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The First Mitzvah: Know God Exists

“I am the Lord, your God, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2).

The first of the Ten Commandments is to know there is a God. It is also the first mitzvah in the Rambam's listing of the 613 mitzvot. He explains:

The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know (leida) that there is a Primary Being who brought into being all existence. All the beings of the heavens, the earth, and what is between them came into existence only from the truth of His being. (Sefer Mada, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 1:1)

The Rambam specifically uses the verb “leida” – to know – in explaining our obligation in this mitzvah. But whom is this mitzvah addressing? Someone who does not believe in God does not believe in a Commander, and without a Commander, there can be no commandment. And someone who does believe in God is already fulfilling the mitzvah. Therefore, this mitzvah seems to be either irrelevant or redundant.

Our answer is predicated on the fact that one's belief in Hashem lies on a continuum of understanding. This mitzvah is speaking to the believer and it is telling him to deepen his belief in Hashem. A belief in God based only on the teachings of one's parents and teachers must be upgraded. Hashem wants a person to shake off his complacency regarding his belief in God and strengthen this fundamental conviction by independently verifying it.

This is accomplished by establishing a rational foundation to corroborate what you have been taught to believe and accept. Furthermore, by identifying your questions and doubts, and working on gathering the information you need to resolve them, you move your belief in Hashem further up the ladder of your convictions, bringing it to a higher level of knowledge. This is the ideal way to fulfill this mitzvah, as the *Sefer HaChinuch* explains (Mitzvah 25):

And if one merits to climb the heights of wisdom, and his heart understands and his eyes see the clear-cut evidence that the belief he has believed is true and evident, there being no other possibility, then you he is carrying out this mitzvah in the best way possible.

A Hierarchy of Convictions

The first step in upgrading your belief in God is to assess the current strength of your belief, by categorizing it into one of the following four levels of convictions:

1. Knowledge (De'ah)

Knowledge is absolute clarity based on an overwhelming amount of evidence. For example, we all know we have 10 fingers, and no matter how hard someone tries to persuade us that we have 11 fingers, our conviction will remain unshakeable. This is the level of clarity we should ideally strive to achieve in our belief in Hashem, as outlined above by the *Sefer HaChinuch*.

2. Belief (Emunah)

The second level of conviction is what we call *emunah*, belief. It, too, is based on evidence, but it lacks the full clarity of knowledge. For example, you are willing to accept the check of a close friend without concern that it is going to bounce, even

though you do not know the exact balance in your friend's account.

The gap between knowledge and belief can be caused either by a lack of evidence or by an unresolved question that undermines one's certainty.

Baseless Convictions

The next two categories of convictions lack any valid basis for belief.

3. Social Conditioning

Every person is raised with a certain set of beliefs, which varies from society to society. People brought up in India believe that cows are holy. Americans growing up in a liberal western society are likely to believe that there are no absolute truths. An Arab born and raised in Gaza is likely to believe that Jews are evil oppressors. Unless they examine the validity of their convictions, these people will remain nothing more than a product of their society, as their beliefs are merely an accident of birth.

It requires a concerted effort to independently think through your beliefs, and it is therefore much more comfortable to just go with the flow of your society and adopt their beliefs as your own.

4. Blind Faith (Emunah Tefeilah)

Blind faith is a conviction based on an emotional or physical desire for something to be true. This form of faith lacks any shred of evidence to substantiate its position. In fact, people who trust blindly are often willing to take a leap of faith that goes against the evidence contradicting their conviction. For example, a smoker might confidently state, "This cigarette won't harm me," despite knowing the overwhelming evidence that smoking is life-threatening.

Use these four definitions to help you assess the current quality of your belief in Hashem. Once you have pinpointed where you are at, you can then begin to work on strengthening your belief by either filling in the gaps in your understanding or by seeking answers to the questions that weaken your confidence in Hashem's existence. Although this may be a bit uncomfortable, confronting your questions will ultimately strengthen your clarity and dispel your doubts, while disregarding your questions guarantees that your belief will never become rock solid.

Who Is God?

A student at Aish HaTorah once challenged Rabbi Noah Weinberg with the following question. His sister was traveling with her friend through the American South. They had a terrible car accident, and her friend sustained painful burns all over her body. A born-again Christian came to speak to her in the hospital, and he told her that if she accepted JC as her savior, her terrible pain would end. The friend dismissed him and told him to leave.

The next day the Christian returned and again promised that her pain would end if she accepted JC. In a moment of weakness, she said that she accepted him as her savior, and sure enough, her pain immediately disappeared.

