



Mitzvat Asei 1: Knowing/Believing in God's Existence
By David Silverberg

In the prevalent Hebrew translation of *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, Maimonides describes the first *mitzvat asei* ("positive commandment") as follows: "The first commandment is that He commanded us to believe in the divine, meaning, that we believe that there is a primary cause that brings all things into existence, and this is what is said, 'I am the Lord your God'." According to Maimonides, the verse that opens the Ten Commandments, "*Anokhi Hashem Elokekha*" – "I am the Lord your God" (Shemot 20:2) – introduces an obligation to believe in the existence of God, or, more precisely, a Creator, and this obligation constitutes one of the 613 Biblical commands.

Maimonides proceeds to cite a Talmudic source for his view that this verse introduces one of the 613 commandments. In *Masekhet Makot* (23b), the Gemara cites the famous passage of Rabbi Simlai that forms the basis of the entire notion of there being 613 commandments: "613 *mitzvot* were said to Moshe at Sinai." The Gemara finds a subtle allusion to this number from the celebrated verse (Devarim 33:4), "*Torah tziva lanu Moshe*" – "Moshe commanded us the Torah." The numerical value of the word *Torah*, the Gemara observes, is 611, suggesting that Moshe transmitted to *Benei Yisrael* 611 commandments. The Gemara comments that in addition to these 611 commandments, *Benei Yisrael* heard two commands from God directly, without the mediation of Moshe: *Anokhi* and *Lo yihyeh lekha*. It appears that the Gemara refers to the first two of the Ten Commandments – "I am the Lord your God" and "You shall have no other gods besides Me" – claiming that these two commandments were heard directly from God, for a total of 613 *mitzvot*. It thus clearly emerges from this passage that the Gemara deemed this verse – "I am the Lord your God" – as one of the 613 commandments. Maimonides understands this *mitzva* as requiring the fundamental belief in the existence of a Creator.

Mishneh Torah

This *mitzva* begins not only Maimonides' listing of the commandments, but also his halakhic code, *Mishneh Torah*. He begins this work by establishing that "the most fundamental of principles and the pillar of wisdoms is to know that there is a first cause and He brings into existence everything that exists" (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:1). Later (1:6), Maimonides adds, "Knowing this matter is a *mitzvat asei*, as it says, 'I am the Lord your God'."

Many writers have addressed the seeming discrepancy between Maimonides' formulation in describing this *mitzva* in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, and in *Mishneh Torah*. Whereas in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* Maimonides speaks of "belief" in the Creator, in *Mishneh Torah* he describes the obligation as "knowing" that there exists a Creator. "Belief," or *emuna* in Hebrew, generally connotes holding a concept to be true irrespective of any rational proof, whereas *yedi'a*, or knowledge, usually refers to cognitive, definitive

acknowledgment of an idea. For example, if somebody informs his fellow that he performed a certain act the previous day, the friend will *believe* the information; he has no concrete, logical proof that his friend did as he claimed, but he will nevertheless trust that the information is accurate. By contrast, somebody who witnesses his friend perform that act *knows* – cognitively – that this in fact occurred. In *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, it appears, Maimonides enjoins us to *believe* in the Creator, to acknowledge His existence despite the fact that we cannot rationally prove it. In *Mishneh Torah*, however, he speaks of *knowing* that the Creator exists, just as we *know* without any doubt or hesitation that which we directly perceive with our senses. Indeed, a number of writers interpret Maimonides' description of the *mitzva* in *Mishneh Torah* in terms of philosophical inquiry to prove the Creator's existence. The Radbaz (Rabbi David Ben Zimra, Egypt, 1480-1573), for example, in his work *Metzudat David*, understands Maimonides here as requiring that one arrive at rational proofs and effective arguments to refute heretical theories denying God's existence. The work *Ma'aseh Rokei'ach* explains that Maimonides requires philosophical engagement resembling that undertaken by Avraham, as Maimonides describes later in *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 1:3), to prove the existence of a single Creator and reject the claims of paganism. Furthermore, Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim (1809-1879), in his Torah commentary (Shemot 20:2), interprets Maimonides' comments in *Mishneh Torah* in light of the controversial theory he posits in the *Guide for the Perplexed* (2:33), that "the existence of God and His unity can be arrived at by means of reasoning." According to Malbim, when Maimonides speaks of an obligation to "know" the existence of the Creator, he mandates that we employ logic and philosophical reasoning to arrive at the knowledge of God's existence.

But while this is very likely Maimonides' intent in *Mishneh Torah*, it does not explain why he formulated this obligation differently in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*.

