

Intellect and Faith in *Tanya*: The Never-Ending Circle

Faith and intellect seem to be complete opposites; our intellectual capacities cause us to question, to doubt, to re-examine. Our faith causes us to do the exact opposite—to accept, to believe, to surrender.

A footnote in Chapter 7 of *Shaar HaYichud* says that “True belief implies pure faith which transcends the realm of the intellect. First one must strive to understand to the extent of one’s intellectual capacities. Beyond that limit, he is to believe with simple faith. Simply put, ‘where knowledge ends, faith begins’”(*Tanya* 313). The goal of this paper will be to elucidate that final statement—What does it mean to say where knowledge ends, faith begins? What do R. Schneur Zalman's writings reveal about his belief regarding the relationship between intellect and faith?

Intellect was very important for R. Schneur Zalman; his followers understood this as well, and it is no coincidence that they adopted the name Chabad to describe their movement. The name Chabad is derived from the three intellectual *sefirot* (the ten attributes through which G-d reveals himself; they are also the ten attributes of the soul) *Chochmah* (wisdom), *Binah* (understanding) and *Daat* (knowledge).

How are these three *sefirot* related? In Chapter three of *Likutei Amarim*, R. Schneur Zalman discusses their relationship. *Chochmah* literally translates to the “potentiality of what is.” It can best be understood as an intellectual spark, a brilliant thought that one cannot yet put into words. *Binah*, understanding, describes the process whereby one uses his intellect to begin to “understand a thing truly and profoundly as it

evolves from the concept which he has conceived in his intellect” (*Tanya* 11). This can be called elaboration, analysis, or elucidation.

R. Schneur Zalman writes in *Tanya* that *Chochmah* and *Binah* give rise to Love and Fear of G-d, which are the basis for service to G-d. When we use our intellectual faculties to deeply contemplate on the greatness of G-d, we will come to dread him and to love him. Fear of G-d keeps us from doing evil and Love of G-d compels us to do good (*Tanya* 285).

Daat is also very important to the process. *Daat* means knowledge, but it also implies attachment; the word seems to imply that one cannot know anything of G-d unless he *frequently* thinks about G-d’s greatness and internalizes his greatness: “For even one who is wise, understanding of the greatness of the blessed *En Sof*, will not— unless he binds his knowledge and fixes his thought with firmness and perseverance— produce in his soul true love and fear, but only vain fancies” (11).

Additionally the Hebrew word for faith, *emunah*, is also a term that means training, and so the very definition of the word itself seems to say we must engage our mind, our intellectual faculties, regarding G-dly matters in order to have faith: “The essential thing, however, is the [mental] training to habituate one’s mind and thought continuously...that everything one sees with one eyes...constitutes the outer garments of the King...This is also implicit in the word *emunah* (‘faith’), which is a term indicating ‘training,’ to which a man habituates himself, like a craftsmen who trains his hands” (*Tanya* 225). In this way, wisdom, understanding, and knowledge are central to R. Schneur Zalman’s entire project.

An Objection to the Intellectualist Style

Many Hasidic leaders, including R. Avraham of Kalisk, decried the *Tanya*'s intellectualist style. These Hasidic leaders thought that it was dangerous to encourage the broad group of Hasidim to approach G-d intellectually (Loewenthal 51). What did R. Avraham find so objectionable about an intellectual approach to G-dly matters? R. Avraham outlines his basic objection to *Tanya* in a letter sent to R. Schneur Zalman after the publication of the work. R. Avraham says that Fear of G-d is “the innermost point around which all the planets revolve and all the worlds are built” (Lamm 85). He argues that when one builds on reason alone, without the Fear of G-d, judgments are awakened and that the beginning of evil comes from the intellect's awakening of judgments.

What does he mean by this? R. Avraham seems to be saying that *improperly trained* human intellect is the source of all evil (Lamm 86). If one has a misunderstanding of truth, or a lack of knowledge, he is bound to act in ways that he should not. For example, a child who has never been taught that stealing is wrong may think it is appropriate to take things from his friends without asking. The child has used his (improperly trained) intellect to make a judgment—that taking the toys of his friends is good because then he can play with them. The child's parents must teach him that stealing is wrong; they must train his intellect so that he can make better judgments in the future.

