

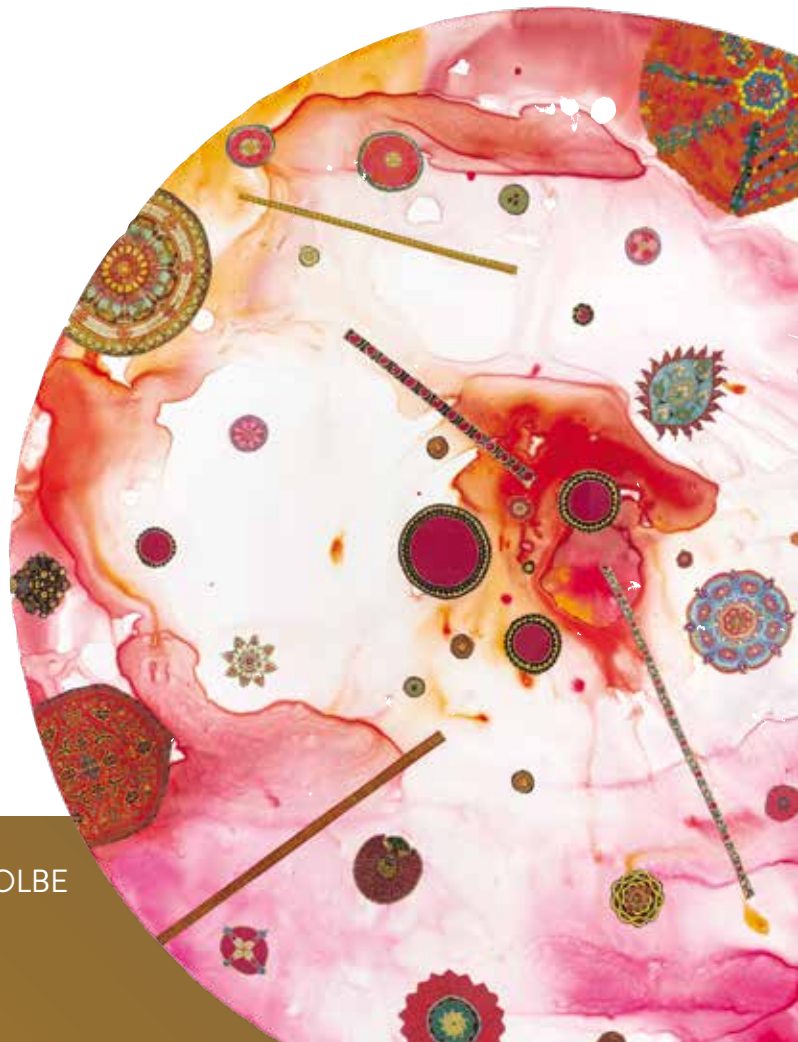
My Elevator Pitch *for* God

IN 500 WORDS OR LESS,
THOUGHT LEADERS
FROM AROUND THE
WORLD EXPLAIN WHY
THEY BELIEVE

BOOK CLUB COLLECTION #6

CLOSING REMARKS BY RABBI YAAKOV WOLBE
AND RABBI LAWRENCE KELEMEN

ARTWORK BY ANDI ARNOVITZ



My Elevator Pitch *for* God: In 500 Words Or Less, Thought Leaders From Around The World Explain Why They Believe
This Book Club Collection #6 was compiled by Bruce Licht

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Foreword

Elevator Pitch [el-uh-vey-ter pich] *noun*

A brief talk intended to win approval for something, as a product, a business proposal, or a compelling idea.

WHY THIS TOPIC and why now? Because there is unquestionably a groundswell of interest and a real need for a non-religious conversation about God. The world is desperate for meaning, purpose, and wisdom; a glance at social media will show you that the struggle is real. Humans are by nature religious. We have an innate need to worship something. That might be health, politics, beauty, or money, but it might be something deeper and more meaningful.

Hoping to guide people in that search, the journey began by first talking about the project with friends, and brainstorming about whom to ask to participate. After composing an invitation explaining the mission, interesting, thoughtful people with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences were sought out.

Were the authors given any direction about what to address? Not at all. They all had their own ideas about how to approach the subject. The “Submission Package Information Sheet” that was provided to all the authors stated that the essays should not be written as a proof of one religion over another. These essays are not about “Proof of Christianity,” “Proof of Judaism,” or “Proof of Islam.” There is no theology in this collection.

What differentiates these essays one from the other is their reasoning, their analogies, their proof, if you will. What unifies them is their unshakable belief – hard-won, ingrained from birth, and everything in between – that God exists, that God created the world, and that God continues to take an active interest in what happens here. Is every essay in this book club collection a stand-alone proof of God’s existence? No, it is not. But every essay adds to the overall conversation. One of them might have a sentence, an example, or an analogy that will resonate with you. Each one comes from its author’s heart and aims to speak directly to yours. So open your heart, and your mind, take a deep breath, and dive in. You have nothing to lose and potentially, much to gain.

The aspiration in this book club collection is (in a non-religious way) to introduce more people to God and strengthen the faith of those who already believe. In doing so, the goals are to find common ground, bring people together, provide greater meaning to their lives, and start to transform the world in a positive direction.

Visit mepfg.com (*My Elevator Pitch for God*) and read many more wonderful, inspirational, thought provoking essays from additional Thought Leaders from around the world.



NOMI FREEMAN

EDUCATOR, INSPIRATIONAL SPEAKER, EXPERT IN NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

Nomi Freeman is an inspirational speaker and teacher of Jewish spirituality. She has interviewed hundreds of people about their NDEs (Near Death Experiences). She is particularly interested in how these experiences guide us to lead lives in tune with the spiritual world. Nomi lectures internationally and leads workshops in spiritual development, Jewish mysticism, and meditation. Her online videos have accumulated over 100,000 views.

Nomi and her husband, Rabbi Tzvi Freeman, live in Atlanta, Georgia. To book Nomi Freeman for speaking engagements, contact her through chabad.org/k16144.

The View from Beyond

BY NOMI FREEMAN

RACHEL NOAM, a young engineering student, was walking past a construction site when an eighteen-foot steel beam fell from the fifth floor onto her head. Rachel was astonished to find herself floating fifteen feet above her body. She could not understand how she could see and hear everything when her eyes and ears were in her body that lay on the sidewalk beneath her. The events on the street began to fade into darkness. Then she perceived a glimmer of light. As the radiance came closer, it grew in intensity.

In Rachel's words: *"The magnificent stream of light was accompanied by a flow of sublime love, the kind of love I had never before experienced... No words can describe the enchantment, the infinite goodness. I discerned in it qualities of compassion, spiritual pleasure, happiness... all in infinite profusion."* She said, *"I felt a powerful bond with this marvelous presence. This was... a Higher Power, a Being of infinite might."*¹

NDEs (near-death experiences) are extraordinary events in which clinically dead individuals leave their bodies and later return through medical intervention or by a spontaneous reconnection. I've interviewed over 150 people who reported such experiences, and have poured over thousands of personal accounts.

Dr. Bruce Greyson, Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences at the University of Virginia and co-founder of IANDS,² states that 5% of the world's population – a staggering 400 million people – have had a near-death experience. Pioneering researchers such as psychiatrist-physician

Raymond Moody,³ cardiologists Pim Van Lommel and Michael Sabon, and Sam Parnia, an expert in cardiopulmonary resuscitation, have presented volumes of convincing evidence for the survival of the self after clinical death. Many people who have experienced NDEs recall with startling accuracy details of events and conversations that occurred when brain activity was nil or negligible.

Near-death experiences often begin with floating sensations, moving through a tunnel toward an alluring light. Then experiences diversify. Some reunite with loved ones, some encounter beings of light, and many undergo a "life review." In this playback of their entire life, they experience every emotion they ever caused another person.

NDE experiencers return profoundly changed, with a newfound focus on lovingkindness and a decreased attachment to material possessions. One man described his post-NDE state as being *"on fire with love (for humanity)."*

A young man described his meeting with the Light to me: *"I found myself in front of this Entity of Light. I understood it to be God. If you want to know what it feels like to be with this Presence, imagine all the happiness you experienced in your entire life. Make a package of all that happiness. Now multiply it by a million. That was my experience."*

Some people relate that while in front of the Living Loving Light, they were asked a powerful question: *"What did you do with the life I gave you?"*

I often wonder how I will answer.



