Richard Dawkins and others, who advocate an extreme neo-Darwinian view of the universe. Dawkins, for example, declared that the universe “has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, only blind, pitiless indifference”.

Yet Meyer presents three major scientific discoveries that demonstrate what he calls the “God hypothesis”, which dominated scientific thought for centuries, and is now resurging among many of the world’s greatest scientists. This hypothesis argues that from a purely scientific perspective, the evidence points to the intelligent design of a wilful creator possessing the qualities attributed to God.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen C. Meyer, *Return of the God Hypothesis: Three Scientific Discoveries That Reveal the Mind Behind the Universe* (New York: HarperOne, 2021), ch.9. All the references to and quotes from Meyer in this essay come from ch.9 of his book as cited here. This includes the references he cites, such as the quotes from Bill Gates and Richard Dawkins below.

## **“DNA is like a computer program”**

Just to give you a taste of the book, which I highly recommend, Meyer describes how the discovery of DNA by molecular biologists deals a fatal blow to random evolution as a plausible theory for the origin of life. Scientists discovered that DNA operates as an advanced information system conveying instructions using coding sequences in alphabetic or digital forms to build and run even the most basic components that make up a living cell. In short, as Bill Gates observed, “DNA is like a computer program.”

This reality poses two devastating problems for random evolution. The first problem is its mathematical improbability. Even for the most primitive single-celled organism, the DNA stores the assembly instructions for building its crucial proteins. Meyer demonstrates that the probability of randomly producing even a single functional protein of modest length (150 amino acids) is a one in  $10^{164}$  chance, which puts it in the realm of the ridiculously implausible.

And even that, as Meyer explains, doesn't give you enough functional protein: “The number of combinations thus produced would still represent only a tiny portion—less than one out of a trillion trillion—of the total number of possible amino-acid combinations corresponding to a functional protein.” And this is just a single protein—a living cell requires hundreds of them. And that is only one cell—the average human being has 36 trillion cells.

The discovery of DNA dealt another fatal blow to the theory of random evolution. Until then, scientists assumed that the universe consisted of only two basic entities: matter and energy. With the new DNA discoveries, they revealed a third fundamental component of life: information. Information is non-physical. The theory of random evolution cannot explain how non-material information came into being through only physical forces and materials.

Meyer makes the point that accepted scientific methodology when seeking the most plausible explanation for an observable phenomenon is to rely on what is called “uniform experience”, which means what we know from experiencing other similar phenomena. And as he puts it, “our experience of the twenty-first century information revolution, to say nothing of centuries of using and generating information, suggests that the presence of functional information—especially in an alphabetic or digital form—is one of those qualities that we *should expect* only if intelligent design and purpose had played a role in the origins of life”.

In his book, Meyer presents two other major scientific discoveries that prove that the only plausible explanation for the existence of the universe and complex life forms within it is a master creator possessing all the qualities we attribute to God. As Einstein put it: *“Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the universe—a spirit vastly superior to*

*that of man, and one in the face of which we, with our modest powers, must feel humble.”*

Einstein would have been counted among this growing group of scientists who acknowledge the overwhelming scientific evidence for a Divine creator.

### **Einstein's blind spot**

But Einstein couldn't take it to the next level. Walter Isaacson, in his acclaimed book, *Einstein. His Life and Universe*, cites statements in which Einstein qualified his belief in God. For example:

*“I cannot conceive of a personal God who would directly influence the actions of individuals or who would sit in judgement on creatures of His own creation.”*

Isaacson also recounts a telling moment when a little girl, a 6<sup>th</sup> grader in a Sunday school in New York, asked Einstein:

*“Do scientists pray?”*

Einstein's response was clear:

*“A scientist will hardly be inclined to believe that events could be influenced by a prayer, ie, by a wish addressed to a supernatural being.”<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that later scientific studies have rejected Einstein's assumptions about prayer, and clinically demonstrated its efficacy. For example, a 2001 study conducted at Duke University Medical Center on a group of 150 cardiac patients uncovered some extraordinary findings. The patients, all of whom were receiving post-operative therapy treatment, were

At another time, when pressed on the nature of his belief in God, Einstein said:

*“I am a determinist. I do not believe in free will. Jews believe in free will. They believe that man shapes his own life. I reject that doctrine. In that respect, I am not a Jew.”*

Isaacson adds that Einstein did not believe in the existence of the soul, or, consequently, in life after death. All this puts Einstein in direct opposition to the foundational principles of Judaism, as he himself acknowledged: “In that respect, I am not a Jew.” As Jews, we believe in a deeply personal God, in human free will, in the soul and a spiritual dimension, in a world of Divine meaning and purpose.