Among the intriguing theories advanced to resolve this seeming discrepancy was suggested by Rabbi Aharon Soloveitchik, in his work *Perach Mateh Aharon*, a commentary on the *Madda* section of *Mishneh Torah*. Rabbi Soloveitchik boldly asserts that Maimonides understood this *mitzva* as imposing different demands upon different classes of people, and that the two aforementioned contexts are addressed to two different audiences. *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, Rabbi Soloveitchik claimed, was written for the masses, and it therefore requires *belief*, a conviction that one holds without concrete proof or rationalization. In *Mishneh Torah*, however, Maimonides speaks to the scholar, and demands of him the *knowledge* of God's existence, that he probe and inquire philosophically into the notion of a Creator. According to this theory, whether the Torah requires intuitive belief or definitive knowledge depends on the given individual's personal capabilities.

Many others, however, claimed that the perceived discrepancy between the two passages results from an inaccurate translation of *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*. (Recall from our introductory *shiur* that unlike *Mishneh Torah*, which was written in rabbinic Hebrew, *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* was written in Arabic.) The Arabic word employed by Maimonides in this context and rendered as *le-ha'amin* ("to believe") is *itakad*, which, as Rabbi Chayim Heller notes in his annotation to *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, is also used to mean "knowledge." Indeed, this word is the second term in the title of Saadia Gaon's famous philosophical treatise which has become known to us by Hebrew translators as *Emunot Ve-dei'ot*, which of course assumes that this word is equivalent to the Hebrew word *dei'a*, or knowledge.

Rabbi Yosef Kapach, in his commentary to *Mishneh Torah*, argues that *itakad* means exclusively "knowledge," and not "belief," and he thus entirely dismisses the notion of any discrepancy between Maimonides' descriptions of this *mitzva* in *Mishneh Torah* and *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*. More importantly, perhaps, as Rabbi Kapach notes, Maimonides explicitly clarifies for us what he means by this Arabic term, in a passage in the *Guide for the Perplexed* (1:50). We cite this passage here from Friedlander's translation, where, interestingly enough, the term *itakad* is in fact rendered as "faith":

When reading my present treatise, bear in mind that by "faith" we do not understand merely that which is uttered with the lips, but also that which is apprehended by the soul, the conviction that the object [of belief] is exactly as it is apprehended. If, as regards real or supposed truths, you content yourself with giving utterance to them in words, without apprehending them or believing in them, especially if you do not seek real truth, you have a very easy task as, in fact, you will find many ignorant people professing articles of faith without connecting any idea with them...

For belief is only possible after the apprehension of a thing; it consists in the conviction that the thing apprehended has its existence beyond the mind [in reality] exactly as it is conceived in the mind.

Thus, *itakad* describes a cognitive process of "apprehension of a thing" followed by the "conviction" that this "apprehension" corresponds precisely to reality. It denotes a degree of confidence and certitude that extends beyond verbal professing or even acting upon the given notion. It thus appears likely that even in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* Maimonides speaks of "knowing" the existence of the Creator, the intellectual process of arriving at this fundamental theological truth through rational thinking.

A *Mitzva* or the Basis of *Mitzvot*?

This understanding of Maimonides' definition of this *mitzva*, as requiring philosophical inquiry, rather than a mere declaration of belief, helps resolve two well-known challenges to his inclusion of *Anokhi* as one of the 613 commandments. As Nachmanides notes in his critique of *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, the *Behag*, author of what had been the authoritative listing of the 613 *mitzvot*, did not include the belief in God as one of the Biblical commands. Nachmanides speculates that the *Behag* omitted this command for the simple reason that the precept of God's existence is a necessary prerequisite for the acceptance of His commands. In the *Behag*'s view, it would be tautological for God to issue a command demanding the recognition of His existence; the very setting of a Diving Being conveying instructions to His subjects presumes a ruler-subject dynamic, which obviously depends on both parties' awareness and acceptance of the other's status within this framework. (Nachmanides raises also a second argument against the inclusion of this *mitzva*, which we will address later.) In addition, Rabbi Chasdai Crescas (Spanish Jewish philosopher, 1340-1410), in his harsh critique of Maimonides entitled *Or Hashem*, objects to the notion of God commanding the human being with respect to belief. Crescas contends that God could demand that we perform an action or refrain from performing an action, but He cannot demand that we think one way

and not another. Thought and belief, he argues, are not subject to the human being's free will, as one cannot necessarily control what he believes. Therefore, God cannot issue a command that we accept the belief in His existence.

