

CHAPTER 1:1 THE CREATOR

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

1:1:1

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto offers that there are a number of things about G-d Almighty each one of us needs to both *know* and *believe*.

He apparently combines the two, because Rambam (Maimonides) said in one context that we're to *know* certain fundamentals of the faith including the fact of G-d's existence ¹, and in another he said that we're to *believe* them ². It appears that Ramchal contends that we'd need to do both at the same time.

So much for the more academic answer to the question of why both knowing and believing are listed. We'd like to approach it differently now, and ask a couple of questions based on the combination. First, what's the difference between believing and knowing? And why, for our purposes, did Ramchal combine them?

The best way to define the difference between knowing and believing is to imagine being without either. It seems that not believing is more personally and existentially threatening, and more darkly dire than not knowing. Because I'm convinced that if I don't know something, I can always learn it; while if I don't believe it, I'm left somehow "stranded". And in fact, many of our Sages have taught that belief is higher than knowledge ³.

But not knowing threatens, also. Knowing for example why something bad happened to me seems to dampen the pain and lend solace while not knowing seems to gnaw at my being and oppress me.

Apparently Ramchal's point is that we're to somehow or another so internalize the truth of G-d's existence, so convince ourselves of His living presence that both the dark, dread lack of faith in Him, and the bleak, dulling lack of knowledge of G-d's ways in the world simply disappear.

But how do we ever do that?

This may help. Notice how Ramchal titled this work "The *Way* of G-d" in the singular, rather than the *ways*? It seems he put it in the singular because a major point of his throughout his writings is that all-in-all G-d has one broad way or agenda, if you will (with many, many narrow paths or side-agendas along the way leading up to it). He intends to allow the universe to reach perfection in the end ⁴.

Eventually grasping that -- learning it and fully believing it in one's heart and soul -- will have us both know and believe. And in fact a great part of the gift of this book will be its underscoring the fact of G-d's ultimate agenda in light of His many side-agendas.

That having been said, what are we to believe and know about Him after all?

The first thing is that G-d's *the first being*; and that He existed *before* anything or anyone else, and will continue to exist *after* everything and everyone is gone ⁵.

But that's curious. If He's the first being, of course He existed before anything or anyone else. What's Ramchal's point? What's the difference?

Perhaps we can explain G-d's being termed the "first being" this way.

Were we to somehow or another appear out of nowhere and come upon reality for the first time, the first being we'd notice -- the most obvious and preeminent Being -- would be G-d. Simply because we hadn't yet had a chance to take His presence for granted, and hadn't yet been waylaid by all the other things that have us overlook Him.

G-d will eventually prove to have existed before everything else, too. But knowing that would come later, after we'd have withstood the alarm and stun of catching sight of His presence in the first place.

Again, we're also told that He will continue to exist after everything and everyone is gone. Why would we need to know that, too?

This seems to be the best way to illustrate and explain G-d's preceding and succeeding everything and everyone. Imagine a grand concert full of roil and thunder, high pitches, low pitches, *gravitas* and *piccolo*. And imagine it beginning with a single, bold note that somehow or another threads its way throughout the concert and appears again at the concert's end.

Wouldn't that single note prove to have *defined* the concert in retrospect and to have given it its heft?

That's exactly Ramchal's point. G-d's ineffable presence defines reality and gives it *its* heft. And that by being the first and last, He is the better part of the whole.

His final point here is that G-d -- and G-d alone -- both *created* and *maintains* everything ⁶.

Simply put, that comes to deny the power of anything or anyone else to truly and utterly *create* out of the blue. And it comes to underscore the fact that G-d not only created us, he also maintains our beings moment by moment. Returning to our musical analogy, we'd add that G-d not only pressed His lips (if you will) to the mouth of our beings to start "playing" us (i.e., to animate us), He continues to, throughout the concert.

Notes:

¹ *Yesodei HaTorah* 1:1.

² *Sefer HaMitzvot*, Positive Mitzvot 1 (some who are well-versed in the classical Arabic in which this work was written indicate that the word used here should also read "to know" rather than to believe, but that's beside the point for our purposes here since Ramchal did indeed use the word "believe" here).

³ See 1:1:2 below where it's pointed out that the Jewish experience of faith in G-d is actually based on knowledge of Him, in that it's rooted in His revelation of Himself to our ancestors at Mount Sinai rather than on a vague, tenuous sense of His existence (but see our note there). That combination would explain why Ramchal commends both at the same time.

As to which matters more, faith or knowledge, some say belief is more important. That's because we're told that "the righteous lives by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4), that "Abraham believed in G-d" (Genesis 15:6) and that our people are consequently to be depicted as "believers and the children of believers" (*Shabbat* 97a) above all else.

Others say that we're to build on that faith and to gain knowledge of G-d since we're told that one is to "know (and understand) the G-d of your father" (1 Chronicles 28:9) and to "Lift up your eyes to the stars and see (and understand) Who created them" (Isaiah 40:26).

Ramchal himself indicated elsewhere, though, that he favored knowledge over pure faith (see *Ma'amar Halkkurim* 1 which, interestingly enough, parallels this statement in *Derech Hashem* but doesn't cite belief; *Klallim Mitoch Sefer Milchamot Moshe* 1; and the beginning of *Da'at Tevunot*).

⁴ Ramchal wrote that G-d created the universe so that there would be beings to benefit from His generosity by virtue of the reward for their own correct choice of actions, and that they would ultimately perfect the universe with those choices (see beginning of *Klallei Pitchei Chochma v'Da'at*). He returned to those themes again and again (see for example *Kinat Hashem Tzivaot* p. 76, his comments to R' Chaim Vitale's *Otzrot Chaim* as found in *Ginzei Ramchal* p. 297, and *Iggerot Pitchei Chochma v'Da'at* p. 404 there). The "generosity" spoken of there refers to the eradication of all wrongdoing and the revelation of G-d's presence (see *Klach Pitchei Chochma* 4) which is the ultimate reward for all goodness and the ultimate consequence of universal perfection. And see 1:2:1 below which spells this out very well.

⁵ See Ramchal's *Ma'amar Halkkurim* 1, *Klallei Ma'amar HaChochma* 1, and *Klallei Kinat Hashem*

Tzivakot 3, and *Klallei Pitchei Chochma v'Da'at* 6; also see *Breishit Rabbah* 81:2, *Yesodei HaTorah* 1:10, and *Emunot v'De'ot* 2:10.

⁶ See Ramban to Exodus 20:2 where he addresses G-d as being both the G-d of creation and of history (meaning to say that He maintains the universe so as to be active in it); also see *Sefer HaChinuch* 25.

Subscribe to *Ramchal* and receive the class via e-mail.