

June 12, 1968

Col. Mordechai Bar-On
Chief Education Officer
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Israel

Dear Col. Bar-On:

I am most grateful to you for your kindness in sending on to me the corrected reprint of the article in which you were interviewed about your thoughts on emunah. I am genuinely sorry that I delayed my response until now, but I was caught up in the "Passover rush," and then left for England for several weeks, and as a result was not able to get to the article and the letter until now.

I had, of course, heard a great deal about the article, and reading it was a supreme pleasure for me. I am quite astonished at how someone who was "outside the fold" and has turned back towards it, has succeeded so well in formulating an authentically Jewish religious response in the context of modern times. I can now very well understand the widespread repercussions of this interview, and frankly I think it deserves even greater dissemination than it has received heretofore.

I believe that some time ago I sent to you, by post, several reprints of articles that I had written and in which I thought you might find some interest. Now, with special regard to your comments about the religious situation in Israel, I have the pleasure to enclose a reprint of a popular article that I wrote (based upon a speech that I gave) upon my return from my recent visit to Israel in which I was fortunate enough to make your acquaintance.

Permit me to make several comments on your interview, all of them in support of various points you made (לדיון נוסף נוסף).

1. About the shallowness of popular rationalism that prevents so many people from even entertaining any notion of emunah: this is true not only for Israelis, but for Americans and people of other nationalities as well. The immediate and unquestioning use of the rationalist yardstick represents an interesting cultural lag in this day of instantaneous electronic communication. Apparently, those who consider themselves most "modern" have been by-passed both by events and advanced philosophical thinking.

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2. Your distinction between "coming" and "returning" to emunah is not only interesting but, I submit, completely valid from a Jewish point of view, and most especially from a Hasidic perspective. Here is one instance in which Hasidic theologians (if they will pardon my referring to them by such a "goyish" term) articulated an authentic Jewish principle that had always been implicit in the Jewish tradition. Both the authors of the "Tanya" and "Sefat Emet" express this notion, apparently independently. They begin by pointing to the verse, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God..." Halakhic scholars throughout the ages have included this v'ahavta as one of the 613 commandments. But how, they ask, can one be commanded to love, a state which is not given to command by external forces? They answer that the command is merely to allow oneself to express what already is latent within him, for "the love of God" is innate in every Jew. Man is born with ahavah tiv'it u-mesuteret, and if he is unaware of his fundamental religiousness it is because, like any undeveloped talent, it requires work in order to articulate it and refine it -- but it remains "natural," and a normal part of the human constitution. In more sophisticated modern language, the point they make is that man is a "Homo Religiosus." In that case, as you so rightly point out, one does not "come" to faith fresh, but he "returns" to it, for although it has never been for him a manifest biographical fact, it has always been an innate spiritual fact. That is why for the Greek philosophers the great problem was to define the "good," whereas for Jews the problem was: how to express it.

3. As an incidental observation, may I comment on your phrase, on page 13, that one ought to "steal" time for the study of Torah. Another Hasidic personality, and great Talmudic scholar, the author of "Haflaah" makes this interesting philological observation: according to the Talmud, after one has died and appeared before the Heavenly Court, he is asked: Kavata ittim le'torah? Throughout Talmud, the idea of setting aside established times for the study of Torah is expressed in the same idiom, based on the root נָפַח. However, he points out, that same root -- נָפַח -- in Biblical Hebrew never means "to set aside," but always, "to steal." In other words, one must "steal time for Torah"...

I have made these comments not because you need my support but as my own way of expressing my appreciation of your courage in undertaking to re-investigate the unspoken spiritual assumptions of your childhood and, in a truly Jewish manner, to begin the "return" to our sacred sources.

Please be assured that it was a pleasure for me to meet with you, and that I do look forward to meeting you again in Israel. If, by any chance, you do plan to visit New York before then, I certainly hope that you will allow some time for us to meet at leisure. With all good wishes-

Sincerely yours,

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enc.

RABBI NORMAN LAMM

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