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Is Belief in God a Miztvah? Maimonides on the First Commandment

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The first of the Ten Commandments, which we will read with much fanfare on Shavuot morning, is “Anochi Hashem Elokecha” – I am the Lord your God. Or is it?

The Torah never actually refers to ten commandments, but to “Aseret HaDibrot”, ten statements, that God uttered to the Jewish people at Sinai. While the importance of these ten statements has never been questioned, the question of whether they in fact constitute commandments is quite controversial, specifically with regard to the first of these statements. Rambam, in his Sefer HaMitzvot, counts belief in God as the very first mitzvah, and cites “Anochi Hashem Elokecha” as the Biblical source for the commandment of faith. Ramban, however, in his glosses to Sefer HaMitzvot, points out that the passuk is not phrased as a commandment – “Believe in the Lord your God”, but rather as a statement of fact – “I am the Lord your God.” Therefore, the earlier mitzvah compendium Halachot Gedolot did not count the first of the ten statements as one of the 613 commandments, viewing it rather as a statement of theological fact. Of course, Halachot Gedolot does not deny that a good Jew must believe in God, but he understands that this requirement is too basic to be counted as a mitzvah. Faith is the pillar which supports all the 613 mitzvot of the Torah, and thus is not considered one of them. Rav Soloveitchik once summarized this disagreement using halachic terminology –Rambam considers faith as a mitzvah, but Halachot Gedolot considers it a “hechsher mitzvah”, a necessary precondition of the mitzvot.

It behooves us, then, to explore what led our great teacher the Rambam to count belief as a mitzvah, especially since the plain meaning of the Biblical verse does not contain an element of commandment. In addition, the later commentators and philosophers raise two string objections to the Rambam’s interpretation. Rav Hasdai Crescas, in the introduction to his philosophical masterpiece Or Hashem, points out that it is circular reasoning to speak of God commanding us to believe in God. No one can believe in God because God commanded him to do so, for if he obeys God’s command, that means that he already believed in God anyway. And if someone doesn’t already believe in God, then telling him that God commands belief is irrelevant. Therefore, concludes Crescas, it is illogical for God to command that you believe in Him.¹

In addition, Crescas points out that commandment only applies to volitional acts, and belief is decidedly involuntary. If you are convinced by the evidence, you are forced to believe something, and if you have not found convincing evidence, you cannot believe it with certainty. No threat, sanction, or command can make you believe something if you are not convinced that it is true. To illustrate this objection with a contemporary example, I cannot command you to believe the world is flat if you are not actually convinced by the evidence I present, and even if I

threaten you with the death penalty for disbelief, you may decide to lie and say that you believe the world is flat, but you will never succeed in making yourself actually believe it.

This second objection to the Rambam's stance has been dealt with by Maimonidean commentators from the fifteenth century through the present generation. One approach to defending the Rambam is to argue that religious belief, as opposed to scientific belief, is indeed volitional, and Rambam was a proto-existentialist who held that we are commanded to take a "leap of faith" and believe in God even without convincing evidence.² A more Maimonidean approach to resolving this difficulty is taken by Don Isaac Abravanel in his work on dogma and belief, entitled *Rosh Amanah*. Abravanel explains that while one cannot be commanded to believe, one can be commanded to study, investigate, to acquire philosophical knowledge and training. Once these prerequisites are in place, suggests Abravanel, faith will suddenly appear, as a philosophically trained mind will have no choice but to be convinced by the evidence for God's existence. Thus, although one cannot be commanded to believe, one can certainly be commanded to undertake the necessary preparations for belief, as the decision whether or not to study lies within the realm of free will.³ This approach certainly suits the general tenor of Rambam's philosophy, and adequately addresses Crescas's second objection, but is not yet a complete explanation of the Rambam's position, for it does not address Crescas's first objection. How can God command us to undertake the intellectual journey towards belief in God, if the Jew who heeds this commandment already believes, and the Jew for whom this commandment is necessary does not admit that he is commanded?