R. Avraham argued that encouraging the common Hasidim to engage their (improperly trained) intellects on matters of G-dliness was dangerous; undoubtedly, he thought they would use their intellects to make incorrect judgments about the nature of

G-d, and because these ideas were in a book, the readers would have no one to correct them when they misinterpreted the text. He thought that this misunderstanding could lead to heresy (Lamm 86-87).

R. Schneur Zalman was not blind to this problem; in fact, he recognized the inherent danger of the printed word: “For the reader reads after his own manner and mind, and according to his mental grasp and comprehension at that particular time. Hence, if his intelligence and mind are confused and wander about in darkness in G-d’s service, he finds difficulty in seeing the beneficial light that is concealed in the books” (*Tanya* xviii).

Even though he recognized the danger, he still thought that giving all of his followers an intellectual toolkit to understand G-d was necessary. Why did he disagree with R. Avraham of Kalisk? The two Hasidic leaders differed in how they understood Fear of G-d. R. Avraham of Kalisk believed that Fear of G-d, by itself, was the basis for a pure faith in G-d. R. Schneur Zalman, on the other hand, believed that Fear of G-d was born from contemplation.

Intellect as the Foundation of Faith

Human beings, especially those who are religious, are caught in quite a bind. The bind can best be stated as follows: Man cannot have a mental grasp of anything except through the limited structure of his mind. G-d, by its very definition is Infinite. Therefore it would seem that human beings are utterly incapable of talking about the infinite. G-d is that which cannot be grasped. Our minds cannot think of what it means to be outside of time or outside of space. We are also limited by the fact that we can only communicate in

words, and G-d is beyond words. What place does intellectualism have in matters relating to G-dliness?

Consider the following example. A Physics professor at Dartmouth College is teaching an introductory level Astrophysics course. One day, he says to his class: “Students, scientists have recently proved that the universe is expanding. I would show you the mathematics behind how they proved it, but that is a topic covered in upper level courses.” A student leaves that class and has complete faith that the universe is expanding; he believes what his professor has told him. Ten years go by, and the student forgets about the class. One day, something sparks his memory and he remembers that the professor told him the universe was expanding. However, time has made him a skeptical man and he now no longer has faith in what the professor told him. Unfortunately, the professor never taught him the math behind the proposition, and so he does not have the intellectual tools to prove himself wrong.

R. Schneur Zalman, if he were around today, would say that this story exemplifies why intellectualism is important in religion. R. Schneur Zalman thought that throughout their lives, many, if not all, of his followers would have doubts; they would lose faith in a G-d. He wanted to give them an intellectual foundation, a set of ideas they could go back to in case they ever had doubts about the existence of G-d.

Reason Leads to Faith: An Intellectual Approach to Understanding Divine Wisdom

One can understand the role that intellectualism plays in understanding G-d by looking to Chapter 8 and 9 of *Shaar HaYichud*. In these chapters, R. Schneur Zalman writes about a human being’s wisdom in order to help reveal what Divine wisdom is. He

writes that human wisdom is the original source of life-force in man, because from wisdom comes understanding and knowledge, and from these flow all the emotions like love, kindness and mercy. From the emotions flow all the letters of thought: “for the soul thinks of that which it loves or of how to perform deeds of kindness and mercy.” And from the letters of thought proceed letters of speech, and speech leads to action. Once he has shown this, he then goes on to say that “And even when a man himself performs some deed, the power of the soul and its life-force which clothes itself in this deed, is as absolute nothingness in relation to the power of the soul and its life force which clothes itself in the speech of man; [they are to each other] as the relation and comparison of the body to the soul” (*Tanya* 323). What is R. Schneur Zalman trying to get us to understand?

He is trying to show us that a man’s speech somehow contains more of his soul, more of his life-force, than his deeds, and in some way speech is the life-force of action, just as thought is the life-force of speech.

For example, imagine a friend of yours slams his fist on the table without saying anything. You begin to think of hundreds of reasons as to why he did this. Maybe he is angry with you because of something you said. Maybe his hand fell asleep and he was trying to wake it up. Now imagine that when he slammed his fist down, he had yelled “I hate taking exams!” These words reveal much more to you about his inner being than just the fist slamming by itself does. If you had the power to see his thoughts and understand his emotions then you would be able to grasp even more of what he meant when he yelled “I hate exams!” Another important thing to understand with this example is that the action of the fist slamming contained all of your friend’s thoughts, emotions, and wisdom. You do not have the capability to see those things in the fist slamming, and so

there is a way in which the action has concealed from you the things in your friend's mind, even though those things are there.