Where did Einstein go wrong? He was one of the greatest scientists of all time. But he was a scientist, not a philosopher. Einstein understood the physical world—the laws of atoms, molecules, energy, mass, time and space. His error wasn’t in science. I would never dare to question his expertise in that field, especially since it is not my own.

But where Einstein made a critical error was in the area of philosophy. Logically, no intelligent being with the level of sophistication and brilliance required to create this

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split into two subgroups—one subgroup had people praying for their well-being, the other subgroup didn’t. The findings showed the subgroup that was prayed for had significantly better treatment outcomes than the group that received the treatment alone. Most notably, the study was double-blind—neither the researchers, nor those being prayed for, knew about the prayers. And it wasn’t a once-off either. A comparable double-blind study, conducted at San Francisco General Hospital’s Coronary Care Unit, demonstrated similar results.

world—to create the human being, to create a human mind like Einstein’s—would act irrationally. And to create a world and have no purpose or reason for having done so would be irrational.

Let me give you an analogy. Imagine someone builds a house—a beautiful, multi-storied house, with a lavish garden, exquisitely furnished and adorned with magnificent artwork, everything meticulously put together. Now imagine you find the house standing empty. So you approach the owner of the house—the one who built it, paid for it, invested time and effort in it—and you ask them: “Why did you build this house?” And they respond: “For no reason.” You’d be puzzled, and ask: “But you don’t live in it? Did you build it for someone else to live in? Was it an investment?” And they say: “No, I built it for no reason at all.”

That answer would make no sense. A person wouldn’t build such a house without some reason, some purpose. To invest time, effort and other resources into building something so magnificent, only to then claim it was done without any purpose—that would be irrational to the point of insanity. Similarly, to claim that God created this magnificent universe—which is immeasurably more sophisticated and complex than any house—without any purpose is to claim that this intelligent being operates without reason or rationality. That claim itself is philosophically flawed.

But it's actually even more troubling than that. According to Einstein, God not only created the world without purpose, He also has no interest whatsoever in the actions of the people He created, no care for the outcome of their lives, no concern for what happens in His universe.

Here's another, more disturbing, analogy. Imagine parents telling you: "We don't love our children. We have no interest in them. We don't care whether they live or die, are happy or sad, are succeeding or failing, are hurting or celebrating." What would you say to such parents? You would feel that this is more than just insanity. It's the mindset of a psychopath.

For Einstein to claim that God created the world with no purpose—that He has no care, interest or love for His creations—is to attribute to God a detached, psychopathic nature. It is to portray the Creator of the universe as a soulless machine, which would explain why some have described Einstein's views as "a cloak beneath which hides the ghastly apparition of atheism".

Once Einstein moved beyond Darwinism and recognised the intelligent design of the universe, the next logical step should have been to conclude that God created the world with purpose, with care, with concern for His creation.

What led Einstein to make such a basic philosophical mistake? What caused him to pronounce, unscientifically, in the field of philosophy that was not his area of expertise?

Although I have no evidence, I suspect it was the social pressure of mixing in the elite circles of Western Europe's intelligentsia. At that time and place, it was fashionable to be an atheist, just as Sigmund Freud, Bertrand Russell and many others were. To his credit, as an objective scientist, Einstein did not *totally* succumb to the peer pressure of the time, because he refused to ignore the overwhelming evidence for intelligent design. But he conceded only to the bare minimum of belief in God as the Creator of the universe, and in failing to take the next logical step, made an error in philosophical reasoning, stumbling into his own form of atheism.

Einstein wanted it both ways, to affirm that God created the universe but deny it has purpose and meaning. At least Darwinism is consistent in this regard—the universe and all life forms, including human life, is the product of a series of random accidents, with “no design, no purpose, only blind, pitiless indifference”. But as human beings, we know this deeply, intuitively, to be false.

### **Frankl's psychology and the soul**

This brings me to the next part of our discussion. We've explored arguments from science and philosophy, now let's turn to psychology. Viktor Frankl was a fellow Jew and contemporary of Einstein, but who tragically wasn't able to escape Europe in time to avoid the clutches of the Nazis. Frankl made a paradigm-shifting contribution to psychology, of the same magnitude as Einstein's contributions to science.

You may remember that I wrote about Frankl in this publication three years ago. Through his experiences in the Holocaust, Frankl came to the conclusion that the deepest need for human beings is not, as other schools of psychology argued, the accumulation of power, the experience of pleasure or the acquisition of possessions. It is the search for meaning. Ultimately, human beings are meaning-seeking creatures, and that, he held, is the greatest driver of human behaviour.

