

IS THERE A MITZVAH TO BELIEVE IN GOD?

Source 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.

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

Source 2: Sefer HaChinuch

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

Source 3: Rambam/Maimonides – Sefer HaMitzvot Mitzvah 1

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” (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.

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 ת’ו’ר’ה’.

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

Source 4: Nachmanides (Ramban), commentary to Sefer HaMitzvot – quoting Behag בעל הלכות גדולות

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 מצות 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 המצות לא ימנה בחשבונן.

Source 5: Ramban quoting the midrash (Mechilta)

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

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

משל למלך שנכנס למדינה אמרו לו עבדיו גזור עליהם גזירות

אמר להם לאו כשיקבלו מלכותי אגזור עליהם גזירות שאם מלכותי אינן מקבלים גזרותי היאך מקיימין

כך אמר המקום לישראל אנכי י"י אלהיך לא יהיה לך ... כשם שקבלתם מלכותי קבלו גזרותי לא יהיה לך.

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

Source 5 (cont'd) Ramban:

ואם תהיה בכל מקום מצוה שיאמר דעו והאמינו שאני י"י שהוצאתי אתכם מארץ מצרים ועשו מצותי עם כל זה לא יבא בחשבון המצות כי הוא העיקר והן התולדות כאשר פירשתי. ולדעת הזו מה שאמרו בתשובת השאלה "תורה" שש מאות ואחד עשר הוי אנכי ולא יהיה לך מפי הגבורה שמעום לומר שיש בדיבור לא יהיה לך שתי מצות ישרים לשש מאות ושלוש עשרה והם המניעה בצלמים לא יהיה לך ולא תעשה לך ענין אחד והמניעה בעבודה זרה לא תשתחוה להם ולא תעבדם מצוה אחרת.

In my opinion, that which they said that "Torah" = 611 and that "I am the Lord" and "Do not have any other gods before Me" were said by God, that means: that the mitzvah "do not have any other gods" includes two mitzvot, and that completes the 613. Specifically, the making and owning of idols is one mitzvah and the prohibition of idolatry - ie bowing down to them and serving them, is another

Source 6: Rambam: Laws of the Foundations of the Torah Ch. 1

יסוד היסודות ועמוד החכמות לידע שיש שם מצוי ראשון, והוא ממציא כל נמצא, וכל הנמצאים משמים וארץ ומה שביניהם לא נמצאו אלא מאמתת המצאו.

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 exist due to the truth of His existence.

Source 7: Bereishit Ch. 4

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gained a male child with the help of the LORD."

א וְהָאָדָם יָדַע אֶת-חַוָּה אִשְׁתּוֹ
וַתְּהַר וַתֵּלֶד אֶת-קַיִן וַתֹּאמֶר קָנִיתִי
אִישׁ אֶת-יְהוָה:

Source 8: Bereishit Ch. 18

Now the LORD had said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do,

since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him?

For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is just and right, in order that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him.”

יִזְוֶהוּ אֶמְרֵ הַמְכַסֶּה אֲנִי מֵאַבְרָהָם
 אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה: יַחַד וְאַבְרָהָם הֵינּוּ
 יִהְיֶה לְגוֹי גָדוֹל וְעַצּוֹם וְנִבְרָכוּ-בּוֹ כָּל
 גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ: יֵט כִּי יִדְעֻתּוֹ לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר
 יַצְוֶה אֶת-בְּנָיו וְאֶת-בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו
 וְשָׁמְרוּ דֶרֶךְ יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה
 וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הִבִּיא יְהוָה עַל-
 אַבְרָהָם אֵת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר עִלָּיו:

Source 9: Shemot Ch. 3

And the LORD continued, “I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה רְאֵה רָאִיתִי אֶת-עֲנֵי עַמִּי
 אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת-צַעֲקָתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי
 מִפְּנֵי נַגְשָׁיו כִּי יִדְעֻתִי אֶת-מַכְאֲבָיו:

Source 10: Sefer HaChinuch Mitzvah 25

וזאת מן המצוות שאין להם זמן ידוע, שכל ימי האדם חייב להיות במחשבה זו.

This is one of those mitzvot that has no set time, because a person must have this in his thoughts all of the days of his life

Source 11: Rav Assaf Bednarsh: R. Chasdai Crescas objected that one can only be commanded to do something that one can freely decide to do or not to do. Belief is not volitional, as one must necessarily believe that which has been proven to him and cannot choose to believe with certitude that which has not been proven to him.^[6] Abarbanel defends the Rambam by explaining that the commandment is not to simply believe, but rather to engage in philosophical study and learn those prerequisites and logical arguments that lead to belief. While the belief which arises as the result of such study arises automatically, the decision to engage in philosophical study is indeed volitional, and one is commanded to devote one's time and resources to engaging in such study.

According to this explanation, we can understand the phenomenon of disbelief. The study of philosophy is difficult and time-consuming. Those who have dedicated themselves to theological investigation will eventually believe. But those who are lazy or apathetic and do not study properly will not be influenced by the philosophical evidence of God's existence. They are liable to profess atheism as a result of their ignorance. According to this theory, then, disbelief is an intellectual failing that arises from a neglect of study.

Source 12: Beit HaLevi – Parshat Bo Yosef Dov Soloveitchik

(born 1820 in Nesvizh, Minsk Governorate, Russian Empire; died 1892 in Brest-Litovsk, Grodno Governorate, Russian Empire^[1]) was the author of Beis Halevi, by which name he is better known among Talmudic scholars. He was the great-grandson of Rabbi Chaim Volozhin.