RABBI SHMUEL MARCUS

SPIRITUAL LEADER FOR CHABAD IN LOS ALAMITOS, CALIFORNIA, LEAD SINGER OF “8TH DAY”

Rabbi Shmuel Marcus is a Chabad Rabbi with a global reach. In the late 90’s, he was assistant rabbi at the Central Synagogue in Kharkov, Ukraine. He then earned his rabbinical ordination from Machon L’Smicha in Melbourne, Australia. Marcus worked as a project manager at Chabad’s Kehot Publication Society in New York, where he played a crucial role in initiating the Heritage Series and overseeing the digitization and publication of the Annotated Tehillat Hashem Siddur. In 2003, Marcus and his wife, Bluma, founded the Chabad of Cypress and the Hebrew High of OC, both of which have been instrumental in promoting Jewish education and community outreach in the region.

Marcus is an accomplished singer-songwriter, having published over 100 songs. He is the lead singer in the popular Chassidic Pop Band 8th Day, which he formed with his brother, Bentzion Marcus, in 2004. Spotify and radio stations in Israel and around the world regularly play his Chassidic-themed tunes. Find the band at my8thday.com.

He is also the author of the books *Chicken Kiev*; *The Ballad of the Yarmulka Kid*; and *Your Story of Freedom*. He currently serves as the editor of the international Chabad magazine. You can reach him at chabadofcypress@gmail.com.

Rooftop Champagne in Italy

BY SHMUEL MARCUS

I JUST GOT BACK from Italy. The trip had singing gondoliers and rooftop champagne, all to prove my absolute love for my wife, to my wife. It is similar to the ring I gave her years ago and to those matching earrings I'm saving up for. True love is invisible and intangible and it requires effort. Absolute confirmation and verified proof of my love would be a wonderful climax but it would be the end of our romantic story.

Proof is important on an x-ray and in a court of law, but it is a mistake to try and fit all of life's adventures into a "proof" box. And God is not the only invisible and intangible thing that can't be proven.

Take the X Factor, for example. It's called "X" because it is there, although we can't put our finger on it. We can't know what ingredients make a hit song. Researchers ran the all-time top 100 Billboard songs through an algorithm to determine what makes a song a success. It was like trying to catch a rainbow with your bare hands.

I worry this book will reinforce old positions. The believer will see proof of a creator in everything yet the skeptic will remain unsure about an invisible God. And they're both right.

Human proof of a creator is solely based on what we see within creation. So, the believer only knows God's actions, and what an unknowable God does. The skeptic is correct

that we can't know what this unknowable God is.

Does the believer wonder why God is both knowable and unknown, seen and unseen, here yet intangible?

Here's my thought: True love, art, and God by definition cannot completely fit into a proof box like a smoking gun or calculated numbers. Ironically, it's these allusive intangible parts of life that push us to reach the unreachable.

Furthermore, a "provable" God would allow our belief, but the "un-provability" of God allows us to seek to bridge the gap between creation and Creator. It's the intangibility of love that makes our hearts grow fonder.

There's enough proof in this book for those who need it. Logically, a painting has a painter, and the perfect creation has a Creator, so the believer is fine. My takeaway is that God sees value in the unknowable, unprovable parts of life. It's what pushes us the hardest to reach higher and deeper.

If this book works, the believer might be sitting at home with his "proof of God" trophy while the skeptic is still out there exploring the deepest unknowable parts of the Creator and a wonderful Divine story continues.

For me, it's the invisible and intangible things in life that made me discover what rooftop champagne tastes like in Italy. And it's Divine.



AMBASSADOR DAVID M. FRIEDMAN

NOBEL PEACE PRIZE NOMINEE, NATIONAL SECURITY MEDAL AND MERITORIOUS CIVILIAN SERVICE MEDAL RECIPIENT

As the United States' Ambassador to Israel from March 2017 until January 2021, Ambassador David Friedman successfully guided unprecedented diplomatic advancements in the U.S.–Israel relationship, including moving the United States Embassy to Jerusalem, and recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. He also is among the small group of American officials responsible for the “Abraham Accords” – peace and normalization agreements between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco – for which he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021.

The Jerusalem Post has recognized Ambassador Friedman as the most influential Jew in the world. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency named him one of the 20 Most Impactful Persons of the Past Decade.

Ambassador Friedman received the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff's Meritorious Civilian Service Medal in April, 2019. In September, 2020, President Trump honored him with the National Security Medal. He has received numerous other honors, recognitions, and awards, including honorary doctorates from Yeshiva University in New York, and Ariel University in the Shomron.

Ambassador Friedman is the founder of The Friedman Center for Peace through Strength, which builds on the Ambassador's achievements in strengthening the U.S.-Israel relationship.

On February 8, 2022, HarperCollins published Ambassador Friedman's memoir, *Sledgehammer: How Breaking with the Past Brought Peace to the Middle East*. In its first week, *Sledgehammer* broke sales records for a book about the State of Israel.

Listen to God

BY DAVID M. FRIEDMAN

PRAYER IS THE traditional means by which we speak to God. Whether reciting a traditional liturgy or offering a unique or customized plea for specific relief, many of us have sought refuge in prayer. We beseech God for things we need or want, and hope that God will respond favorably.

But we expect God to answer with actions not words. Few, if any, of us anticipate a verbal response from God, and those who claim to have heard God's voice are afforded little if any credibility. Indeed, in the Jewish religion, prophesy is said to have ended after the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, more than 2,000 years ago.

But prophesy does exist in abundance in the Hebrew Bible. From Moses to Joshua, Samuel, David, Solomon, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and many others, prophets not only present the Word of God, but offer visions as to how God will cause future events to unfold. Reading those works gives us a special opportunity not just to speak to God but to listen as well.

The Jewish People are referred to as the "People of the Book" – that book being the Hebrew Bible. Its modern relevance to hundreds of millions of people is beyond dispute and it sells approximately 2,500 copies worldwide every hour. But what is most important about the Bible is not what it says about the past but what it informs with regard to God's plan for the future.

When I served as the United States Ambassador to Israel, I took advice from many living subject matter experts, but also from

several long-gone Biblical prophets. Here's an example:

In determining whether to move the United States Embassy to Jerusalem, I consulted with every American and Israeli security agency, along with agents on the ground from Morocco to Pakistan. And I also read the Book of Isaiah. The latter was an essential component of the due diligence.

Isaiah prophesizes that a day will come when the nations of the world all come to Jerusalem, the wellspring of God's laws and values, whereupon God will resolve their differences and "nation will no longer lift up sword against nation nor study war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4) – the paradigmatic end-state of peace that is carved into the wall across from the United Nations in New York City.

Isaiah predicts that the road to peace runs through Jerusalem, very fitting insofar as Jerusalem literally means "City of Peace." And peace is achieved when "nations come to Jerusalem" – something that occurs in practical terms when an embassy is opened in that holy city.

Many pundits predicted in 2018 that opening our embassy in Jerusalem would lead to endless wars and irreconcilable conflicts. Isaiah predicted 2,800 years ago that it would lead to peace. With the Abraham Accords coming on the heels of the move, Isaiah was proven right.

Much can be gained by speaking to God. Even more can be achieved by listening.



DAVID PORUSH, Ph.D.

ENTREPRENEUR, PROFESSOR, FUTURIST, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE RESEARCHER

David Porush is a teacher, author, and entrepreneur. He wrote *The Soft Machine: Cybernetic Fiction* (Routledge, 1985; republished 2018), a revolutionary study of science and literature, as well as numerous books of cultural criticism and fiction, essays about the intersections of science, religion, and literature, a book of short stories (*Rope Dances*), plays, articles, reviews, and blogs. His works have been translated into Hebrew, Japanese, French, and German. Many universities use his textbook, *A Short Guide to Writing About Science* (HarperCollins). He is currently writing a book, *Telepathy*, about the origin of the alphabet as a model for all new media revolutions.

He was CEO of MentorNet (2008-2013), which matched students in science and engineering with mentors in those professions, and was chairman and co-founder of Spongefish (2005-2008), a San Francisco-based social platform for sharing knowledge. Earlier, David was the Executive Director for Learning Environments and the SUNY Learning Network, where he spearheaded new media innovation and e-learning for the sixty-four campuses of the State University of New York. David was a professor of literature and media at William and Mary and Rensselaer (1977-1998), and he won awards for excellence in teaching and grants for research in interdisciplinary studies, AI, and electronic media.