The student then asked Rabbi Weinberg, "If miracles are proof of the existence of God, doesn't this story serve as a proof for Christianity?"

Rabbi Weinberg replied with the following parable:

Imagine that the United Nations convenes an international conference on the existence of God. Leading philosophers and religious leaders from all over the world are in attendance.

In the middle of the discussions, a powerful-looking man walks up to the front podium and demands, "Silence!" The entire building suddenly lifts off the ground.

Everyone is in shock. The man then says, "Watch!" To the amazement of the entire group, the building begins flying all over Manhattan.

"Let's dive under the water now!" he says, and the UN building goes straight down into the ocean. People can see fish swimming by their window.

"Now let's fly into outer space!" The building heads straight up and lands on the moon.

After collecting moon rocks as souvenirs, the man steers the UN building back to earth, where it settles back down on its original foundation.

Everyone is speechless, and the man says to all of the philosophers and religious leaders, "I am God, bow down to me!"

Everyone in the room hits the floor and bows, pleading to him to be merciful towards them. The only person left standing is an old Jewish janitor of European descent who works for the UN. Despite numerous pleas from all the others, he remains standing and tells this powerful man, "Sir, I have no idea how you did what you did, but God you're not."

How can we understand this janitor's confident refusal to bow down? To answer, let us change the end of the story.

They zoom down from outer space, and the powerful man says, "I am a frog, bow down to me!" Do you think anyone in the room would bow down? Chances are, they would say something similar to what the Jewish janitor said: "Sir, I have no idea how you did what you did, but a frog you're not."

Everyone knows that a human being cannot possibly be a frog, because we all understand what a frog is and what a human being is. The old Jewish janitor has enough understanding of Who God is to know that a human being can never be God, no matter what kind of miracles he performs. But if you do not have a clear definition of God, you are liable to jump to false conclusions, especially when miracles are involved. You might even believe that JC was responsible for her recovery, when in fact there is no logical correlation between the two.

So what is the Jewish definition of God?

Creator, Sustainer, and Supervisor

There are three primary axioms that define Hashem, and we are obligated to understand and believe each one as part of the mitzvah to know that God exists:

1. God is the Creator of the universe, Who made the world from nothing.
2. God is the Sustainer Who continually wills every particle in the universe into existence.
3. God is the Supervisor Who orchestrates everything that happens to us.¹

Each of these axioms carries significant implications for our daily lives.

1. Creator Implies That God Loves Us

Love is expressed through giving. And the more altruistic the giving, the more it expresses one's love. When a gift is given with an ulterior motive, it is manipulation, not love.

Since God is infinite and perfect, there is nothing He can receive from His creations. Therefore, His gift of creating life is the purest possible expression of love, and can only be for the benefit of the recipient. We are given the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with the infinite Creator of the Universe, which is the greatest gift possible, and there is absolutely nothing we have done to deserve it.

Indeed, as King David stated, "The world is built on kindness" (*Tehillim* 89:3).

2. Sustainer Implies That There is No Other Power to Turn to

The fact that God is the Sustainer means that nothing in the universe exists independently; everything exists only because Hashem wills it into existence. This implies that it is fruitless to rely on any power or person other than Hashem, because ultimately all these other powers are themselves completely dependent on Hashem. They can only help us if Hashem decides to work through them as His messengers. Therefore, it only makes sense to go to the source; deal with the puppeteer, not his puppets.

3. Supervisor Implies That There Are No Accidents

God, in His role as Supervisor, orchestrates everything that happens to us. Even trivial events happen for a reason, as the Talmud teaches that even the frustration of having to stick your hand into your pocket a second time to retrieve the correct coin is a lesson from the Almighty (See *Berachos* 5a).

There are no accidents; everything that happens to us is a personal message from Hashem. He is constantly talking to us through the events that occur in our daily lives. Pay attention and listen.

The Jewish people survived as a tiny minority in a very hostile world for over 2000 years in exile. We clung to our beliefs despite unrelenting persecution because we were supremely confident that our beliefs were true. We understood the intellectual foundation for our core beliefs, and that enabled us to reject all attempts to convert us regardless of the terrible consequences we faced. And it is this clarity of conviction that will enable us to survive the unrelenting temptations of secular society, and to give over to our children a rock-solid understanding in the reality of God and His Torah.

1. The *Sefer HaChinuch* includes all three aspects in his explanation of the mitzvah to know God exists: Creator: "To believe that the world has one God who created everything..."
2. Sustainer: "...and all that was, is, and will be forever and ever came about from His power and will..."
3. Supervisor: "...and that He took us out of the Land of Egypt and gave us the Torah."