Frankl never intended for his theory to be understood in a theological sense, in the way that Judaism speaks of serving God and finding Divine purpose. He believed that even those who don't believe in God or a higher purpose can find psychological health and solace by subjectively attributing personal meaning to their lives.

But let's ask a deeper question—one that, to the best of my knowledge, Frankl himself did not address but which, to me, emerges naturally from his work. How can it be that if a human being is purely material—made up only of atoms and molecules, the product of a random evolutionary process, no different from an amoeba, a monkey, a dog or a bird—that the deepest human drive is for meaning? From where does this innate need for meaning come? How does a purely material being possess such spiritual longing? Atoms and molecules cannot “search for meaning”.

The inescapable conclusion is that the human being is not simply physical. We must have a spiritual dimension that is the source of the basic human need for meaning. Through Frankl, modern psychology brings an honest person to acknowledge that, as humans, we have a real, tangible spiritual entity woven into our physical makeup—a soul.

That is the fundamental difference between humans and animals. Animals do not seek meaning. Animals seek only survival. You won't find, for example, your pet Labrador wondering about the purpose of life or getting depressed because he's simply chasing his tail and running around the garden. As long as he has his bowl of food, water and a place to sleep, he is going to be a happy, high-functioning dog. Animals do have a God-given life force—a capacity for emotional connection, even—but they do not have a soul, which is unique to human beings.

From Frankl, therefore, we know that Einstein was wrong when he said that the human being, like his conception of God, is a machine with no free will, no morality, no soul—the perfect description of a modern AI tool. No matter how sophisticated AI becomes, no machine can ever have a psychological need for meaning and purpose. This requires consciousness, self-awareness, a metaphysical aspect, a *soul*.

That is why, as human beings, we know instinctively that Darwinism is false, that Richard Dawkins is making an awful

mistake when he says that the universe has “no design, no purpose, only blind, pitiless indifference”. Beyond the scientific arguments that refute this bleak picture of existence, we understand in a profoundly intuitive way that our lives are not an accident. Deep down, we *know* that our lives have meaning and purpose. We know that our need for meaning emanates from our soul, our essence.

So, if we take Einstein’s scientific view that the universe was created by God, combine it with the philosophy of purpose that follows logically from that, and then add to it Frankl’s assertion that the deepest human need is for meaning, we arrive at an inescapable conclusion—that God created humanity, the only spiritual creatures in the universe, to fulfil a higher purpose.

### **Proof from history**

This leads to an obvious question: how would we know what our God-given purpose is, unless He revealed it to us? It follows, therefore, that God would seek to reveal to humanity His purpose for creation and our role within it.<sup>4</sup> As Jews, we know when that moment was, because it is a part of our history.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See this argument made by Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman *hy”d* in Kovetz Ma’amarim no.1.

<sup>5</sup> The argument from history as it appears in the main text is based on the writings of Rabbi Lawrence Kelemen, *Permission to Receive* (Michigan: Targum Press, 1996), Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb, and others, who have drawn on the approach of earlier rabbinic philosophers such as Rabbi Yehudah Halevi and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.

There are things we know through the verification process of accepted recorded history. Certain events, especially, stand out as undeniable because their scale is such that the record of these events could never have been fabricated. No one alive today knew Alexander the Great or Napoleon Bonaparte, or many other figures from history. Yet we know beyond reasonable doubt that they existed and carried out what is recorded in our history books. To say that their stories were fabricated, that, somehow, the sweeping military campaigns they prosecuted and political shifts they brought about, affecting nations and continents, were simply invented and fraudulently inserted into the history books, would be absurd.

Another example. We know, as historical fact, that the Holocaust happened, and that six million Jews were murdered. We know, as historical fact, that there was a man named Adolf Hitler who waged war on Europe and slaughtered its Jews. We never met him or any of the other Nazi leaders, but we don't doubt what happened. This does not mean that some people, with a hateful agenda, won't try to deny it. But the notion that it was fabricated, as some Holocaust deniers claim, is irrational. The sheer scale of the events makes the historical record impossible to fabricate.

In the same way that we know these historical facts, as Jews, we also know the historical facts of the origins of our people. We know that God redeemed us from slavery in Egypt with the Ten Plagues and the splitting of the sea, and then spoke to us at Sinai to reveal the Torah. We know this

because these events are too big to fabricate and we Jews have been retelling what happened around our *Seder* tables for generations.