As a Fulbright scholar at the Technion, Israel, he researched and wrote about the origin of the alphabet among the Hebrew slaves, and about cognitive differences in reading Hebrew vs. English. Later, he co-founded the Society for Literature and Science. He created the world's first degree program in web design at Rensselaer, and the first online engineering bachelor's degree at SUNY. In 1995, the AI that his lab developed directed live performers in front of an audience in NYC, the first known instance of an AI-directed play. Porush has lectured and consulted worldwide, including most recently for the NEOM project in Saudi Arabia. Porush earned degrees in Biology and Literature from MIT, and a Ph.D. from the University at Buffalo. He now lives in California with his wife, three children, and five granddaughters. You can find his recent blogs at davidporush.com and write to him at dporush@yahoo.com.

We Will Find God in What We Know¹

BY DAVID PORUSH

BELIEVERS IN SCIENCE and believers in God have been trying to debunk each other for centuries, yet they are co-conspirators who share similar motives and goals: to seek the veiled unity of the world. Although most scientists resist it, they might soon come to the ineluctable² conclusion that an omniscient, purposeful, active universal intelligence *must* exist.

Indeed, many scientific hypotheses either directly suggest that a Godlike entity exists or they propose concepts so far-fetched or improbable that they require just as much faith:³

- Space, time, matter, and energy are fundamentally the same thing. We perceive them as distinct because of the illusions of our limited senses. Many physicists believe that all remaining problems will also prove to be projections of a grand unifying *something*.⁴
- What binds the universe across its vast span – over 95 billion light years – is the quantum entanglement of subatomic particles. Every bit of the cosmos is integrated with every other every instant. This also means, as mystics have said about God's perspective, that there is no such thing as the “present,” “past,” and “future.”
- The universe is fine-tuned to produce life beyond all reasonable odds (think Planck's constant, e.g.). This means either that:
 - natural mechanisms with a combined improbability of one in a trillion trillion were miraculously lucky *or*
 - *something intervened to create life.*
- The universe had a single, undefined point of origin just before the Big Bang. Instead of saying *something transcendent*, science posits a one-off event, such as a “quantum fluctuation.” Alternatively, cosmology proposes that it is locked

in a cycle of expansion and contraction without beginning or end, for which there is no evidence.

- Life began through improbable processes that still required a *push by something*: from complexity; or from molecules that replicate themselves arising spontaneously (the “RNA-world” hypothesis); or from metabolism somehow existing on its own to kickstart chemicals into life.
- Human consciousness arises *somehow* from the quantum entanglement of neurons or emergence from complexity. These are as abstract as the belief that God breathed souls into us.
- Every quantum (subatomic) event in the universe exists in a “superposition” of multiple probabilities before they collapse into one reality. There are trillions of quantum events happening every second in every cubic centimeter of space. This leads to two equally magical conclusions:
 - either all the other probabilities become alternate universes so that there are that many trillions of new universes spawned every instant *or*
 - *something with inconceivably infinite awareness – Godlike – observes every one of these events to create what we call reality.*

Put it all together and what emerges from science is the portrait of *something* that very much resembles the incomprehensibly omniscient, unitary, and creative God that lies beneath the different doctrines of the Abrahamic faiths.

Science's job is not to ask the meaning and purpose of it all. But as science finishes its work, religion has been waiting patiently with its answer. We are here to acknowledge and contribute to a holy, God-given world. In its way, science is doing that.



YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR, OP-ED WRITER FOR LEADING MEDIA OUTLETS, CO-DIRECTOR OF THE MUSLIM LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

Yossi Klein Halevi is a senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. He co-directs the Institute's Muslim Leadership Initiative (MLI), which teaches emerging young Muslim American leaders about Judaism, Jewish identity, and Israel. Over 150 Muslim leaders have participated in this unique program.

He is co-host, with Donniel Hartman and Elana Stein Hain, of the Hartman Institute's podcast, "For Heaven's Sake."

Halevi's 2013 book, *Like Dreamers*, won the Jewish Book Council's Everett Book of the Year Award. His latest book, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, is a New York Times bestseller and has appeared in a dozen languages.

He has written for leading op-ed pages in North America and is a former contributing editor to the "New Republic." He is frequently quoted on Israeli, Middle Eastern, and Jewish affairs in media around the world, and is one of the best-known lecturers on Israeli issues in the American Jewish community and on North American campuses.

He is the recipient of the 2019 "Figure of Reconciliation" Award of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews.

Born in Brooklyn, he received his BA in Jewish Studies from Brooklyn College, and his MS in Journalism from Northwestern University.

He moved to Israel in 1982, and lives in Jerusalem with wife, Sarah, who helps to direct a center for Jewish meditation. They have three children.

The Holocaust and Faith

BY YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

HOWEVER COUNTER-INTUITIVE, MY faith in God began with the Holocaust.

I grew up in Borough Park, a Brooklyn neighborhood of Holocaust survivors who were rebuilding, in microcosm, the destroyed world of European Orthodoxy. Their motive wasn't so much faith as loyalty to the Jewish people, to their martyred parents, and to future generations. Yet in reconstructing a world of faith, they were ensuring that God remained part of the Jewish story.

After the war, my father, a survivor from Hungary, abandoned Jewish observance for a time. "God didn't deserve our prayers," he exclaimed. Older, I realized that his rebellion was in fact a peculiarly Jewish affirmation of faith. My father wasn't doubting God's existence; his refusal to pray was an act of protest. Precisely because God was all-powerful, God could have prevented the Holocaust.

My galvanizing moment of faith happened sometime around my bar mitzvah, when I first saw the now-famous photograph of a Jew, wearing prayer shawl and tefillin, surrounded by laughing SS men who are presumably about to shoot him. I understood that photograph as a theological disputation between two opposing worldviews: The German soldiers were insisting on an empty universe, without moral accountability, while the Jew was affirming an intentionally created world. I trusted the Jew as the more dependable witness on the nature of reality.

The very persistence of faith was its own vindication. The Nazis had taken up the pagan taunt against the Jews: Where is your invisible

God? The answer of the survivors among whom I grew up was: Here God is, in our stubborn loyalty.

Most of all, the religious survivors believed in the existence and endurance of the soul. Their families and friends had been taken from them only temporarily; the reach of evil was limited to this world. Growing up, I wasn't clear about what we meant by "God," but I knew that my existence wasn't limited to a body.

The Holocaust simultaneously kept me grounded in this world – as a Jew, I needed to be constantly alert to threat, preoccupied with survival – while reminding me of its inherent absurdity. The Holocaust was an event so strange, so irrational, that it upended my faith in reason and taught me to mistrust the world as experienced by the senses alone. I suspected – intuitively knew – that there must be more.

Both the nihilist and the mystic share the same starting point: This world of suffering and death is absurd. But where the nihilist surrenders to the madness, the mystic seeks an alternative reality. Studying the mystical teachings of Judaism as well as of other religions, confirmed by insights from physics about the deceptive solidity of the physical world, I was led to contemplative meditation.

The spiritual path insists that faith alone is no substitute for experience. Meditation offered me a glimpse into an expanded reality, a fluid world of energy and light, in which what replaces fragmented consciousness is the experience of oneness that we call God. Beyond that point is silence.



“The existence of a purposeful Creator is indicated by the fact that the inorganic universe contains every ingredient needed to make organic life possible. The world exists as an arena for life, and the probability that this is entirely due to chance is infinitesimally small. The essence of the argument is that mathematically the more complex an ordered structure, the less the probability of its structure being due to chance. The chemistry of life is by far the most complex process in our experience, and yet we find that the inorganic matter of the universe can support this process. Since there is only one type of matter in the universe, the chances of its having all the chemical and physical properties needed to support life are remotely small, unless we take into account a purposeful Creator.”¹

RABBI ARYEH MOSHE ELIYAHU KAPLAN

AMERICAN SCHOLAR AND PROLIFIC AUTHOR
ON RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY (1934-1983)



ALAN DERSHOWITZ

**AUTHOR, LAW PROFESSOR,
'MOST FAMOUS LAWYER IN THE WORLD'**

Alan Dershowitz, Professor Emeritus at Harvard Law School, has written 52 books, and more than 1,000 articles. He has successfully litigated hundreds of cases, half of them pro bono. He taught 10,000 students in his 50-year career at Harvard Law School, and has been called the most “famous lawyer in the world.” Among his recent books are *The Price of Principle: Why Integrity is Worth the Consequences*; *Get Trump: The Threat to Civil Liberties, Due Process, and Our Constitutional Rule of Law*; *Killing: How the Law Decides Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die*; and *Palestinianism: The Newest Attack on Peace, Human Rights, and Democracy*. A librarian told him that he has written more words than any Harvard professor in history, having been made a full professor at age 28, the youngest in the Law School’s history. At age 85, he continues to advise presidents, prime ministers, and others. He is deeply involved in American and Israeli political and legal affairs.

