

# THE SUPREMACY OF REASON

*by Rabbi Yonason Goldson*

"You impetuous people," the apostate said to the sage Rava. "You put your mouths before your ears!"

Our mouths before our ears? The apostate was referring to "Na'aseh v'nishmah," the famous phrase uttered by the Jewish people when they stood at the foot of Sinai and were asked if they would accept the Torah. "We will obey, and [then] we will listen," they replied enthusiastically. As their response implies, they committed themselves to follow the Torah's commandments without first asking what responsibilities this commitment would entail.

"You should first have asked what was in the Torah," the apostate continued. "If you felt able, you could then accept it; if not, you could refuse it."

Our first impulse might well be to sympathize with the position of the apostate rather than that of the Sage. Why, exactly, did the Jews not first inquire of Moses, so that they could responsibly weigh the obligations that the Torah would impose on them? Does Judaism call upon us to serve our Creator unquestioningly? Are we to assume that Torah Judaism views faith and rational thought as mutually exclusive?

Conventional wisdom does indeed perceive such an incompatibility between religion and science, between faith and reason. Careful consideration, however, reveals that every single one of us truly does rely on faith. Whether we are scientists or laymen, clergymen or atheists, faith is as essential to our diet as flour and water.

We have all learned that the world is made up of atoms. But no one has ever viewed an atom, only the energy trails left behind by ... something. In the absence of any better hypothesis, we posit the existence of atoms. We have all learned that the universe began with the Big Bang. Scientists tell us that before this great cosmological cataclysm, neither time nor space existed. But what exactly does that mean? It means, according to columnist Bob Berman in the June 2000 issue of *Astronomy*, precisely this: "Nobody has the foggiest idea what happened the Tuesday before the Big Bang."

We have all learned that life came into existence billions of years ago in a sea of primordial goo, and that sentient life evolved from the lower orders. So where are the myriad examples of macro-evolution that Darwin predicted we would find? What's more, biologists can make only the wildest speculations as to how a random assembly of amino acids could produce animation and conscious thought, even given billions of years to work at it. Nevertheless, most people continue to believe that the Big Bang created a universe made up of atoms and inhabited by creatures evolved from pre-Paleozoic slime. Why? Because they have faith, faith that science will eventually answer its own questions.

At best, the science-believer can claim a rational faith; a faith in observation and experimentation that will eventually confirm the unsubstantiated beliefs he holds today. Nor is this the only example of how rational faith serves every one of us every day of our lives. If my doctor tells me that I need my appendix out, I'll probably rely on him, since I realize that I don't know enough to diagnose myself. And if my mechanic tells me my car needs a new fuel pump, I'll probably rely on him too, since I wouldn't know my fuel pump from my appendix.

The faith demanded by Judaism is no less rational, for it is built upon a logical extrapolation of evidence available to anyone who cares to examine it, tempered by an awareness of the limitations of human knowledge. Therefore, if the Almighty tells me that observing and safeguarding the Torah is to my benefit, I will certainly take His advice, for He created me, and He knows me even better than a mother knows her child.

So there was nothing impetuous about the Jews' acceptance of the Torah sight-unseen. Indeed, we did not accept the Torah on faith at all; we accepted it on trust, a trust more solid than the most compelling scientific proof.

But trust is only the first step. "Na'aseh v'nishmah," the Jewish people said. "We will obey, and we will listen." The Hebrew word "nishmah" implies much more than simply hearing the commandments. It implies studying them diligently, laboring to understand them. That which we originally accepted based on trust, we can then accept based on knowledge. This is how the Jew has faced the unknown since his ancestors received the Torah on that first Shavuot day, 3,312 years ago: by trusting that everything in the world has been brought into existence by design, but also by questioning the nature of the world and all that is in it; pondering good and evil, triumph and tragedy, nobility and selfishness. Always confident in the supremacy of divine reason, we stand assured that whenever the universe seems not to make sense, it is rather we who have not yet succeeded in understanding it.

Rabbi Yonason Goldson teaches at Block Yeshiva High School and Aish HaTorah in St. Louis, and writes a regular column for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

E-geress is a Hebrew word meaning letter or correspondence. We welcome your questions and comments. Our address: [fox@moreshet.co.il](mailto:fox@moreshet.co.il) Visit our web-site for back issues & subscription: <http://www.e-geress.org>.