Both these challenges are instantly negated the moment we explain this *mitzva* as demanding "knowledge," rather than "belief." According to Maimonides, *Anokhi Hashem Elokekha* requires one to probe and inquire, not simply to profess a belief. Of course, *Benei Yisrael* believed in God's existence before they stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and heard Him command "I am the Lord your God"; the Torah explicitly describes their firm belief in God after the miracle of the splitting of the sea (Shemot 14:31). *Anokhi* demanded – according to Maimonides – that they develop and refine this belief, advancing it from mere faith to an incontrovertible philosophical truth. This is, in general terms, the approach taken by Don Isaac Abarbanel (philosopher and exegete, Spain-Portugal 1437-1508) to explain and defend Maimonides' position, in the seventh chapter of his work *Rosh Amana* (translated from Hebrew by Menachem Kellner). Abarbanel cites Crescas' challenge to Maimonides and offers the following response:

I respond [to this objection] and say that I have already explained in the ninth proposition that beliefs are actualized and fixed in a man's heart and soul just as natural forms are fixed in their subjects, coming in an instant and by necessity, without choice and will. But despite all this, it is impossible for these beliefs to be actualized if no preparation for them is made, with respect to knowing those things which bring one to those beliefs and which cause them to be accepted by the soul. These facts, investigations, and examinations, and this study are the preparations which bring a person to belief.

There is no doubt that these preparations are an activity of will and choice and are acquired over time. For it is up to each person "to perceive, learn, teach," and know those things which necessitate and give birth to belief in his soul. If he does not wish to involve himself with this, [beliefs will not be born in his soul].

Now Maimonides did not count as a positive commandment the form of the belief and its truth, but, rather, knowledge of those things which bring one to acquire beliefs... Maimonides did not say that *belief* in this truth is an affirmative precept [*mitzvat asei*], for he did not relate the commandment to belief but to knowing those things which bring one to belief.

The *mitzva* demands not belief itself, but rather what Abarbanel describes as "knowing those things which bring one to belief," or, in simpler terms, exerting the intellectual effort to arrive at the "knowledge" of the existence of a Creator.

Abarbanel advanced this theory in response to Crescas' objection, that belief is not subject to human free will and thus does not lend itself to a Biblical imperative. But his reading of Maimonides just as well refutes Nachmanides' challenge, that belief precedes the very notion of a divine command and thus cannot itself constitute a divine command. Nachmanides is, of course, correct; one must believe in a Creator before one can accept the commands issued by that Creator. But, as Abarbanel explained, Maimonides understood *Anokhi* as mandating not belief, but intellectual engagement that leads to concrete knowledge. This process clearly does not necessarily precede the acknowledgment of the notion of a divine command.

We should also note that Rabbi Chananya Kazis, author of *Kin'at Soferim*, a work defending *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* from its critics, advances a different theory in response to Nachmanides' challenge. He claims that this verse introduces an obligation not to believe in the Creator – a belief that *Benei Yisrael* had already attained previously – but rather to "maintain this belief among them [the Jewish people] in the most perfect way, and teach it and bequeath it to their offspring, for eternity." According to the *Kin'at Soferim*, Maimonides understood *Anokhi* as a command not to believe, but to work towards the preservation of this belief among the nation's posterity. But while this approach to Maimonides' position indeed very easily resolves the challenges of Crescas and Nachmanides, it hardly accommodates Maimonides' formulation, which quite clearly indicates that this obligation relates to one's personal religious outlook, rather than its perpetuation through subsequent generations.

Maimonides' Talmudic Source

As Nachmanides was well aware, any defense of the *Behag's* position must address the seemingly convincing proof Maimonides brings to his position from the Talmud in Masekhet Makot, where the Gemara makes clear reference to the two commands of *Anokhi* and *Lo yihyeh lekha*. In response, Nachmanides suggests a novel – but perhaps forced – reading of the Gemara, whereby the Gemara refers to the two prohibitions subsumed under the passage that begins "*Yo yihyeh lekha*." The Torah here forbids fashioning and possessing articles of idolatry, as well as the worship of these articles ("*Lo yihyeh lekha... Lo ta'aseh lekha*"; "*Lo tishtachaveh lahem ve-lo ta'ovdem*"). Nachmanides thus suggests that although the Gemara mentions *Anokhi* and *Lo yihyeh lekha*, it in truth refers to the two prohibitions of *Lo yihyeh lekha* – possessing or making idols – and *Lo tishtacheveh lahem* – worshipping idols. According to this reading, the Gemara does not cast *Anokhi* as a separate command, and this is perhaps how the *Behag* interpreted this Talmudic passage. Indeed, as Nachmanides notes, the *Behag* lists possessing and worshipping idols as two separate commands, a listing consistent with the theory Nachmanides here seeks to attribute to him. (Interestingly enough, Rabbi Yerucham Fischel Perlow, in his commentary on Saadia Gaon's poetic listing of the commandments, notes that in more authoritative texts of the *Behag*, the prohibition against possessing idols is not, in fact, listed as a separate commandment.) Rabbi Chasdai Crescas suggests this reading of the Gemara, as well.