Maximizing Inspiration

Recall a time when you felt really inspired. Did the stirring words of a great speaker touch your heart? Perhaps you were inspired by someone who beat great odds. Each of us experiences inspiration differently, as a unique but short-lived aha moment.

In this week's Torah portion, we recall the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. This momentous event was experienced collectively by the entire Jewish nation. No other people has ever received Divine revelation en masse. Each individual was elevated to otherwise unknown spiritual heights.

At Sinai, the Jewish People as a whole shared an all-encompassing state of unity. *Rashi* states that "they encamped there like one man with one heart."⁸¹ Previous encampments were marred by internal conflicts and discord. Yet here they were, permeated by a feeling of shared purpose. Their hearts became spiritually aroused, causing the underlying unity among all the Jewish People to be revealed.

At Sinai, the Jewish people were in complete agreement. This was an unprecedented occurrence. The first word of acceptance of the Torah by all of Israel in unanimity was "*Naaseh*—We will do." This was spoken at the apex of the greatest spiritual epiphany ever. The multidimensional manner in which the revelation at Sinai took place stimulated all the human senses. An all-powerful blast of a shofar reverberated throughout their encampment. All of Mount Sinai shook forcefully, while an ascending smoke enveloped it. A thick cloud hovered over the mountain, while thunder and lightning punctuated the shofar's crescendo.

The Torah's detailed description of what transpired is awe-inspiring. *Rashi* comments that the people all were able to see that which is normally only heard. Modern science calls this phenomenon "synesthesia." It's a condition in which the senses react in a novel way to a stimulus usually dealt with by another sense.

Imagine your sense of sight perceiving a certain sound as purple, or your hearing designating a specific color as the sound of a violin. All those at Har Sinai had the heightened ability to actually see sounds. During this elevated state of consciousness, the dimensions of physical and spiritual reality were perceived as one harmonious whole. In a symbolic metaphor, the higher and lower realities of Heaven and Earth interfaced. An entire nation, simultaneously, was able to transcend its previous limitations. How utterly inspirational!

Can inspiration last? It's not meant to. Inspiration is the spark that lights a flame. It functions specifically to jump-start us into action. Every inspirational experience begins as a brilliant flash and gradually diminishes into a weakened recollection.

Without continued efforts, the initial feeling engendered by inspiration cannot be maintained. Think of the contrast between infatuation and enduring love. The first sensory high of discovering one's beloved eventually will subside. That initial flash of awareness must be nurtured, so that it can grow into a sustainable relationship. Imagine a couple telling one another, "I love you," on their wedding day, but never repeating it again for thirty years. Blithely saying, "If anything changes, I'll let you know," certainly is not what we'd consider a loving relationship.

Why do companies, hospitals, schools, and other institutions prominently display portraits of their founders? Such visual images encourage viewers to connect to their ideals and to continue them. Likewise, mission and vision statements encourage us to activate our *raison d'être* into daily practices.

Inspiration is the first phase, which is meant to evoke a second phase of continuous effort. In the introduction to *Moreh Nevuchim* (*The Guide for the Perplexed*), *Rambam* (Maimonides) metaphorically refers to life as "a dark night on a stormy plain." Lost in the darkness, one cannot see his or her way. Suddenly, a flash of lightning illuminates a pathway. As the light disappears, the faded memory of that flash provides guidance. The pattern of our lives is expressed in this description. We are meant to focus on phase two—utilizing inspiration to develop more inspiring lives.

Unlike treasured artifacts in display cases, we safeguard valued truths by striving to live by and perpetuate them. The Torah's mitzvot enrich and vivify our relationship with God, self, and humanity. Each mitzvah is part of a greater Divinely calibrated

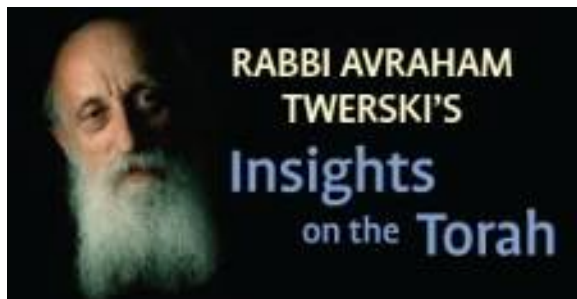
and connective system. As the expression of infinite wisdom, the Torah and mitzvot act to enrich both our physical and spiritual quality of life. Thus, life can be infused with ongoing meaning and purpose.