This is not to make the simplistic argument that if people believe something happened then it must have happened. People believe all kinds of things. After all, there are many religions, some with millions and even billions of followers, who believe competing claims to truth. They can't all be true. But Judaism is in a different category. It makes claims that no other religion makes. It makes claims about major historical events that were experienced by an entire nation. Every other religion in recorded human history is based on the claim of an individual or a small group of individuals that God appeared to them, performed various miracles for them and told them to found a new religion. These claims can neither be proved nor disproved. You either believe in the integrity and honesty of those making the claim or you do not.

Judaism is the only religion that makes the claim that an entire nation—the Jews—witnessed the open miracles of the Exodus and soon after heard God speak to them directly as He announced the Ten Commandments.

There can be no bolder claim—and it is made with real specificity. The two defining events of Jewish history—the Exodus from Egypt and the mass revelation at Sinai—happened in full view of the entire nation exactly 3 336 years ago, fifty days apart, beginning with leaving Egypt on Wednesday the 15<sup>th</sup>

of the Jewish month of Nissan at midnight, and culminating with God speaking to the Jewish people on the 6<sup>th</sup> of Sivan, a Shabbos morning, unveiling the Ten Commandments to the entire nation, approximately three million men, women and children as eyewitnesses.

Although these events happened thousands of years ago, the same principles of verifiable history applying to more recent events like the Holocaust apply here as well. To understand how, let's play out the scenario as if none of this happened—that the Jews were never enslaved in Egypt, freed by God with miracles or heard Him speak—to test whether it is a plausible theory.

Imagine the Jewish nation is living peacefully in its land and someone comes out of nowhere and says to the Jews of the time that—even though they've never heard about it—their ancestors were slaves in Egypt for hundreds of years, and then God freed them with the Ten Plagues, and split the sea to allow them to escape their pursuers, before drowning the entire Egyptian army, the great superpower of the time. And then the entire people heard God speak to them at Sinai.

In the imagined scenario, if the leader who tries to introduce this fanciful story claimed the events happened just a few years earlier—no one would accept that, because they would know if they were personally enslaved and miraculously liberated. His only chance would be to claim that these events happened centuries before. But even then, how would he

convince the Jews of that time, the descendants of those who had supposedly experienced mass slavery and miraculous deliverance, to accept his wondrous tale, when none of them had heard even the vaguest mention of these events? If what he claimed was true—how could it be that none of the millions of the descendants of those who were supposedly enslaved by the Egyptians and freed by God had any knowledge of it? If his claim were more limited—that these events only happened to a small group within the nation—then he could plausibly explain to the Jews of his time why they had not heard about it. But his claim is that the entire nation, every Jew at the time, had experienced these dramatic events.

How, then, would he have managed to convince the Jews of that first generation that they must, for example, carry out a *Seder*, and all the other laws of Pesach, even though they had never heard of the momentous historic events the *Seder* commemorates? And how would the *Seder* have then become so important that future generations would observe it for thousands of years, until today?

The only rational, plausible explanation is that these events *actually* took place. No one could have introduced these earth-shattering events into Jewish history had they been fabricated because all the descendants of those who had supposedly experienced these things would have heard about them if they had, in fact, occurred. Therefore, the claim of a complete national experience cannot be fabricated.

This explains why Judaism is the only religion to have ever made such an audacious claim. If the strongest claim a religion can make to its legitimacy and authenticity is that of mass revelation to an entire nation, why has no other religion—apart from Judaism—made that claim? The answer is because if it is not true, you can't get away with it. It is an unbelievable lie. The claim that the entire nation heard God speak to them is too big and too audacious to fabricate. It must have happened.

### **God's blueprint revealed**

What emerges from science, philosophy, psychology and history is the picture of an awesome being we call God, who created the universe in all its brilliance and complexity, and did so with a clear purpose—which He communicated to humanity, at a particular moment in history, through a mass revelation to a slave nation He personally freed from slavery.

After delivering the Ten Commandments—at the request of and in full view of the entire Jewish nation—God designated Moses to receive and convey the rest. God gave over this information in two forms. There is the Written Torah—the Chumash, or “Five Books”, which He dictated word for word to Moses. Then there is the Oral Torah—the interpretation and elaboration of the text, also given by God to Moses and handed down through the generations, in an unbroken line of transmission from teacher to student, all the way through

to the sages, who distilled these teachings into the key texts we have today in the Talmud.