Of course, as argued in the *Lev Samei'ach* and *Megilat Ester* commentaries to *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, this reading is very difficult to sustain, as there seems to be little reason for the Gemara to make any mention of *Anokhi* if it does not deem it a *mitzva* at all.

It seems more likely that the *Behag*, and the others – like Saadia Gaon – who likewise do not consider *Anokhi* as one of the 613 commandments, based themselves on a different source. The *Mekhilta*, as Nachmanides cites in his Torah commentary (Shemot 20:2-3), describes the declaration of *Anokhi* as God's calling upon *Benei Yisrael* to profess their acceptance of His authority before He proceeds to convey to them His commandments. This formulation very strongly resembles Nachmanides' understanding of the *Behag's* position, that *Anokhi* be seen as a necessary preamble to the commandments, rather than a commandment in and of itself. If so, then we might

speculate that the *Behag* derived his stance from the *Mekhilta*, such that any indication in the Talmud to the contrary may be dismissed as representative of a conflicting position.

Command or Affirmation?

Nachmanides posed a second argument in defense of the *Behag*, as well, namely, that the clause "*Anokhi Hashem Elokekha*," which Maimonides understands as introducing an obligation, is clearly written as an affirmative, rather than imperative, statement. God here appears to merely introduce Himself, so-to-speak, to the Israelite people before proceeding to present to them His instructions. According to Maimonides, God should have declared, "You shall believe that I am God," or something of that nature, rather than simply establishing the fact that "I am the Lord your God." How could this verse introduce an obligation if it is written as an affirmative statement, rather than a command?

The Maharal of Prague (Rabbi Yehuda Loew, 1525-1609) addresses this question in his work *Tiferet Yisrael* (chapter 37). He suggests that the Almighty chose not to formulate this *mitzva* as a command so as to emphasize the unshakeable truth that "I am the Lord your God" regardless of whether or not one chooses to accept this fundamental belief. Had God commanded, "Acknowledge Me as Creator," one might mistakenly conclude that just as it is conceivably possible to deny the authority of a mortal king and thereby free oneself of his rule, so, too, can one choose to shake himself free of divine authority. The Almighty wanted to impress upon *Benei Yisrael* that they are forever under His control and authority regardless of their acceptance or denial of this axiomatic truism; He therefore issued this command as a statement of fact, rather than as an order that could potentially be violated.

A simpler answer is suggested by Rabbi Avraham Aligri, author of the *Lev Samei'ach* commentary to *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*. The *Lev Samei'ach* suggests that Maimonides understood from context that *Anokhi Hashem Elokekha* introduces a command, rather than a statement of fact. For one thing, even before the Revelation at Sinai, when *Benei Yisrael* first encamped near the mountain, God spoke to Moshe and had him tell *Benei Yisrael*, "You have seen what I did to Egypt, and that I carried you on wings of eagles and brought you to Me..." (Shemot 19:4). With this verse God introduces to the people the terms of His covenant, which they gladly accept: "The entire nation replied in unison and said: All that the Lord said – we will observe" (Shemot 19:8). There would be no reason, then, for God to once again "introduce Himself" to the people at the actual Revelation, before presenting His commandments. It thus stands to reason that *Anokhi* signifies a command, rather than a preamble. Furthermore, the *Lev Samei'ach* argues, it seems reasonable to assume that all the information inscribed upon the tablets involves commandments, and not introductory information. The context of *Anokhi*, as part of the ten principles that comprise the elementary creed of Jewish law, strongly suggests that it presents a command, rather than simply a truism.

The *Lev Samei'ach* adds that in another instance, too, Maimonides identifies the Biblical source of an obligation in a verse that reads as an affirmation rather than a command. The 153rd *mitzvat asei* listed by Maimonides is that of *kiddush ha-chodesh*, maintaining the lunar calendar system, which he derives from the verse in the Book of Shemot (12:2), "This month is for you the first of months." Here, too, the Torah simply

establishes a fact, implying a command that *Benei Yisrael* must implement and abide by this system. It should therefore not surprise us that Maimonides similarly understood "I am the Lord your God" as mandating – albeit indirectly – that every Jew firmly accept the basic precept of God as Creator.