How can inspiration be maximized? As with any worthwhile endeavor, you must invest yourself. Sitting on the couch and bingeing on junk food while watching exercise videos won't cultivate a healthier lifestyle. Likewise, just reading self-help books or essays on spiritual growth won't produce the sought-after, optimal results. Yes, those things can offer inspiration, but you have to act on it.

Immediately translate inspiration into real, tangible deeds. Inspiration is a call to action. What you do with it can maximize the initial spark of inspiration into an ongoing flame.

Making It Relevant

1. Starting today, resolve to take action toward actualizing an important life goal.
2. The next time that you get a flash of inspiration to do something, act on it immediately. If you wait till the next day, the inspiration already will have dissipated and you'll have rationalized your decision not to act.
3. Strive to keep the flow of daily Torah learning going to fuel on- going inspiration in your life.



Only United Can We Fulfill the Torah

And they encamped in the Wilderness and Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain [Sinai] # (19:2)

As we have seen, the narration that precedes the giving of the Torah is more than just historical. It indicates the prerequisites of Torah.

Rashi points out that the Hebrew word for encamped is *vayichan*, he camped, rather than *vayachanu*, they camped. Furthermore, the Ten Commandments were also spoken in the singular, *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*, your God in the singular, rather than the plural *elokeichem*. The singular form of the verb is utilized because there was such complete unity among the Israelites that they were like one person, hence the entire nation could be addressed in the singular.

The Torah was given to each individual, and every person is required to fulfill the 613 mitzvot. It is obvious that technically this is impossible. There are some mitzvot whose performance is restricted to Kohanim (priests), which Yisrael cannot perform. A person whose firstborn child is a girl cannot fulfill the mitzvah of *pidyon haben* (redemption of the firstborn son). Mitzvot that apply to judges do not apply to lay people. How can any single person fulfill all 613 mitzvot?

Torah scholars have provided the answer. When a person puts on the tefillin (phylacteries) on his arm and head, it is not just the arm and head that have the mitzvah, but the whole person. Similarly, when people are united, they are as one, and a mitzvah performed by one person is shared by those with whom one is united.

How tragic that we have allowed ourselves to be divisive. Fragmentation not only weakens our nation, but deprives a person of acquiring the merit of those mitzvot which he is unable to perform.

Every human trait may have positive applications, even something as repulsive as selfishness. We should realize that eliminating the divisiveness that reigns among us is not merely altruistic. It is of inestimable personal benefit.



How to Inspire Others

How do we stay grounded after achieving spiritual heights? And perhaps the greater challenge: how do

we share these transformative experiences in a way that truly inspires others?

These questions, as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago, find their answer in an unexpected moment just after the giving of the Torah.

The Torah tells us that Yisro, Moses's father-in-law, joined the Jewish nation in the desert after hearing about the miracles God performed in Egypt. While this appears at the beginning of this week's Torah portion, Rashi explains it actually occurred the day after Moses returned with the second set of tablets. Consider the context: Moses had just spent three sets of 40 days and nights on Mount Sinai in direct communion with God, receiving a divine download of unimaginable proportions. He returned carrying the mission to teach God's infinite wisdom to three million Jews. One might expect him to be too overwhelmed for visitors.

Yet instead of brushing him off, Moses does the exact opposite - he lays out the metaphorical red carpet:

"Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed low and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent. Moses then recounted to his father-in-law everything that Hashem had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and how God had delivered them." (Exodus 18:7-9)

Moses's intimate attention to his father-in-law might seem surprising. Shouldn't he be beyond such mundane interactions?

Nothing could be further from the truth. True spiritual growth doesn't distance us from others—it brings us closer. This wisdom flows from a foundational principle: humanity bears the Divine Image.¹ Therefore, the deeper our connection with the Divine, the greater our appreciation must be for His children. This is why our greatest Torah leaders never retreated to mountaintops. The Rambam exemplified this perfectly: while producing works of eternal wisdom, he served both as leader of the Egyptian Jewish community and as the Sultan's physician, showing how spiritual greatness expresses itself through deeper engagement with both one's own community and the broader world.

The Roadmap of Inspiration

Let's take this conclusion a step further: Given that Moses just had the most powerful spiritual

experience imaginable, his interaction with Yisro must serve as the masterclass in imparting spiritual elevation. When we examine the text closely, we discover that each of Moses's actions was precisely calculated, forming a seven-step framework for transmitting our highest revelations with genuine connection:

1. "**Moses went out**" - He left his comfort zone and took the initiative
2. "**He bowed low**" - He demonstrated respect
3. "**And kissed him**" - He gave love and affection
4. "**Each asked after the other's welfare**" - He displayed humanity and empathy
5. "**And they went into the tent**" - He provided hospitality and physical nurturing
6. "**Moses then recounted (וַיִּסְפֹּר)...**" - Then, and only then, he delivered an inspiring and moving account of the Exodus in order to draw Yisro close to Torah²

One crucial step remains—the seventh step that transforms the previous six into a complete whole, much like Shabbat elevates the six days of the week:

1. "**And Yisro rejoiced** over all the kindness that God had shown Israel when He delivered them from the Egyptians. And Yisro said '*Baruch Hashem!* (Blessed is God!)" - He steps back and lets Yisro internalize the message on his own.

