



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Lech-Lecha: Is Faith Innate or Acquired?

“R. Levi said in Reish Lakish’s name: Abraham recognized his maker at age three.

R. Hanina and R. Yochanan disagreed: Abraham was 48 when he recognized his maker” (Bereshit Rabbah 30:8)

What seems like a technical disagreement is in fact a deep difference of opinion regarding the nature of faith.

If Abraham found God at age 48, it was an adult decision, a product of his life experience and the result of serious thought and consideration.

But if Abraham found God at age three, it was something innate, a sort of predisposition with which Abraham was born. When he began to talk, he was already talking about God. He just believed.

So please discuss:

- Is faith something you are born with or something you acquire?
- Is faith just there or do you have to work at it, seek and discover at a later stage in life as a product of rich and deep experience and thought?

Maimonides tells a different story:

Once Abraham was weaned, he, as a child, began contemplating and thinking day and night, and wondered how a planet could follow a fixed path without being directed. If so, who directed it? Surely it would be impossible for it to rotate on its own! Abraham did not have a mentor, but was immersed amongst the foolish idolaters of Ur Casdim, where everyone, including his

mother and father, served idols, as did he. In his heart, however, he continued to contemplate, until he realized the way of truth and understood the ways of righteousness from nature, and knew that there is a God who directs the spheres, created the world, and besides whom there is none other...

Abraham was 40 years old when he recognized his Creator. (Maimonides Mishnah Torah Laws of Idolatry 1:3)

Maimonides adopts BOTH positions. Abraham started thinking about faith “when he was weaned.” At age three he was an inquisitive child with a proclivity to philosophical exploration with an active religious interest. His path is to observe nature, wondering what propelled the planets and what force caused Earth’s rotation. And yet, this is a long quest. Abraham only crystalizes his religious path at age 40! Rambam is saying that the path to faith is long, it is a protracted intellectual odyssey. And it cannot necessarily be taught.

For Rambam, faith is long and hard. It can take 40 years to sort it out! Frequently in Jewish religious circles, religious questions are regarded as a “problem.” But if the appropriate faith perspective is reached after an extended process of contemplation and investigation, then maybe we should understand that questions are frequently an opening to move from childhood or childish notions of God to a more sophisticated conception of the Almighty.

- Can you articulate a conception of God that you have now, which is different to the way that you perceived God in your childhood?

Shabbat Shalom!