An Argument Against God's Nonexistence

BY ALAN DERSHOWITZ

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN a skeptic. That is my God-given right, gift, and curse.

The nature and quality of my doubts have varied over the past 70 years, but the constant in my life has always been skepticism about everything. When I was a troublesome student in an Orthodox Jewish yeshiva, every day we recited prayers that began “Baruch ata Adonai” — “blessed are you God.” I composed a variation that reflected my skepticism and my struggle to overcome it:

“Baruch ata I don’t know (or *adunno*, as I pronounced it).

Baruch ata I deny.

Baruch ata I’m not sure.

Baruch ata show me why...

Baruch ata maybe so.

Baruch ata why not try.

Baruch ata still not sure.”

If the existence of God could be proved empirically, then belief in God would be a matter of science, not of faith or religion. But it is in the very nature of the concept of God that there can never be definitive proof or disproof of God’s existence. The case for God will always be somewhat uncertain.

The strongest argument has always been a negative one: without a Creator, certain observable phenomena seem unexplainable. The “God of the Gaps” explains what science cannot, but as science explains more, the gaps become smaller and so does the function of

God. But there is one gap that will never be filled, that is inherently unfillable. Science will never be able to explain how something came of nothing. The Big Bang theory might explain how big (the universe) expanded from small (subatomic particles), but it cannot explain how small came from nothing. Similarly, evolution can explain how complex (humans) evolved from simple (one-celled units), but it cannot explain how a living cell capable of evolving came from nothing.

It is this conundrum, Creation!, that prevents me from being an atheist. It requires me, an honest skeptic of all things, to doubt the non-existence of God. It is not a traditional “leap of faith.” It is closer to a rejection of non-faith — an enduring doubt about the non-existence of a creator.

Maybe someday science will fill even this gap, though I deeply doubt it. I believe it is inherent in the limitation of the human mind to be incapable of imagining nothingness becoming something based on natural change. I recognize that earlier humans could not imagine many of the remarkable insights that later humans possess, but I think this is different!

The never-ending march of science might prove me wrong, as it has proved so many other skeptics wrong. I would welcome a natural explanation of creation from nothing. But until this gap of gaps is satisfactorily filled, I shall continue to doubt the nonexistence of God and cannot understand how atheists are so certain that God doesn’t exist.



RABBI YITZCHOK FELDMAN

SILICON VALLEY RABBI

Rabbi Yitzchok Feldman grew up in Evanston, IL, and attended its public schools. He spent two years at Trinity College in Hartford, CT, in its Guided Studies Program in the Humanities, then two years as an English major at Yale. Between those two schools, he spent three months in a yeshiva in Jerusalem. He returned to Jerusalem after college and spent 10 years learning in various yeshivas. He has been the rabbi of Congregation Emek Beracha in Palo Alto, CA, since 1995.

On One Foot

BY YITZCHOK FELDMAN

THE FIRST ELEVATOR pitch for God seems to be a well-known story from the ancient world. “*Teach me all you know*,” a potential convert asked the Sages, “*while I am standing on one foot*.” One teacher rejected the challenge out of hand but another accepted it. In the ancient world, elevator rides were short. That teacher boiled it down to a few words: “*What to you is hateful, don’t do to anyone else. The rest is commentary – go and learn.*”

Most people think that brevity is the point of the exchange. But there’s another approach. A person on one foot is not just someone who cannot balance for long. It is also a person ascending, reaching. It is someone asking, “*Can you teach me how to climb spiritually?*”

People choose belief systems based on many factors, but the most elemental issue is the will to believe. That is the source of one’s aspirations – to be decent, to be of service, to be spiritually transformative. A potential convert is at the very beginning of the journey. But candidates show up because they sense that there is a path of ascension.

Proofs of God’s existence in a mathematical sense are a fool’s errand. Those who think they have found them are sometimes dangerous. Equations govern many things in the universe but not the human world full of free choice. The search for proof arises out of an encounter with honest skepticism, an understandable phase. But the skeptic must ultimately decide.

Not just skeptics but everyone needs to decide: Do they want to pursue the world beyond equations? If not, the search never begins. If so, it begins simply: Don’t do anything that is hateful. This is phrased in the negative because the first rule is not to deteriorate. Duly warned, one can begin the journey into the positive, into that which is creative and purposeful. That journey must be informed by learning.

I came upon the world of spiritual learning as an adult, or, more accurately, when I was no longer an uninformed child. I had read some of the Great Books and was aware that libraries held more. I knew that the ancients weren’t silly but I was indifferent to religion. I met someone who told me that anyone alive today is a product of thousands of years of spiritual living stretching back to the ancient world when people were always aware of the Divine. Someone in your family, he said, decided not to adhere to that system for whatever reason. You have inherited the consequences of that choice. He or she decided on the basis of some knowledge; you, on the other hand, are ignorant. At least put yourself in the position of the person who made an informed choice. Go and learn what you don’t know.

Go and learn, indeed. And from there, I learned that one can choose to try to ascend. We will stumble, we might deteriorate, but we can choose to resume the climb.



MAZ SIAM

STORYTELLER, HOLLYWOOD ACTOR

Maz Siam has been writing, on and off, for most of his life. He's written a TV show, "No Money Down," a play, "Soul Mates From Hell," essays, articles, blogs, and musings. He does it because he's an observer of the human condition and he thinks his observations of said human condition might interest those who read these essays and articles and blogs and musings. He curses a lot, so if you don't like cursing, you probably shouldn't read them. You can find some of them at mazsiam.wordpress.com.

He's also an old guy who is a father (one daughter), a grandfather (two granddaughters), a brother (two siblings), an ex-husband (twice), as well as an actor ("The Mindy Project," "Argo," "Seal Team," "Ramy," "The Chosen," and other stuff). His various identities weave together to make him a storyteller.

What else would you like to know? Ask him and he'll try to tell you.

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Where'd This Come From?

BY MAZ SIAM

THIS IS A tough one, isn't it? Because some of the first questions that are gonna come up are, if there's a God, then how can that child get cancer? How can this new mother get run over by a truck? How can there be famine and disease? And don't get me started on mean people.

I don't know a lot about anything, but I believe that we have free will. I also personally believe that God is sorta like a parent, a really good parent, who taught us how to live an honorable life before we were even born, who taught us about right and wrong, and how to be decent people, good people, caring people, and how to love and share. I believe it's all instinctive.

But then, when we're born, it's like turning eighteen and we're adults. *"I did my job, now go make it on your own."* And we're given influences, both good and bad, that shape us; parents, family, teachers, criminals, sociopaths, politicians.

And like a really good parent, when we move out, God leaves us to find our own way, not telling us what to do, how to do it, and how we're doing it wrong. But God is there if we have questions, ready to help us be our best selves. And if we listen, God gives good advice.

But, because we have free will, there are gonna be those who are convinced they're right and they don't care about all the lessons

they were taught. They're more concerned with money, property, prestige, and how to get theirs. And they forget their God-given instincts. That's a part of it. And the other part is just that stuff, both good and bad, happens. There's a randomness to the Universe. I don't believe that God is a micromanager. I also don't believe God's a Santa Claus God, someone to ask for stuff from. God created us, God taught us, God sent us on our way to do the best that we can with what we were given.

I know that when I'm going through a *"How could there possibly be a God"* moment, if I ask for God help, God doesn't fix it. God gives me the strength to get through it.

Here's just one experience that made me believe in God's existence:

I was in the delivery room when my daughter was born. I wasn't the most honorable person at that point. But when this child, the most important thing in my life from that moment on, was handed to me and I cut her umbilical cord and held her in my arms, I felt instantaneous love unlike anything I had ever experienced. That I could feel that immediate love is the most powerful proof I could present.

God is such a deeply personal, private, and unique experience.

Does anything I've said prove anything? I'll let you decide.



RABBI NECHEMIA COOPERSMITH

MEDIA GIANT, AUTHOR, TRUTH SEEKER

As a teenager in Toronto, Nechemia Coopersmith was a truth-seeker. His search led him to Jerusalem, Israel, where he met Rabbi Noah Weinberg, dean and founder of Aish HaTorah, and submerged himself in the world of Torah learning and activism.