In order to make sense of the Rambam, then, we must return to the terminology of Rav Soloveitchik, but with an eye to the philosophical orientation of Maimonidean thought. Halachot Gedolot assumes that belief in God is a "hechsher mitzvah", a necessary precondition to the observance of the entire Torah, and he is certainly empirically correct. According to the Rambam, however, the exact opposite is true – the entire Torah comes essentially to lead us to the knowledge of God (*Moreh Nevuchim* III:27), which is the ultimate goal of human existence in this world and the key to the continuation of that existence in the World to Come. Perhaps this is the reason that Rambam took pains to establish faith as a commandment, in order to emphasize that knowledge of God is not merely a prerequisite to serving Him, but constitutes a goal in and of itself. This explanation dovetails with the observation of the nineteenth-century Biblical commentator Rav Meir Leibush Malbim (in his commentary to the Decalogue), who mounts a defense of the Rambam based on the Rambam's choice of terminology of the Mishneh Torah. Malbim points out that the Rambam pointedly refrains from stating that there is a mitzvah to believe – "lehaamin" – in God.⁴ Rather, we are commanded to know – "leida" – the existence of God (*Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* I:1). Even though a naïve belief might suffice as a precondition to keeping the other commandments, as a "hechsher mitzvah", in order to fulfill the mitzvah of belief, we must go further and achieve a clearer knowledge and more accurate understanding of the nature and existence of God.

Armed with this insight, it is possible to defend the Rambam against Crescas's objections. This mitzvah is not circular because it is not an attempt to command the unbeliever, but rather to command those who already believe in God to get to know Him a little better, to shake off their unsophisticated and inaccurate conceptions of God and improve their spiritual life by refining and advancing their understanding of and relationship with Him. Crescas's second objection can

also be overcome, for the mitzvah is not merely to decide that you believe in God as opposed to believing in atheism. That is already assumed by the fact that you are trying to fulfill God's commandment. Rather, the mitzvah is to study, contemplate, and philosophize, with the aim of achieving a more sophisticated knowledge of the nature and necessity of God's existence. As pointed out by Abravanel, study and contemplation are activities which we are free to perform or not perform, and therefore we can be commanded to choose to engage in them.

If this interpretation of the Rambam is correct, then perhaps we can generalize it to explain the Rambam's overall approach to the relationship between dogma and commandment. The Rambam lists thirteen dogmas of Judaism in his commentary to the last chapter of Mishnah Masechet Sanhedrin. (They have been immortalized in the Yigdal poem and the list of Ani Maamin found in most Siddurim following Shacharit.) Yet he only includes some of those beliefs in the count of the 613 commandments in his Sefer HaMitzvot. Scholars have struggled to explain how Rambam chose which dogmas qualified as 'mitzvot' and which were merely required beliefs. A glance at the Rambam's thirteen principles, however, reveals that the first five principles (God's existence, unity, incorporeality, eternity, and exclusivity) deal with the nature of God, the next four (prophecy, Mosaic prophecy, and Divinity and irrevocability of the Torah) deal with revelation, and the last four (Divine omniscience, reward and punishment, Messiah, and resurrection) deal with reward and punishment. It has been suggested⁵ that while the latter two groups of principles are intended merely as a "hechsher mitzvah", as truths whose realization constitutes a precondition for observance of the 613 mitzvot, the dogmas in the first group were formulated as "mitzvot" in and of themselves. Belief in the Torah and in the utility of keeping the Torah is necessary in order to be a good Jew, but only the five crucial beliefs about the nature of God constitute the core of Judaism according to Rambam. It is no wonder then, that only the first five principles are counted by Rambam as mitzvot. The first two principles constitute the first two positive commandments on the Rambam's list, the third and fourth principles do not appear on the list of commandments but Rambam includes them in the purview of the second commandment (Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah I:7), and the fifth commandment is identified explicitly by Rambam (in the commentary to Mishnah Sanhedrin) with "the negative commandment prohibiting idolatry." In contrast, none of the latter eight principles make their way, explicitly or implicitly, onto the Rambam's listing of mitzvot. This pattern supports our speculation that the Rambam formulated belief in God as a mitzvah in order to emphasize that this belief was not merely a prelude to Divine worship and fulfillment of the commandments, but was rather the goal of all the other commandments. An untutored, naive faith in God could suffice as a "hechsher mitzvah", inspiring the Jewish people to keep the Torah, but the mitzvah of belief could only be fulfilled by understanding the five basic principles of Maimonidean theology, and thereby acquiring a true understanding of, and ipso facto a relationship with, God.