We have an exact record of the names of each of the leading sages in every generation responsible for the accurate transmission of the Oral Torah, dating back from the moment it was given 3 336 years ago, all the way through to today.<sup>6</sup>

Which means that today, in the Torah and the Talmud, we have in our hands the most precious gift known to humankind—the full, documented system of God’s blueprint for creation. Let’s pause for a moment and consider the implications of this. It means that we don’t have to speculate. All is revealed—by the Creator, Himself. We have in our possession the foundational truths of existence from the One who created everything.

This means that to be a Jew is not a cultural, national or ethnic identity. It is not about preserving quaint, heartwarming customs inherited from our grandparents. We don’t give charity or act with compassion, keep Shabbat or kosher, because these are nice things to do. We do them because the Creator of the universe says that we need to do these things to fulfil our life purpose.

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<sup>6</sup> The Rambam, in his general introduction to his commentary on the Mishna, traces the line of transmission by naming the leading sage in each generation from Sinai to the final edit of the Talmud around the year 500 CE. From that point in history, we can trace the line of sages and communities all the way to the present. Rashi, for example, one of our great commentators, who lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, traced his lineage directly to King David.

Everything we do as Jews only makes sense as an expression of our faith. When we pray, we acknowledge and connect with God. When we say *Kaddish*, we recognise the immortality of the soul of our loved one. When we have a *Seder*, we reaffirm for ourselves and our children the historical facts of our origins. When we gather around the Shabbos table every week, we declare that God is the Creator of the universe.

The Torah is not a book of comforting stories and nice things that we tell ourselves and our children. It is not even about an ancient heritage that has stood the test of time. To be a Jew is to recognise and live by the truth revealed to us by God.

### **Thirteen foundational truths**

Once we know what is true and real, then the meaning and purpose of life, and what we have to do, become clear. As a system authored by God, the Torah is all true, but there are a few *essential truths* that are the foundations on which Judaism rests. Without the clarity of these first principles, we are lost. Once we know them, everything else falls into place. They inform and frame the way we live.

These truths were revealed by God at Sinai, handed down through generations, recorded in the Written Torah and the Talmud, and eventually distilled into thirteen core principles by one of the great sages of Jewish history, Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon, known as Maimonides or the Rambam.

These are the foundational truths of Judaism:<sup>7</sup>

1. God is the Creator and source of everything that exists.
2. God is indivisible, the one and only God, the sole source of existence, without comparison to any other being.
3. God transcends any physical form or limitations that constrain other beings in the material universe.
4. God exists beyond time. He is eternal, preceding time and continuing to exist once the physical universe is no more.
5. God is the only being appropriate for a person to turn to in prayer.
6. God can and has communicated directly with certain rare individuals—prophets—of unique spiritual, intellectual and moral greatness, making them worthy of receiving such communication, as recorded in the Bible.
7. Moses was the greatest prophet of all, and the only one to whom God spoke directly, “face to face, as a person would speak to his fellow”.<sup>8</sup>
8. The entire Torah we have today is exactly the same Torah given by God to Moses, who accurately recorded the

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<sup>7</sup> The formulation of the thirteen principles in this essay is based on the Rambam in his introductory commentary on the Mishna in Sanhedrin, “All Israel have a portion in the world-to-come”. The Mishna then proceeds to list exceptions to this rule—those who, as a result of their beliefs, do not qualify for the title “Israel” and therefore do not enter the world-to-come, on which the Gemara elaborates. The Rambam distilled the thirteen principles from the outcomes to these discussions in the Talmud.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 33:11. See also Numbers 12:8.

Written Torah as dictated by God word for word, and who faithfully conveyed the Oral Torah as taught to him directly by God.

9. The Torah we have can never be changed or replaced.
10. God is aware of the thoughts and actions of all people.
11. God rewards those who keep His mitzvahs and holds accountable those who violate them.
12. God will send the Messiah to usher in the final redemption for the world.
13. At this time of redemption, God will miraculously bring back to life those passed who merit it.

These principles speak for themselves. And yet, they are just the bare essentials, the foundations that hold up the building of Judaism, but needing the surrounding meaning and narrative of the Torah to give us the full picture. I will attempt to fill in some of that big picture now.

### **A loving Creator: Principles 1-4**

The first four principles form a basic description of what we know about God. As beings encased in a body and a material world, God is beyond our full understanding, as He told Moses: “No human being can see Me and live.”<sup>9</sup> What we *can* know, however, is that God is the Creator and source of

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<sup>9</sup> Exodus 33:20

all existence (Principle 1), that no other being is even remotely similar to Him (Principle 2), and that He transcends the basic elements of the physical world—space (Principle 3) and time (Principle 4). These principles are connected.