Nechemia became an educator in formal and informal education and outreach. When the Internet era dawned, he realized its immense potential to reach masses of Jews worldwide on a scale never before possible.

After assembling a small team and securing seed money from a Los Angeles philanthropist, Nechemia spearheaded the creation of Aish.com, which has become one of the most popular Jewish-content websites. Today Aish.com services over one million visitors each month, and Nechemia has plans to bring this "lean and efficient" media staple to the next level.

In addition to being the chief editor of Aish.com, Rabbi Coopersmith is the author of *Shmooze: A Guide to Thought-Provoking Discussion on Essential Jewish Issues* – a must-have little book for anyone who loves a good question, and the co-author of Rabbi Noah Weinberg's *48 Ways to Wisdom* and *Wisdom for Living: Rabbi Noah Weinberg on the Parsha*. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and children.

Morality and God

BY NECHEMIA COOPERSMITH

IMAGINE A FOOD that could taste like whatever you want. It could be chocolate one minute, lasagna the next. Taste is relative to the eater.

Manna had this quality. Want daiquiri ice? Voila. Steak with portobello mushrooms? You're good to go.

One evening, you overhear a ferocious argument.

"What are you arguing about?" you ask.

Jake says, "Sarah thinks the manna tastes like strawberries. She's wrong! It tastes like a hamburger!"

"Both of you are wrong!" Zach yells. "It tastes like a Budweiser."

You can't believe what you're hearing.

"Guys, manna can simultaneously taste like all of those flavors since it has no objective taste. None of you is right – or wrong. It's a matter of personal preference."

Many profess to believe that there is no single objective standard of right and wrong. After all, societies have different views about what is right and wrong. People have divergent views on abortion, gender issues, religion, and politics.

Let's define moral relativity. Like manna that has no objective taste, good and evil are subjective; each individual creates his or her own standard based on his or her personal tastes. The Aztecs performed child sacrifice; the Hindu widow was burned alive on her dead husband's pyre; the Papuan enjoyed feasting on human flesh. These might not be your cup of tea, but different strokes for different folks. If no objective standard of morality exists, you can't label someone's preference as *wrong*; the most you could say is that you don't like it. I think olives are disgusting, but evil?

Immoral?

Even though many say they believe morality is relative, the vast majority don't truly believe it, nor do they live their lives in concert with that belief.

How can we see that?

By the fact that most people vociferously and passionately argue over moral issues. If morality is relative, what are they arguing about? There is no right or wrong! It's whatever each person desires it to be.

Heated exchanges or moral outrage do not stem from mere distaste; their proponents believe that their position is *right* and that the other person is absolutely wrong.

Moral relativism posits the *creation* of morality based on one's preferences. Objective morality posits that the standard exists independently from us; we are responsible for *discerning* it. Those are two very different things. It's rare to find a consistent moral relativist.

What makes something true, as opposed to merely in vogue, is its permanence. Murdering an innocent child isn't just wrong for now, with the possibility of it becoming "right" in the future. It's *absolutely* immoral, meaning unchangeable, *cannot* change.

But everything undergoes change.

Since everything finite is bounded by time, everything is constantly changing, getting older, eroding. Only an Infinite Being who exists beyond time is absolute and unchangeable. Thus the vast majority of people believe that there is some objective standard of morality. They might not realize it, but they believe that an Infinite Being, who is beyond time and impervious to change, exists.



SAL LITVAK

HOLLYWOOD DIRECTOR, FOUNDER OF THE ACCIDENTAL TALMUDIST

Salvador Litvak was born in Santiago, Chile, and moved to New York at age five. He attended Harvard, NYU Law, and UCLA Film school. He directed the Passover comedy and cult hit, *When Do We Eat?* starring Max Greenfield, Ben Feldman, Shiri Appleby, Lesley Ann Warren, and Jack Klugman in his final role. Sal also directed *Saving Lincoln*, based on the true story of Abraham Lincoln and his closest friend and bodyguard, Ward Hill Lamon. It features a new visual style called CineCollage, which places the actors within actual Civil War photographs. Houghton Mifflin has incorporated the film's Gettysburg Address scene into its American history textbook. Sal wrote both films with his wife, Nina. Their next picture is *Man in the Long Black Coat*, starring Mark Feuerstein, Christopher Lloyd, Dermot Mulroney, and Neal McDonough. The film is a neo-western mystery thriller about a Chassidic rabbi who investigates a seeming hate crime and uncovers a far more sinister truth.

A pair of miracles propelled Sal on his faith journey, leading him to create the Accidental Talmudist, a nonprofit social media platform. He and Nina share daily posts on Jewish wisdom, history, and humor with over one million followers in 70 countries.

The Language of Events

BY SAL LITVAK

I WAS A TEENAGE science-fiction fanatic. My heroes were Heinlein, Asimov, and Clarke. They rarely talked about God. At the time, Hebrew School was a three-day-a-week chore that I mostly dreaded, and my teachers there didn't talk much about God either. Nor did my parents, friends, or public-school teachers. And yet, I somehow formed a relationship with the Almighty.

He (an admittedly clumsy pronoun for a Being beyond gender) is the strong, silent type. He hasn't spoken to me in words, but He speaks to all of us constantly in the language of events. I started paying attention at a young age because it seemed absurd to me that the universe and all its trillions of stars could have burst into existence out of nothing. The Big Bang had to have been *willed*. It had to have a Creator.

And if that Creator placed thinking creatures in the creation, it stood to reason that He would be interested in having a relationship with them – with us. So I started talking to Him. Decades later I learned that I had stumbled onto an important Jewish practice. You can do it too. Simply talk to God as you would to a close friend. Not in your thoughts, but with your lips. It's liberating and rewarding. I suggest trying it in private. People can be pretty judgmental

about such things – their loss.

When you talk to God, a few things happen. Since there's no point in lying – He knows what's what – you hear a dead honest version of yourself. More honest than the voice inside your head, which often self-deceives. And since God answers in His own way and in His own good time, you grow in patience. Eventually you even begin to grow in wisdom.

In Psalm 90, Moses addresses this process. He was luckier than most. God spoke to him in words. Moses understood that he was privileged, so he left us some guideposts for fashioning our own relationships with God. The Torah is the big one, but Psalm 90 is pretty special too. In it, Moses scripted an average person's one-sided conversation with God, including the line, "Teach us to number our days, that we may acquire a heart of wisdom."

When you speak with the eternal One, you soon realize how short life is, even if you're blessed to reach 120 like Moses. I don't know about you, but my tendency is to waste a lot of time, time I'll regret having wasted when I'm lying on my deathbed. Now, no one likes talking about their deathbed. Talking to our Creator, however, accomplishes the same task without being so grim. In fact, it's joyful. Highly recommended.



Closing Remarks



RABBI YAAKOV WOLBE

**PROLIFIC, INNOVATIVE, DYNAMIC TORAH EDUCATOR,
PODCASTER, AUTHOR**

As the Director of Outreach at TORCH (torchweb.org), Rabbi Wolbe has delivered thousands of classes, lectures, and workshops on a wide range of subjects, including Jewish history, Jewish life, parsha, Jewish philosophy, relationships, and ethics. Rabbi Wolbe launched his first Torah podcast show in 2013. Since then, he has expanded his production and currently hosts six Torah and Judaism podcasts: “The Jewish History Podcast,” “The Parsha Podcast,” “This Jewish Life,” “The Ethics Podcast,” “The Mitzvah Podcast,” and “TORAH 101.” Rabbi Wolbe has published more than 1,400 podcast episodes with more than 3 million downloads (as of September 2023), and growing.

Rabbi Wolbe is the author of *Upon A Ten-Stringed Harp: How Torah and Mitzvos prepare the Soul for Eternity*, published in 2022. He is currently writing a book about the Torah’s guidance on how to identify, develop, and actualize your potential. Rabbi Wolbe lives in Houston with his wife and children.

Reach him at rabbiwolbe@gmail.com.

Closing Remarks

BY YAAKOV WOLBE

DOES GOD EXIST or not?

That is the most consequential question of our lives. If God does, in fact, exist, then existence is purposeful. Life must have meaning. The world, the universe, humanity, everything that exists does so for a reason. A believer understands that the existence of God mandates that we behave accordingly. A believer lives with a sense of existential and absolute morality. Believers know that there is a concurrent reality hiding behind the veneer of what we can see and measure. Believers understand that our soul, our consciousness, and our choices outlive our relatively short tenure here. A believer recognizes that God will extend the ultimate reward and mete out punishment. Faith governs every aspect of a believer's life.