When does the mitzvah of Emunah apply? What's the difference between Emunah and Yediya?

ועוד טעם לזה דהרי עיקר מצות אמונה הוא שנאמין בכל דברי התורה וכפי הקבלה מרבותינו גם מה שאי אפשר לנו לבררו על ידי מופת חותך דהרי כל מה שנתברר להאדם במופת זה נקרא ידיעה ואינו בכלל אמונה עדיין ואנחנו מצוים להאמין וזהו בדברים שאין השכל משיג אותם במופת וכל זמן שלא יאמין רק במה שנתברר לו במופת אין לו חלק במצות אמונה כלל דכמו דנצטווה האדם לכוף כל כחותיו לעבודת ה' ולבטל אותם לעבודתו באיברי גופו וכמו שבירת התאוה והחמדה לעניני עוה"ז ותענוגיו הלא כמו כן החיוב לכוף ולבטל שכלו לעבודתו יתברך והוא בהאמינו בדברי התורה את אשר לא ישיג בשכלו...

We are commanded to believe - and this is regarding matters which the intellect cannot grasp. A person does not believe unless it is proven to him clearly - has no portion in the mitzvah of Emunah at all. For just as a person is command to subject all of his energies to serve Hashem and to channel them (with his physical body, eg overcoming urges etc) to His service , so too, he has the obligation to subject his intellect to His service and that is to believe in those words of Torah that he cannot comprehend with his intellect...

Source 13: Rav Assaf Bednarsh:

R. Elchanan Wasserman: Disbelief Due to Moral Failing

R. Elchanan Wasserman offers a different explanation for the phenomenon of disbelief.^[7] He assumes that philosophical belief does not require arduous study or in-depth knowledge of philosophy. Rather, even a cursory analysis of the world suffices to prove the existence of a Creator. R. Elchanan believes that the teleological proof is so obvious that no one could honestly observe the heavens and earth, much less the intricate workings of the human body, and not immediately conclude that the world testifies to the existence of God, just as a shirt testifies to the existence of a weaver and a book testifies to the existence of an author. R. Elchanan brings evidence to this approach from the fact that the Rambam counts belief in God as one of the six hundred and thirteen commandments. Since every thirteen-year-old Jewish boy and twelve-year-old Jewish girl is obligated in this commandment, it is clear that belief in God does not require intense philosophical training or advanced intellectual ability. Additionally, the Halakha obligates every gentile to believe in God and fulfill the seven Noahide commandments, including even those whose lifestyle does not

allow for academic achievement or intellectual advancement. This expectation would be unjust if belief in God is not easily attained by any normal human being.

If belief in God is so obvious, asks R. Elchanan, how can anyone honestly doubt the existence of God? He answers that in fact it is impossible to honestly doubt God's existence. Rather, R. Elchanan finds the explanation for the phenomenon of disbelief in the Torah's prohibition of bribery. The Torah, when forbidding the acceptance of bribes, explains that "you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning" (*Devarim 16:19*). Bribery has the power to corrupt the intellect and prevent one from thinking logically, as evidenced by the testimony of the Torah and the many stories of Talmudic sages whose judgment was biased by a whiff of bribery.^[8] If a paltry sum of money has the power to corrupt our reasoning, argues R. Elchanan, then certainly the bribe offered by the evil inclination – i.e. that if we deny God's existence then we can then indulge our passions without restraint – has the power to blind us to the truth and pervert our intellect to the extent that we can deny the undeniable fact of God's existence.^[9] The sole explanation for disbelief is that it stems from a moral failing. One who is beholden to his desires will experience a strong subconscious bias to reach a conclusion that justifies his lifestyle, and will therefore conclude, against all logic, that God does not exist.

The path to belief, then, lies not in more advanced intellectual inquiry, but merely in freeing oneself from the influence of one's passions and thinking honestly, without bias or preconception. That is a standard that not everyone fulfills, but everyone – whether old or young, sophisticated or illiterate – is capable of meeting. R. Elchanan points out that the Halakha relates to the sin of disbelief with exceptional severity. If it were possible to commit heresy as the result of an honest mistake, the Halakha would instead have related more leniently to the sin of disbelief than to other sins, because the heretic was only doing what he honestly thought was right. If, however, disbelief stems from an intellect corrupted by the prejudice of illicit desires, then it is understandable why disbelief is considered an inexcusable sin.

Critique of R. Elchanan Wasserman's Argument

R. Elchanan's perspective is founded on deep psychological insight, and it is easy to find real life examples of people whose heretical beliefs seem to flow from a desire to justify an irreligious lifestyle, as opposed to sincere intellectual inquiry. However, it is far from clear that this is the only source of heresy in the world and that there are not atheists who reached this philosophical error via honest (if mistaken) reasoning rather than moral corruption. Perhaps there are atheists who do not indulge any desires that would be restrained by the Torah. Or perhaps there are those who were not biased by their desires, because they reasoned that even if God existed it would be permissible to indulge their passions. One could sincerely believe that God exists but does not require us to restrain our actions in any way, or at least not to restrain ourselves any more than any decent person would if left to his own devices.^[10]

If so, why would anyone deny the existence of God? Perhaps they are honestly unconvinced by the teleological argument. Darwin's theory of natural selection presents an alternative explanation of the seemingly miraculous design of human beings and all other organisms. Astronomy, which posits the existence of billions of stars and planets, provides an alternate explanation of the wondrous structure of the earth and the solar system. If there are billions of planets, the fact that one of them is ideally suited for human life is not necessarily remarkable.^[11] It may be that a lack of belief represents neither an intellectual nor a moral failure of the heretic, but rather the weakness of the philosophical approach to belief.