We now return to our starting point, the debate over the putative First Commandment. According to our analysis, Rambam and Halachot Gedolot are engaged in not merely a technical disagreement as to whether the Ten Statements are Ten Commandments or not, but a fundamental philosophical debate on the role of faith in Judaism. Halachot Gedolot views belief in God as a "hechsher mitzvah", as the backdrop of the Torah enterprise of serving God. Rambam, however, views knowledge of God as a "mitzvah" itself, as an end and not a means, as an ennobling spiritual experience and a connection to the Divine. It is no wonder, then, that

Rambam counts the first words of God's revelation not only as the first of his thirteen principles, but as the first and most glorious of the 613 mitzvot of the Torah.

¹ It has been suggested that Crescas's objection is valid but does not constitute a refutation of the Maimonidean stance. Perhaps, if we stretch or revise the definition of a Maimonidean "commandment" to include a virtuous or constructive act, then it would not be illogical to assume that God revealed to us the virtue or utility of believing in Him. Similarly, if we define "commandment" theologically as an act for which one receives heavenly reward, then it is not circular to state that God told us that we receive reward for believing in Him. Perhaps we could even suggest that God demonstrated his attribute of magnanimity by making faith a commandment, even though it would only be performed by those who believed already, in order to increase our reward. (See Mishnah Makkot 3:16). However, this approach is ultimately unsatisfying, as the plain meaning of the word "commandment" indicates that God commands to perform some act which we have not yet performed, and thus He cannot command us to believe in Him, for whoever heeds His commandment performs already believes in Him prior to being commanded.

² See Charles H. Manekin, "Belief, Certainty, and Divine Attributes in the *Guide of the Perplexed*", in Arthur Hyman, ed., *Maimonidean Studies*, Volume 1, New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1990, pp. 117 – 141. Manekin bases this argument on Moreh Nevuchim I:50, where Rambam distinguishes between belief, which is "the affirmation that what has been represented is outside the mind just as it has been represented in the mind," and certainty, which consists in the realization "that a belief different from it is in no way possible and that no starting point can be found in the mind for a rejection of this belief or for the supposition that a different belief is possible." Rambam thus admits that belief does not require certainty, and so Manekin argues that belief is undertaken voluntarily and not by force of evidence. However, this passage does not necessarily lead to this radical conclusion. Rambam states merely that one can believe even if the evidence is not one-hundred percent conclusive, but he may very well admit that one cannot believe without any evidence at all, and that one cannot merely decide to believe something unless the evidence supports it.

³ It is interesting to note how this approach of Abravanel is transformed by more recent anti-philosophical interpreters of Maimonides. For example, Rav Elhanan Wasserman (Kovetz Maamarim ch. 1) answered Crescas' objection by positing that in fact the existence of G-d is easily proven, as the complexity of the world cannot be explained without recourse to an intelligent Creator. The commandment, then, is merely to make the effort to consider the issue objectively, without regard to the worldly benefits of denying the existence of God. 'Rav Elchanan' (as he is known in the yeshivah world) does not actually agree with Abravanel's interpretation of Maimonides, as Abravanel holds that belief can only be achieved after prolonged philosophical investigation and Rav Elchanan thinks that it can be proven with a simple one-step teleological proof. Their general approach, however, is the same, and has remained popular among Maimonides' interpreters for five centuries.

⁴ In the Sefer HaMitzvot, Rambam does state that the first commandment is "lehaamin", to believe in God. However, the Sefer HaMitzvot was originally written in Arabic, and the choice

of Hebrew idiom reflects the limitations of translation rather than the outlook of the Rambam. In the Mishneh Torah, the only major work in which Rambam chose his own Hebrew terminology, he consistently uses the root “de’ah” in this context and never “emunah”. On this basis, both Rav Chaim Heller and Rav Yosef Kafah (in their respective editions of Sefer HaMitzvot) argue compellingly for the translation “leida” in place of “lehaamin” in the Sefer Hamitzvot.

⁵ See Arthur Hyman, "Maimonides' Thirteen Principles", in Alexander Altmann, ed., *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967, pp. 119 - 144. Hyman also struggles with the issue of why only certain dogmas are classified as commandments, but reaches a different conclusion than the one I suggest.