Non-believers live very differently. If you are under the impression that the world is a cosmic, if fortuitous, accident, life has no ultimate purpose. For a non-believer, this is the only world that exists, and every moment you are inching closer to the end, when it all ceases and cuts to black.

The differences between the believer and non-believer make themselves manifest in every area of life.

A thinking person must determine the veracity of the claim that our universe and everything in it was the handiwork of an all-powerful Creator. But how can we prove it? How can we make a rational and logical decision about this all-important question? Perhaps this is a journey that each person must undertake on his or her own. But I think that with simple arguments that are accessible to everyone, reasonable, open-minded people can come to the realization that the world has a Creator.

Simplifying the question is key. Faith is not the product of the advanced study of theology, divinity, or astronomy. To arrive at faith, you don't need to understand string theory, black holes, or what happened a trillionth of a millisecond after the Big Bang. You don't need to be a philosopher schooled in the arguments of the ancients. Without advanced degrees, without relying on arcane jargon (epistemology, teleology, punctuated equilibrium, etc.), simply by examining simple, incontrovertible proofs, we can all come to the conclusion that the world has a Creator.

Belief does not rely on complex arguments. The opposite is, in fact, true: Non-belief is wholly reliant on muddling the subject with needless complexity. The existence of a Creator is so obvious and incontrovertible to the objective-minded, that the only way non-belief can endure is if there are sufficient layers of complexity surrounding the question of the existence of God. Wrapping the question with esoteric complications creates sufficient confusion to mask the hollow arguments of non-believers.

Simply put, the fingerprints of the Creator are visible everywhere we turn. The entire universe is screaming that it was designed by the Master Designer, that it was created by the Almighty Creator. One can only deny this obvious truth by shifting the subject in a way that adds complexity and confusion to it. Heresy might always exist (the principle of free-will demands that there must always be room for lack of belief), but only if the subject is unnecessarily complexified.

Consider the following line of questioning: Where did matter come from? Matter cannot create itself. Who or what created matter? This is

a simple question, but a deadly one for someone whose worldview obviates the need for a Creator.

Another simple challenge: Describe a process by which an amoeba can come into existence absent a Creator? How does inanimate matter come to life?

It doesn't end there. According to the doctrine of non-believers, speciation should grow exponentially, yet since humanity has begun to chronicle the world around it, there has not been a single documented instance of speciation. How do you explain the absolute dearth of any such proof? Why did speciation mysteriously stop as soon as we started keeping records?

These are just a few of the endless, maddening questions for non-believers. Non-belief demands mental gymnastics and a suspension of logic. It is not easy to be a heretic. And as we discover more about the universe, it is getting progressively harder.

Let's examine this simple argument: You have been reading this essay for two minutes. In that time, entirely invisible to you, the bone marrow in your body produced more than 100,000,000 blood cells. That is not a typo. Over a hundred million cells were created within you in the last two minutes. Each one of those cells is composed of billions of different, infinitesimally microscopic parts – an unfathomably complex network of intricate machinery making your body work.

If we combine the collected intellectual and technological prowess of all of humanity, deploying the most advanced microchip fabrication techniques, we cannot recreate a single cell. Who made the cell? Who made the system that creates millions of them every minute? Using a straightforward example – a single cell of stunning utility and masterful, intricate design – is sufficient evidence that there is a Creator whose creative prowess infinitely exceeds ours. It is that simple.

The non-believers argue otherwise. But stripping their argument down to its core exposes it as weak and illogical; they would have you believe that the intricate systems of fantastic utility that we harbor within our bodies – systems and functionalities that we could never replicate – were more likely created by a happy accident than by an all-powerful Creator.

If we bar complexity and jargon from the discussion, it would be obvious to everyone besides the stubborn that Almighty God created the universe and everything in it.

Job (19:26) tells us “From my flesh I can see God.” Simply by examining our body, we can arrive at the conclusion that it was designed by God.

I challenge believers and non-believers alike to undertake the following exercise:

Ask a physician to explain to you, in layman's terms, some of the absolutely incredible and awe-inspiring systems and functions of our body. Speak to an eye doctor and ask him to explain how vision works. How do we see? Ask an audiologist to explain the process by which audio waves get transmitted to and decoded by the brain. Ask a nephrologist why we cannot simply make synthetic kidneys to solve kidney failure. Get a neurologist to estimate just how little we know about how the brain works. Each one of these conversations should convince you that Job was spot on – through your own flesh you can see God. We are not the product of a series of accidents.

Jewish law codifies a blessing of gratitude to God to be said after using the restroom. It focuses on the vast network of transportation pipes (arteries, veins, capillaries, nerves, etc.) that crisscross the body free of blockages. Lying end to end, the pipes inside your body are longer than all the roads, rivers, canals, and subways in the United States. Even minor blockages can be fatal. Yet for most people, most of the time, everything works

seamlessly for years and decades. Your body is an engineering marvel.

Ingenious design that humans cannot replicate is everywhere: The miracle of digestion – filtering out harmful toxins and mining food for vital resources; the miracle of conception and the birth of a baby; how wounds self-repair, just to name a few.

Who created these systems? How did they come into being?

In no other context would theories such as the one that everything “evolved” over millions of years, be remotely viable. Arguing otherwise in any other setting would be laughable. No one would be persuaded that a wristwatch, laptop, or a basketball hoop was the byproduct of a series of fortunate accidents.

Using simple logic we know that the existence of design and purpose in anything are evidence of a creator for said thing.

As a species, we can indeed make a wristwatch. We cannot, however, make a cell, or a strand of DNA; we don’t even have sufficient computing power to calculate the folds of a protein (every cell has billions of them); we cannot make a lowly gnat; we cannot even make an atom with a nucleus in the middle and spinning particles revolving around it at breakneck speed.

If all would agree that a wristwatch must have a creator, it is illogical to argue that something infinitely harder to make does not.

These arguments are sufficient to prove that the world has a Creator.

Non-believers, terrified of the consequences of an Almighty God, respond in a variety of ways: dismissal (“It’s settled science” or “It’s beyond the scope of science”), derisive ad hominem attacks (“Are you really a young-Earth creationist?”), changing the subject (“Wars of religion killed more people than anything else” and “Why do bad

things happen to good people?”), and a relentless effort to add complexity to the discussion. Others engage in intellectual outsourcing (“One of the genius professors must understand how this all works. It doesn’t make any sense to me, but I am sure that they have the answers”). That is the only way that non-believers can advance their arguments.

Believers find comfort in the knowledge that simple logic dictates that design was designed, that engineering was engineered, that purpose was created purposefully.

Believers can rest assured that the absolute, overwhelming, preponderance of evidence points to the existence of God. Believers rely on the knowledge that disbelief is completely illogical and entirely devoid of evidence (and no, adding billions of years to the equation does not remedy the sheer lack of logic and evidence).

This is, however, unlikely to win believers any debates. When non-believers encounter these airtight arguments, they rarely enthusiastically embrace faith. Instead, they keep grasping at straws until they realize that the notion of God is much less terrifying than the alternative.

The true deterrent that keeps reasonable people from accepting the obvious fact that our universe and everything in it was created is not the lack of simple logic and evidence. What inhibits faith is the existential angst that comes with it. Even believers recognize the implications of a Creator. If God exists, then existence must have purpose, and it is incumbent on everyone to try to effectuate that purpose. Faith in God naturally extends to living a life that is congruent with God’s will. That requires us to govern our behavior according to God’s will, something that many are reluctant to do.

We are all subject to the dissonance of faith.

But regarding the question of whether God

exists or not, with simple logic and avoiding unnecessary complexity, it can become clear to all that our world did not emerge accidentally.

It is important to emphasize that believers do not reject science. Quite the contrary, a believer sees science as the study of God's handiwork. The great Medieval Jewish sage and philosopher, Maimonides, wrote that the study of science can be a means through which man deepens his faith. Provided that science is viewed as the study of God's creation, it reinforces rather than repels faith. Science is only problematic when one studies it as an alternative to faith.

Faithless science is also incomplete; it can never tell the full story. Decoupled from faith, the study of science is akin to the study of the locomotive that the Elders of Chelm conducted.