Acknowledging God as the Creator of the universe means He transcends His creations. He created space and therefore cannot be contained by it. He has no material body or form, which means that we cannot see God. Transcending the physical also means that God cannot be defined or described using the conventional terms that apply to physical beings, such as a body, movement, gender, sickness, sleep. He is above anger or resentment, emotional or physical needs. Because He created time, He is above it. There is no concept of before or after when it comes to God. He is eternal.

With God as the Creator there is nothing random about the awesome world. Considering the all-powerful transcendent being described in the first four principles, His creations are dependent on Him and He is not dependent on them. Because He had nothing to gain from creating the world, it was an act of loving kindness. This is reflected in how He created a world not of mere minimalistic functionality, but of generous abundance and breathtaking beauty and diversity, of countless species of flowers and trees, birds, fish and animals, of magnificent landscapes, an elaborate world of mind-boggling complexity.

## **Human greatness: Principles 5-6**

Since creating the world was an act of loving kindness, God is not a distant Creator. He created this world for a purpose directly connected to human beings. Principles 5 and 6 reveal the human being as the only creature in the world with the capacity to connect with God, to nurture a close emotional and spiritual bond through the act of prayer or receive communication from God.

This is only possible because the human being, unique among all creatures, possesses a soul that—of all that exists in the universe—bears the closest resemblance to God. The Talmud<sup>10</sup> explains the similarities: the soul fills the body the way God fills the universe; the soul sustains the body in the same way God sustains the universe; the soul sees yet cannot be seen, just as God sees but cannot be seen. This is what the Torah means when it says the human being is created “in God’s image”.<sup>11</sup>

The soul is the source of our uniquely human drive for meaning, and of our Divine attributes of free choice, compassion, generosity, inspiration, creativity and altruism. It is immortal, predating the body in the spiritual world, with God and other souls, and after the body perishes, it returns to that world.

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<sup>10</sup> Berachot 10a

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 1:26-27, 9:6

## **Life mission revealed: Principles 7-9**

In His kindness, God directly revealed the soul's life mission in this world at Sinai, as handed to Moses (Principles 7 and 8) and passed down the generations, faithfully and with integrity, to us today (Principle 8). God designed the system with perfect precision and balance and used it as the blueprint for creation itself—hence it is eternally relevant to all times and places. To add or remove mitzvahs or principles of faith, to tamper with a system personally crafted by God, thinking that somehow we know better than the One who created us, is gross hubris (Principle 9).

The Torah contains all the wisdom and practical instructions we need to accomplish our mission in life. These instructions consist of 613 commandments, each with branches, details and intricacies. Part of the system applies to all of humanity, and part of it to us alone, the descendants of those who stood at Sinai.

Every soul that comes into this world is on a different journey. We all have the same broad mission with the same Torah ideas and mitzvahs at our disposal, but *who* we become is different for each person. No two souls are the same. Each one of us is an entire universe: irreplaceable, uniquely precious to our Creator, with a unique mission to actualise our unique potential.

## **God cares about us: Principles 10-11**

We learn from our sources that God loves us as a parent loves a child.<sup>12</sup> All of creation breathes with the love of God, and the entire Torah is imbued with His care, guiding us to fulfil our purpose, as a parent lovingly guides their children.

The mitzvahs are for our benefit.<sup>13</sup> God doesn't need us to obey Him. By definition—as the awesome, transcendent, unique, all-powerful eternal being (Principles 1-4)—God needs nothing from us. But God is overflowing with kindness and abundant goodness,<sup>14</sup> and it is the nature of such goodness to want to share it with others.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, out of love, He gave us the mitzvahs as the tools to fulfil our potential and achieve our life purpose in every part of human experience—physical, psychological, spiritual; in areas of family, community and society; in relation to God, people and to ourselves.

God is aware of and cares about how we speak to one another, whether we are generous, kind and compassionate (Principle 10). He cares about us keeping Shabbos, learning Torah, praying with heartfelt intention. He created us to become elevated, altruistic, wise. The combination of the

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<sup>12</sup> Deuteronomy 14:1. See Avot 3:18 at length that all these facts were revealed: that the human being was created in God's image, that we are Hashem's children, that the Torah is a tool for achieving our life purpose. The Mishna describes them as acts of love.

<sup>13</sup> Ramban Deuteronomy 22:6

<sup>14</sup> Exodus 34:6-7

<sup>15</sup> See Ramchal, Derech Hashem, part 2, ch.1.

wisdom and mitzvahs of the Torah is the perfect formula for a person to achieve greatness in every area of life.