In Chapter 9, Schneur Zalman that "It is within the power of created beings to comprehend only the descent from the level of Wisdom which is their beginning, to the level of action which is the lowermost [of levels]...and it is not at all proper to ascribe to Him anything that is appurtenant to Wisdom even in a very lofty and sublime form...it is beyond the capacity of any higher or lower creature to comprehend His Wisdom or His Essence" (*Tanya* 327).

If our wisdom is not at all like G-d's wisdom, then why has R. Schneur Zalman gone through the trouble of explaining the relationship between human wisdom and human action? The metaphor is important because it helps us recognize that the relationship between a thought and action in a human being is in some way related to the relationship between Divine Wisdom and creation. G-d uses "letters" to create all that there is; humans use their letters to create words. The metaphor is important because it help us comprehend the descent, but the metaphor is nowhere near perfect; it cannot be relied on to be precise: "What we have here is more in the nature of an operative model, something on our own level that will enable us to comprehend what is happening on a higher plane, above our comprehension" (Steinsaltz 29).

Should R. Schneur Zalman even use metaphor then? Does it obscure more than reveal? Is there too great a risk of oversimplifying G-d? He would argue that there is not. Obviously we are not able to grasp Divine Wisdom at its highest level, but we know something of our own wisdom, and this enables us to grasp *something* of G-d's wisdom. Schneur Zalman would argue that as long as we are vigilant about recognizing the limits

of our intellect, there is no harm in bringing down G-dly concepts and fitting them into an intellectual framework.

Faith Leads to Reason

The relationship between faith and intellect in R. Schneur Zalman's writings seems to be a unidirectional relationship—the powers of intellect bring us to a certain level of understanding and we must realize that there are certain truths our reason is not able to grapple with. Faith seems to be a human faculty that kicks in where our reason ends off. However, implicit in R. Schneur Zalman's writings, faith leads to reason in some sense as well; the relationship goes both ways. How so?

R. Schneur Zalman's writings were not geared towards atheists; he assumed that most of his readers had a strong faith in G-d, a strong awareness that there existed something much greater than themselves. His works were meant for people who were scholarly individuals of considerable spiritual stature (Loewenthal 48).

This reveals something quite interesting about his understanding between faith and reason. He believed that a pure faith in G-d compelled his followers to want to engage their intellectual faculties regarding ideas about G-d.

What do I mean by this? Consider an example. A freshman enters an undergraduate institution and after his first semester of study, he is trying to decide what to major in. He enjoys English and has excelled in it, so he considers English as a course of study. But, he hopes to make quite a bit of money in the future, so he thinks studying finance might be to his advantage. Ultimately though, he decides to major in Physics.

Why? The student has an intuitive feeling that physics is the science of sciences; he believes that physics can answer all of the difficult questions about the nature of existence. This feeling is a feeling of faith. He believes there is some truth to be found in physics and so he has decided to dedicate his college career to engaging his intellectual faculties on matters regarding physics. In this way, a pure and curious faith in the “truth” and superiority of physics has led him to an intellectual pursuit of the subject.

R. Schneur Zalman believed that the same process took place in the hearts of his followers. Simon Jacobson describes this process: “And faith leads to reason because faith in G-d impels us to use our reason, every ounce of the intellect and logic G-d gave us, to internalize and integrate our faith. G-d expressly told us that he wants us to know him—to perceive him with our mind and its finite tools of logic, to embark on a lifelong quest in which we expand the scope of our reason, learning to both fulfill its power and to recognize its limitations” (Jacobson 245).

Schneur Zalman’s system seems to imply that there are two faiths—a blind, curious faith that compels us to engage our reason; and a mature, secure faith built on the shoulders of reason.

Conclusion

Although intellect and faith seem to be completely contradictory, they are intimately connected in the system of R. Schneur Zalman. A strong faith in G-d leads one to engage his intellectual faculties in order to fill his mind with G-d, which leads him to an even stronger faith in G-d. To return the question posed in the beginning—what does it mean to say where knowledge ends, faith begins? R. Schneur Zalman would most

likely answer that although knowledge and faith are not overlapping faculties, they do influence each other. It is incumbent upon every Jew to figure out where his intellect ends, to push himself to his intellectual limit.

References

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