When we've experienced profound insights or spiritual revelations, our enthusiasm might tempt us to launch straight into sharing these deep truths. But the Torah reveals a crucial principle: the most powerful wisdom can only be conveyed through genuine connection. People don't care about how much we know until they know how much we care. These seven steps show us exactly how to bridge the gap between having wisdom and making an impact

Making the Extra Effort

A story from recent years brings these seven steps to life: Danny grew up in a religious Jewish family in Brooklyn, but his search for meaning led him far from home – to Montana's Blackfoot Indian Reservation. There, he became a hunter and formed deep bonds with the Native American community. His quest for truth brought him to a renowned Sioux elder who, after two weeks of profound conversation, offered unexpected guidance: 'Seek the truth of your heritage.' Moved by these words, Danny returned to New York, ready to rediscover his Jewish roots.

His search for guidance led him to Rabbi Freifeld, who answered his call on the first ring and, upon hearing of Danny's interest, invited to his home. When Danny arrived, the Rabbi showed him in, gave him refreshments, and urged him to get comfortable.

"Where do you live, Danny?" he asked gently.

"In Montana."

"What do you do in Montana?"

Knowing that hunting is primarily against Jewish law, Danny braced for impact, responding, "I hunt."

The Rabbi's eyes lit up and he leaned forward, his voice filled with wonder. "What do you hunt?"

The Rabbi proceeded to question him enthusiastically about his passion for an hour. At the end of their discussion, the Rabbi invited Danny to come to the Yeshiva the next morning. When Danny arrived, he saw a packed study hall, and the Rabbi sitting in the front holding a baby who was about to receive a circumcision.

Suddenly, Rabbi Freifeld looked up and located Danny at the back of the room. He sent for Danny and gave him a place of honor at his side. Later that day, Danny started in a beginner Talmud class with Rabbi Freifeld as his teacher. Over the next few months, in addition to his studies, Danny spent many hours with Rabbi Freifeld discussing nature, Native American culture, and life in general.

A year later, while meeting with the Rabbi in his office, the Rabbi was called out for an emergency. Danny began perusing the Torah books in the office. A flash of color hidden under the desk drew his attention and curiosity. When he pulled out the book, he stopped and stared in shock. The book, checked out from the library, was a dossier of Native American culture and customs; the information that the loving Rabbi needed to connect with his student to show him just how important he was.

From Sinai to today, this divine wisdom remains unchanged: the path to inspiring others begins not with what we know, but with how deeply we care. As you encounter opportunities to share your wisdom with others, let these seven steps guide your approach. You'll be amazed at how much more receptive people become when you first create genuine connection.

Shabbat Shalom! Avraham

Inspired by the classes of my Rosh Yeshiva (Headmaster), Rabbi Beryl Gershenfeld, in my first year at Machon Yaakov

1. Genesis 1:27

2. If you're paying close attention to the progression of the narrative, you'll notice a glaring problem in the verses above (Shemos 18:7-9). The first verse in the Parsha tells us that the reason Yisro comes to the Sinai Desert is that he "heard all that God had done..." (Shemos 18:1). If so, Yisro already knew the story of the miracles and the Exodus. Yet Moshe goes to great lengths to tell him the whole story again. Why? The answer to this question is hidden in the Hebrew word that we translated as "recounted" - "Vayisaper" (וַיִּסְפֹּר). The Torah doesn't use the normal words for speaking (Vayomer) or telling (Vayidaber)... So, what is this mysterious word Vayisaper and what is its function if not a simple recount of information that Yisro already knew? Rashi, commenting on the strange word "Vayisaper", explains that Moshe recounted the story "to pull on his heart to bring him close to Torah." We're going to need to take our electron microscopes up to 300X magnification to truly appreciate what Rashi is teaching us. The root letters of Vayisaper (וַיִּסְפֹּר) are Samech (ס), Pay (פ), and Reish (ר). In Kabbalah, Samech (ס), is the letter of completion - full circle

3. Pay (פ) is the letter of Poh - here

4. And, Reish (ר) represents Ratzon - desire.