In Jewish folklore, a cadre of Elders who considered themselves to be wise and sagacious, but were actually bumbling dimwits, governed the city of Chelm.

In one classic tale, the Elders sent a delegation of wise men to the recently constructed train station to determine how trains move. They studied the train from every conceivable angle beginning with the 10th and final car. After several days of intensive analysis, they determined that the final car in the train is connected to the 9th car and that when the ninth car moves, it pulls the 10th car with it. But why does the 9th car move? After some time, they discovered that the ninth car moves because it is connected to the 8th car and when the eighth car moves, it pulls the ninth car with it. And so on until they got to the first car. When they studied the first car they

were completely mystified: How does it move? After weeks of fruitless study, they returned to the Elders and announced, "we discovered 90% of how trains move."

This is an apt analogy for the study of science without an acknowledgement of the one force animating the entire process, the Creator. The study of science without factoring in God ignores the force, the power, the first-cause that propels all of existence. Science without faith invariably encounters a *"first-car-problem,"* a point at which science cannot explain what, how, or why. The scope of science does not extend to the first car.

The question of the existence of God is one that we cannot ignore. If we avoid the unnecessary complexity that clouds the subject, it should be clear to most people that the universe and everything in it was created. We don't need to look that far. From my flesh I can see God. For the believer, science complements and even enhances faith. Every new development, every new discovery, every new revelation shows the believer more of God's unfathomable mastery.

Faith is not the endpoint in the life of a believer. Faith places great responsibility upon her shoulders. A believer is not free to act as she pleases. A believer must rein in her worst impulses. A believer must work assiduously to ensure that her behavior is compliant with the will of God. Acknowledging the existence of God is only the beginning of the believer's journey, but in this most consequential question of our lives, the answer is clear: The universe and everything in it was created by Almighty God.

“We need to find God,
and he cannot be found in
noise and restlessness. God is the
friend of silence. See how nature
– trees, flowers, grass – grows in
silence. See the stars, the moon,
and the sun, how they move in
silence... We need silence to be
able to touch souls.”²

MOTHER TERESA OF CALCUTTA

ALBANIAN-INDIAN ROMAN CATHOLIC NUN AND MISSIONARY
CONSIDERED TO BE ONE OF THE 20TH CENTURY'S
GREATEST HUMANITARIANS (1910 –1997)



RABBI LAWRENCE KELEMEN

PHILOSOPHER, WRITER, JEWISH CONTINUITY ACTIVIST

Lawrence Kelemen is the founder of the Center for Kehillah Development, a leadership development project devoted to the growth and wellbeing of Jewish communities worldwide. He is also the Rosh Kollel of the Center's Rabbinical Training program, Ohr Chodosh. He created the International Organization of Mussar Vaadim, a network of dozens of self-development groups in North America and Israel. He has been honored as a visiting scholar at universities and communal organizations around the world.

During his decade-long tenure at Neve Yerushalayim College of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, Rabbi Kelemen influenced thousands of students. He is also the author of many journal articles and books, among them: *Permission to Believe*; *Permission to Receive*; *Planting and Building*; and *To Kindle a Soul*.

His audio and video presentations are available on many websites, and at LawrenceKelemen.com.

Closing Remarks

BY LAWRENCE KELEMEN

IT IS DIFFICULT to talk about monotheism (belief in one God) without talking about God's revelation at Mount Sinai in 1312 BCE. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahai Faith all teach that God appeared there. If that story is not true, we can't put much stock in these religions' affirmation that there is One God, or in any of their other claims. The astute reader will have detected this reality between the lines of almost every essay in this volume. Most if not all of the contributors to this volume believe that God first publicly introduced God's self at Sinai.

It is important to understand that I am not trying to prove the validity of any religion or its Holy books here – my argument is that this unprecedented, unrivaled, and never-repeated historical event did in fact occur.

Therefore, let me analyze a fundamental question: Is there any logical reason to accept the Sinai account? I have spent thousands of hours discussing this query with believers and non-believers, theologians and professors, with my teachers and with my students, and have developed what I believe is a complex and compelling argument. At the risk of losing some of its depth and subtlety, I would like to present a summary of my answer to this question. Consider this:

Throughout recorded history, Jews who were observant of Torah law claimed that their ancestors – every man, woman, and child alive at the time – received that law from God during a national revelation at Mt. Sinai, an event that they say took place more than 3,300 years ago. Even most non-Orthodox Jews can trace their

lineage within three to four generations to an Orthodox ancestor who believed in the Sinai national revelation. How did such a story start?

One possibility is that God indeed spoke to the Jewish nation at Mt. Sinai 3,300 years ago. This is what Orthodox Jews, religious Christians and Muslims, and a handful of smaller sects believe.

Another possibility is that at some point in history, a person or group of people fabricated and spread the myth that there had been a national revelation at Mt. Sinai. This is the most popular belief among non-Orthodox Jews and the secular.

Assuming that the story about the national revelation at Mt. Sinai is indeed a lie, whoever spread that lie also would have had to place the event temporally. People would naturally ask the cult leader(s), "Really, God spoke to the Israelites? When did this happen?"

What could the cult leader(s) say to the cult members? There are only three "periods" available. They could say that: (1) it happened to a previous generation of Jews; (2) it happened to you, the current generation of Jews; or (3) it hasn't yet happened, but it will happen to a future generation of Jews. In short, the initial lie had to take the form of "Past" (your ancestors heard God speak), "Present" (you heard God speak), or "Future" (your descendants will hear God speak).

It is difficult to assert that the "Future" lie was the origin of Jewry's historical belief in the Sinai revelation. That is because a widely accepted mythology should leave some trace in the historical record. If the fabricator(s)

of the myth claimed that “God has not yet spoken to us, but someday God will,” someone should have recorded that claim in the last few thousand years. We should find someone saying, “God hasn’t spoken yet, but God will.” Yet, no matter what Jewish community we study, regardless of its period and location, no one ever says this. In every community, the Jews believed that long ago God spoke to their ancestors.

In contrast, had the fabricator(s)’ initial claim been the “Present” lie (“You, all Jews alive in this generation, heard God speak”), it could have evolved to match what we find in the historical record. If someone could convince people in the first generation that they had heard God speak, then they would have told their children that lie, and the children would have told their children that “your grandparents heard God speak.” Generation after generation would pass along this story, generating exactly the sort of evidence we face: Thousands of years of consistent belief that “long ago our ancestors heard God speak.” *Prima facie*, it seems that a national revelation mythology could have been created by a cult leader or group of leaders telling the “Present” lie.

However, while it might be possible for a liar, call him Jack, to persuade his friend, Norman, that Jack was once a millionaire or an astronaut, it is very difficult for Jack to persuade Norman that Norman himself was recently a millionaire or an astronaut, etc. People might be gullible, but they have ample clarity about their own lives, and they will reject claims that are inconsistent with that clarity. No matter what Jack says or how he says it, and no matter how many people he gets to join him in swearing to Norman that during his adult life Norman was actually a millionaire or an astronaut (both of which wouldn’t even require believing in

the supernatural), Norman isn’t going to buy it. And if Jack and his friends had to persuade a few dozen or a few hundred people that they were recently millionaires or astronauts, the proposition becomes ludicrous. People are sometimes gullible, but they are not that stupid.

According to the “Present” lie theory, the fabricator(s) persuaded an entire generation – more than three million people – that they weren’t just millionaires and astronauts, but that they achieved the supernatural – prophecy. They heard God’s voice, “I am the Lord thy God... You should have no other gods before Me,” and they were so terrified that they begged God to speak to Moses instead because they felt they couldn’t survive more prophecy. Just as people would know that they weren’t millionaires or astronauts, and would have difficulty accepting a claim to the contrary from even the most charismatic cult leader, how much more so would a large group of people have difficulty accepting that they and everyone else they know had heard God speak. It takes a huge leap of faith to believe that the “Present” lie is what launched belief in the Sinai revelation.

In contrast, had the fabricator(s)’ initial claim been the “Past” lie (“God never spoke to this generation, but God did speak to your ancestors long ago”), people might have believed it. It’s hard to persuade someone that he was a millionaire or astronaut, since he feels confident about his own life experience; but he might believe that his great-great... grandfather was one, and that the story was just forgotten. It’s still not going to be an easy sell, since extraordinary events or accomplishments tend to be remembered (and since it would have required a miracle for someone to have been an astronaut generations before modern space travel). But the further back in history

the liar places the extraordinary event or accomplishment, the more reasonable it might seem. Of the three possible theories, explaining how people could create and spread a Sinai revelation mythology, the “Past” lie seems the most plausible.

