

Faith through Logic

The most difficult part of religion is faith. There is little logical basis for simple belief without proof or the ability to disprove. It is hard for me, as a scientist, and as an empiricist at heart to simply accept “facts” without proof. However, blind faith is not required in Judaism, as I importantly learned in Sinai Scholars. Karl Popper’s statement that one should not believe in what is undisprovable and its application to Judaism was the most important contribution of Sinai Scholars to my Jewish Knowledge. Facts and principles, ideas, whether from Torah, Talmud, or later commentators, were known to me before. I had had five years of an extracurricular “Hebrew School,” where motivated students studied with a variety of Rabbis. In many ways, it formed the basis of my Jewish identity. This is not to say, however, that it was a complete or singular education. Such courses should not exist for any discipline worthy of study. What I gained from Sinai Scholars were ideas that had either escaped my mind, or were completely new. I cannot say which category the Popperian statement falls into; however, it is extremely important on how I view the world and Creation.

The testable hypothesis is the key to the scientific universe. Beginning with Francis Bacon especially and gradually gaining momentum throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the empirical approach to examining the World shaped human thought. Gone were the classical days where there was no idea of a testable approach or a scientific method. The empirical method was a way by which the universe could be ordered and given a metric. As its popularity grew, so did its scope. Diderot and D’Alembert in

L'Encyclopédie drew up a chart of the combined knowledge of mankind. Interestingly, they placed religion in a similar category to “black magic” and “witchcraft,” rejecting it as a myth. Similar anticlerical attitudes landed them in jail for many years. However, many of the other empiricists of the day were quite religious, for instance Buffon and Newton. Their problem was, however, that they could not combine empiricism and religion. Newton’s religiosity ruined much of his later scientific endeavors. Buffon kept both spheres of his life distinct, an approach favored by many throughout the ages. This approach is a tragedy, as segmenting the brain, not allowing the methods of one worldview to influence another limits thought and can only lead to uncertainty.

The Christian worldview that controlled Western thought for almost two thousand years demanded simple faith. Empirical methods were not applicable to dogma. Death by burning for heresy was the punishment usually reserved for such people. It is easy to see from this record why empiricism and religion came head to head so frequently.

Judaism, however, rejects this notion of conflict. The Torah and its revelation at Sinai are inherently disprovable. The fact is that they have not been. It is the solution in some sense to the faith problem. If over 1 million people saw an event and there is no account to the contrary coming from them, there exists a modicum of proof that the event happened. Judaism’s acceptance of empiricism and its cousin, logic, only strengthen its believability. That I can reconcile my scientific worldview with religion and the desire to have a reason to believe what is written in the Torah only affirms my Judaism.

At core principles, thus, science and religion may meet. There is an interesting commentary on this parallel in Milton Steinberg’s book, *As A Driven Leaf*. The protagonist has rejected all religions because they rely, in his view, upon faith. He bases

all that he knows upon principles, such as Euclidean Geometry. A friend then poses to him the question, is not geometry itself founded upon five postulates that one must believe to be true? This revelation startles the protagonist and the reader. Science and mathematics, taken to be empirical *sui-generis* require just as much faith as religion does. Logically however, geometry does not require faith as Euclid's principles are testable and extensive research for thousands of years continues to ascertain their veracity. The scientific case parallels that for the revelation at Sinai, a testable hypothesis is taken and proven correct through experimentation.

This unity fascinates me. That similar principles can be applied to religious belief and scientific inquiry allows a more unified structure of knowledge. It allows me to bridge two parts of my life and not question either one based on the other's principles. Using Popper's reasoning we can remove religion from the category of "black magic" and "witchcraft" that Diderot placed it in and return it to the field of human knowledge. It is important that every Jew know this; that one should not believe in what is undisprovable and that the revelation at Sinai has not yet been disproved even though it may easily be. It allows the scientist, the logician, and the secular scholar to accept the Torah.

My thanks to Reb Eitan for a wonderful class, and the class itself for interesting discussion, and several people (unnamed here) who brought up questions I probably would not have dared to at the time. It was good to question my own beliefs as well and to realize that many times I knew of a certain rule or principle, but did not know or had forgotten why it existed and the logic behind it. I hope that Sinai Scholars 2 may be implemented next year to continue learning and having enjoyable discussions about

Judaism. These two hours per week were a wonderful break from homework and learning for classes, even if they did cause me to stay up two hours later Wednesday nights.