As an act of love, God sends our soul into this world on a mission to achieve greatness and eternal merit through the mitzvahs—so that, when we leave the body and return to God and the spiritual world, we can enjoy the reward for all our efforts in this world. God created this world to give us the opportunity to achieve the eternal reward of a life well lived (Principle 11).

### **Death, the moment of clarity: Principle 11**

It's difficult for the soul to come to this physical world.<sup>16</sup> The spiritual world, where the soul originates, is perfect, pure and pristine. It is a place where the soul can bask in the presence of God. There is no confusion or challenge, only truth and light, goodness and compassion.

But, for our achievements to be meaningful, we must at least have the possibility of failure. This means having freedom to choose between meaningful alternatives. That is why the soul must come to the material world of confusion and turbulence.

After the soul completes its journey through this world, it returns to God and the spiritual world to present the full account of the time it spent in a body (Principle 11). At this moment of unadulterated clarity, we realise that our entire

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<sup>16</sup> Avot 4:29

life has been leading up to this moment of truth, this close encounter with our Creator, this honest reckoning with the choices we made.

It is primarily in the world-to-come that accountability happens (Principle 11).<sup>17</sup> All the good we accomplish during our lifetime confers a spiritual light on our soul that stays with us forever, illuminating our eternal existence in the next world, bringing us an unimaginable joy and tranquillity, and a sense of fulfilment from a job well done (Principle 11). Every letter of Torah wisdom we imbibe, every mitzvah we do, every aspect of our character we develop, is written forever on our soul.

Similarly, all our misdeeds and mistakes, all our untruths and selfishness, all the mitzvahs we transgressed, form a spiritual darkness on our soul that accompanies us to the next world. When we enter the next world, God lovingly helps remove that darkness and purifies our soul (Principle 11). This happens through the painful, yet cathartic process of facing our mistakes in His presence, realising where we went wrong, and feeling the deep pain of regret and remorse.

And as we look back on our lives with God, our entire existence comes into perspective. We see clearly the journey of our soul from the moment it was sent down into the womb. We see everything that happened to us—every incident and event, from birth to death—from God’s perspective; we

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<sup>17</sup> The Rambam in his introductory commentary on the Mishna in Sanhedrin as per above. See also Avot 4:22.

see the Divine plan, the complete picture of our lives, what happened to us and why.

We finally understand how God orchestrates all of our life circumstances as a platform for what we need to accomplish; that all the unique blessings and opportunities we enjoyed, all the personal struggles and pain we endured, were geared towards the journey of our soul in this world. While we lived in a body we were filled with confusion and doubt, possibly even anger and resentment. But in the end, with the soul freed from its body, we have absolute clarity and peace. We finally get to see how every part of our life story fits together. We see how whatever we encountered was a catalyst for fulfilling our purpose—becoming who we were born to be.

We also feel comfort and satisfaction from seeing how this world and the next are actually one world, how this world is a “corridor to the palace”<sup>18</sup> of the next world, where all of the injustices of this world are righted. When the soul is restricted by the body, we only see scattered fragments of God’s big picture. When we see that the two worlds are actually part of one continuum, we understand that what happens to people in this world, in terms of suffering and pleasure, success and failure, is only a small part of the overall story of existence.

And, after all our hard work, our tireless efforts to fulfil our Divine mission, we finally get to rest in the world-to-come. We enjoy ease and bliss, and are totally at peace, basking in the

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<sup>18</sup> Avot 4:21

glow of our good deeds and everything we worked so hard for during our lifetime. We finally get to live in a world without suffering and obstacles, without distraction and confusion, having completed the journey of our soul through this world.

### **The final act of love: Principles 12-13**

Just as the soul travels its own journey, humanity as a whole travels on a collective journey that began at the dawn of creation. Humanity's journey is a test, offering the opportunity for achieving greatness before God, while also being held accountable for the course of history.

Principles 12 and 13 are the ultimate expressions of Divine love for humanity. The great journey of history will culminate in the final redemption. We don't know when this will happen. But in terms of Principle 12, we have faith that it *could* happen today, or any day.

Whenever it happens, we believe that in the end, God will guide history to a glorious endpoint, when His values and wisdom will permeate humanity, thus fulfilling the grand purpose of creation, and heralding the emergence of the world-to-come—a redeemed world, saturated with Divine blessings, His presence revealed to all.