However, there is another reason why it is difficult to assert with confidence that the “Past” lie was the origin of Jewry’s historical belief in the Sinai revelation:

How does the cult leader explain to his followers why no one heard about their parents or grandparents experiencing prophecy? After all, that would have been a big enough deal that some percentage of the population would have remembered it for a generation or two. To be credible, the liar needs to create lots of reasonable opportunities for the story to have been forgotten. The “Past” lie only works if it is cast as, “Hundreds (or thousands) of years ago, all of your ancestors heard God speak, but then there was a terrible (*insert disaster of choice*: flood, war, disease, assimilation, etc.), and the national revelation was forgotten. No one in your family has known about it for eons, until I, Fred, just reminded you.” The claim of this hero, whom we are calling “Fred” is believable because it is uncheckable; no existing evidence can contradict it. Even if every parent and grandparent alive tells their kids that they have never heard anything like Fred’s claim, their insistence doesn’t throw Fred’s claim into question; it matches exactly what he is saying – that the event happened long ago and was forgotten. To be believable, the “Past” lie must be cast as, “There was Moses; then at some point there was a very long gap with no memory of the Sinai revelation; and then there was a great leader (“Fred”) who reminded Jewry of their glorious Sinai experience.” Without

the very long gap, no one would accept the lie.

And here’s the problem with the “Past” lie theory:

Jewish scholars in every generation spoke and wrote about their teachers, providing details not only about their beliefs, but also about their religious and national accomplishments. These traditions appear conspicuously throughout Jewish religious literature over the millennia, providing a comprehensive map of Jewry’s religious leadership from before Moses through modern scholars, detailing who taught whom, and what each leader was most famous for.

We know the name of the person who the tradition says ascended Mount Sinai to meet God and led Jewry through the desert for 40 years. That was Moses. We know who took over Moses’ role and led Jewry into the Land of Israel. That was Joshua. We know who led Jewry back to Israel from Babylonian exile (Ezra), who redacted the Mishna (Yehuda HaNasi), and who redacted the Talmud (Ravina and Rav Ashi). Etcetera. In any year between Mt. Sinai and today, we can identify Jewry’s greatest leaders and their most famous accomplishments.

There is only one unrecorded and forgotten disaster, name, and accomplishment that is very obviously missing from the historical record. Nowhere do we find a story of Jewry forgetting about the Sinai event for hundreds or thousands of years, and a leader who, after Jewry forgot, reminded them that their ancestors were all prophets and heard God speak at Sinai. That leader would have contributed more to Jewish identity and theology than anyone else other than Moses himself. Yet there isn’t a single paragraph in the 24 books of the Bible that mentions this disaster, this savior, and this contribution. In 60 volumes of Talmud, which

discuss the lives of thousands of Jewish religious leaders in detail, there isn't a word about the many generations who didn't know anything about Mt. Sinai, or the prophet who gave that tradition back to God's chosen people.

Indeed, the first discussions of the possible existence of a "Fred"-type character appear in the literature of modern, secular Biblical critics who are aware that without a "Fred," their best theory (the "Past" lie) crumbles. These secular scholars themselves disagree over what the disaster was, when it happened, and who could be Fred, since there is no mention of such events or such a person in any historical text. There are dozens of proposed candidates, each rejected by other secular scholars. It's a mad scramble to find the solution to a major problem which is:

Either God indeed spoke to the Jewish

nation at Mt. Sinai 3,300 years ago, or at some point in history, a person or group of people fabricated and spread the myth that there had been such a national revelation. If there are only three possible lies – Past, Present, and Future – each of which fails to produce the Jewish belief in a mass revelation, that leaves only the possibility that God actually spoke to the ancient Israelites at Mt. Sinai. That is a serious problem for someone reluctant to consider such a possibility.

This argument should solidify the context for the essays that you have read, allowing them to form a cohesive body of thought. Although each one describes a very personal point of view, they are all translating a singular, ancient perspective. They are all tapping into the same fountainhead from which flows the human faith in the existence of One God.

Endnotes

“SAGES THROUGH THE AGES” QUOTES

1. *Handbook of Jewish Thought* 1:1.
2. Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta* (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2007).

NOMI FREEMAN

1. From *The View from Above*, Rachel Noam
2. International Association for Near Death Studies
3. *Life After Life*, 1975

DAVID PORUSH

1. This is a paraphrase of a line by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote, “We should find God in what we know, not in what we don’t know.” He was a Lutheran pastor who wrote about the role of religion in the secular world and whom the Gestapo executed in 1945 because of his sympathy for the Jews and his outspoken resistance to the Nazis. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, transl. Reginald H. Fuller, Touchstone, 1997; (orig. title *Widerstand und Ergebung* Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1970).
2. By “ineluctable” I mean “by application of Occam’s Razor, the simplest possible explanation.”
3. Each of these is a vast simplification of concepts that scientists and philosophers have debated extensively. For a detailed treatment, see the following articles in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:
 - Smeenk, Christopher and George Ellis, “Philosophy of Cosmology,” (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/cosmology/>
 - Weinstein, Steven and Rickles, Dean, “Quantum Gravity” (Summer 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), forthcoming, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/quantum-gravity/>
 - Friederich, Simon, “Fine-Tuning,” (Summer 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/fine-tuning/>
4. A short list of mysteries that cosmologists are confident that one can explain as manifestations of one fundamental something includes black energy, black matter, quantum gravity, and inconsistencies between the cosmological constant and observation. See also Sabine Hossenfelder, *Existential Physics*, (NY: Viking Press, 2022), and her blog at <http://backreaction.blogspot.com/>. See Clara Moskowitz, “The Cosmological Constant Is Physics’ Most Embarrassing Problem,” *Scientific American* (Feb 1, 202), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-cosmological-constant-is-physics-most-embarrassing-problem/>

About The Artist



ANDI ARNOVITZ

WORLD-RENOWNED MULTI-MEDIA CONCEPTUAL ARTIST

Andi Arnovitz is a conceptual artist living and working in Jerusalem, Israel. Her work is in the permanent collections of the United States Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Museum, the Israel National library, Yale University Library, the Magnes Collection, the Yeshiva University Museum, the Museum of the Diaspora, Tel Aviv, the Ein Harod Museum of Art, and the Gottesman Israel National Aquarium. She has exhibited her pieces all over the world.

Her artistic practice focuses on the flashpoints where gender, religion, and politics meet and hinder personal agency. Her art has explored issues of domestic violence, reproductive freedom, abuses of power where church and state are entwined, and nuclear proliferation. Currently she is focusing on problems of climate change, displaced populations, and the impact of Covid on women.

Her art highlights these places of friction, the territory where things are not all black and white, and where we, as human beings, have the potential to create change, or to find common ground. Her work examines symbols, images, and archetypes that transcend tightly defined definitions and create a broad human platform for shared experiences.

Arnovitz works in a variety of media, with fabrics, printmaking processes, paper, and porcelain. As a conceptual artist, she often uses printmaking and digital information to create print series, artist books, and large-scale installations. Much of her artistic practice is focused on creating statements through the use of multiples: thousands of prayers, thousands of paper scrolls, thousands of rods of clay, thousands of pieces of paper, hundreds of pieces of resin or porcelain all painstakingly assembled.

Arnovitz's work has been exhibited all over the world, including solo and group shows in England, China, the United States, Israel, Spain, Poland, Germany, Finland, France, Lithuania, Canada, Italy, Mallorca, and Bulgaria. Her work is in private collections in both the United States and in Europe, as well as universities, museums, and institutions.

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**ENTREPRENEUR, AUTHOR,
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Bruce grew up in Lafayette, California and received a BA in Political Science from UCLA as well as a Graduate Gemologist degree from the Gemological Institute of America. After graduating, Bruce operated his family's 100 year-old retail fine jewelry business for twenty-two years. Bruce had a passion for computers and graphic arts, so he changed careers and joined his best friend at a national technical publishing company for seventeen-years as the company's Publisher, where they invented the modern labor law poster industry, including the first "All-On-One Labor Law Poster" and "Labor Law Poster Compliance Plan."

Aside from being the Founder of the website, "My Elevator Pitch for God," Bruce was the co-editor of the book, *Elevator Pitches For God: Volume 1*, and author of the cookbook titled, *Immediate Chef: No Previous Experience Required*.

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