God makes a loving promise: despite the twists and turns of human history—with nations and leaders periodically plunging the world into a dark abyss of cruelty, atheism,

emptiness and barbarism—there will also be forces of light, saturating the world with innovation, development, kindness and compassion. These forces of light and darkness, good and evil, will struggle throughout history, constantly vying for dominance. There will be times when darkness overcomes light, and other times when light overcomes darkness.

Ultimately, though, out of God’s love, the journey of history will culminate in redemption and goodness. Light will finally triumph with the arrival of Mashiach and the world’s ultimate redemption.

It will be a world in which “knowledge of God covers the earth like the oceans”,<sup>19</sup> “nation will not lift up sword against nation”<sup>20</sup> and “God will wipe away tears from all faces”;<sup>21</sup> a world with a re-established Sanctuary radiating spiritual light; a world of universal peace and prosperity, of widespread unity and goodwill, with “no famine, no wars, no jealousy and competition”, in which “goodness will be abundant”.<sup>22</sup> A world finally—after a long, turbulent history—at its destination.

This miraculous time will also bring the return of generations past—those who suffered through darkness but remained righteous. They will be revived and reborn to enjoy this perfected world, bathed in God’s presence and the final redemption (Principle 13).

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<sup>19</sup> Isaiah 11:9

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 2:4

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 25:8

<sup>22</sup> Rambam Hilchot Melachim 12:4

At this moment, humanity achieves its ultimate victory over suffering and the vulnerability of the human condition, as the prophets promised in the name of God: “He will make death vanish in life eternal, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces.”<sup>23</sup>

The final act of love.

### **To be a Jew**

To be a Jew is not only about the mitzvahs we do, but what we believe. It is, simply put, un-Jewish to see life as an atheist, to see a world of “no design, no purpose, only blind, pitiless indifference”. To be a Jew is to see life through the eyes of the generations of Jews who came before us, who saw a world of overflowing abundance and beauty, of meaning and purpose, a world created lovingly by God, who gave us a mission to do good and create an eternal legacy.

To be a Jew is to understand and internalise the thirteen foundational truths of Judaism. Without faith in these basic beliefs, it is impossible to live as a Jew. Or die as a Jew. Our Oral Tradition reveals that only through these beliefs can we access the world-to-come. Without them, we can’t know or fulfil our purpose.

Study these thirteen principles—learn them, become familiar with them, delve into their meaning. If you struggle with any

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<sup>23</sup> Isaiah 25:8

of them, don't despair, keep working at it. In this essay, I presented some of the rational arguments that demonstrate the truth of these foundational principles. In doing so, I have barely scratched the surface of this field of study. There are so many more powerful arguments to explore. What emerges is that as Jews, we don't have to make a blind leap of faith. There is overwhelming evidence to support all we believe from a scientific, rational and factual point of view.

Don't allow doubts to overwhelm your faith. Generations of Jews before us have believed wholeheartedly in these principles. Seek out more knowledge, learn from your teachers and rabbis, study deeper, and find the proofs that will bring complete faith into your heart.

And now—Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—is the time to do this. That is why these days of judgement, of awe, are also days of *yom tov*, of celebration. We celebrate that our lives have meaning and purpose, that God cares enough about us and what we do—that our actions matter enough to be worthy of His consideration.

And more than anything, God wants us to succeed. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are just two among innumerable expressions of Divine love willing us to succeed. Without this annual reckoning, we could drift through life, forgetting why we are here. We could get distracted by all that glitters, losing sight of our purpose—doing good, performing mitzvot, following God's will as revealed to us in the Torah. In our

prayers on these days, we say *Avinu Malkeinu*—“our Father, our King”. Besides being the Master of the universe, we recognise that God is like a loving parent who cares for us deeply, as a parent cares for their child.

Think about Yom Kippur. What are the words you hear more than any others, ringing through the shul from *Kol Nidrei* to *Ne'ilah*? *Hashem, Hashem, Keil Rachum VeChanun...*, “Hashem, Hashem, God of compassion and graciousness, slow to anger, full of kindness and truth, who protects and nurtures kindness for thousands, forgives sin and cleanses.”<sup>24</sup> These words echo throughout the day because they reveal the nature of God’s love and compassion, how He wills us to succeed, like a parent wills their child to succeed.

The Yom Kippur service ends with the public declaration of the mission statement and rallying call of faith for every Jew: *Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad*—“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”<sup>25</sup>



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<sup>24</sup> Exodus 34:6-7. The Sh’lah and others make the direct link between the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy and the Thirteen Principles of Faith.

<sup>25</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4



