

Gene

December 22, 1967

Mr. Eugene Robert Funk
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Dear Mr. Funk:

Please forgive me for the delay in answering your letter, and also for the fact that I find it simply impossible to answer every point that you mention, interesting though each of them is. I wish I had an opportunity to be in Chicago this year, so that we might discuss these problems face to face. Doing so by mail imposes certain natural limitations which I do not know how to overcome. Nevertheless, I will make an effort to respond to some of your remarks, adding as an aside that you certainly seem to be quite perceptive and that I truly admire the spirit in which your letter is written.

Your first point concerns your friend's question about why religious experience is not granted gratis; and, especially in view of the fact that Hessed is one of the attributes of God, why does not He, as an act of this love, grant the awareness of His existence to mortal men.

The source for the attitude betrayed by the question is both old and new. Thus, for instance, the experience of Teshuvah has usually meant in Judaism an act of conscious return, requiring superhuman spiritual and intellectual effort, by man to God. In Christianity, however, the act of "conversion" usually indicated a sudden settling of spirit upon man whereby he is pulled out of his mundane affairs and suffused with a divine light -- totally without preparation or forewarning. (One of the early issues of Tradition carried an article by Howard Levine comparing William James and Maimonides on this point.) The new source for the same attitude, however, is a kind of Hippyism -- that is, mystical experiences cheaply acquired. I am not trying to answer a problem by becoming pejorative or arguing ad hominem. I am, rather, first establishing that you are quite right that this is not the Jewish attitude.

Now, it is quite true that God acts out of Hessed. Saadia points out, although obliquely, that this Hessed takes two forms: metaphysical and an ethical form. Metaphysically, Hessed means the overflowing of the divine Self, so that He bequeaths existence where there was no existence before. In this sense, the creation of the world is an act of Hessed.

Ethically, God acts out His Hessed by giving the Torah, by affording man guidance on how to live properly and creatively, and so reap the rewards of spiritual happiness.

Now in both cases, that of the creation of the world and the giving of the Word, God's Hessed is limited to giving man the potential and the material with which to complete the task. God created the world for us to complete, to build, to develop, to improve. And He gave us the means with which to attain religious certainty and bliss. Had God extended His Hessed to giving us everything all finished and completed, man would have little to live for, and all existence would be pointless. As Saadia points out, happiness is not merely a matter of attaining a certain state, but of achieving it, of working for it, of receiving his happiness in return for true and genuine effort. To question why this is so is to question the very structure of the universe -- and while we ought to entertain all questions, it is useless to spend one's time and energy on problems that are moot and idle. All of religion is the story of a struggle, of the adventure of the human spirit. Jacob's vision was that of a ladder, which has to be climbed arduously, not of a sudden leap into empyrean heights.

Going now to your second and rather lengthy section where you speak about God-orientation and man-orientation: I don't quite understand what is bothering you. Even in the height of what you call "God-orientation," Judaism never denies the role played by man. On the contrary, I believe we can find sources from the beginning to the end of the philosophy of Judaism to show that while Torah regards with contempt the man who allows his own ego to shut out God from his life, it considers that the creation of man involved a self-restriction by God in which He granted man freedom, and this freedom is the self-exertion by man to carry out the will of God and reach Him. My sources for this will take me much beyond the confines of a letter. Let me just say that I am not quite sure I agree with your analysis of Judaism vs. Christianity as God-orientation vs. man-orientation. Quite the contrary, the emphasis of Judaism upon study and good deeds as opposed to Christianity's emphasis on faith in the "sacrifice" by one whom they consider a God-man, seems to indicate the exact reverse.

I am a bit perplexed as to where you found in the articles you mention any suggestion by me that one of the reasons for keeping the Torah even when in doubt is that at least one will not be hurting anyone else. This sounds like a modification of Pascal's famous "wager," in which he opts for religion on a mathematical basis, as if it were merely a good gamble.

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The next part of your letter speaks of the difficulty in convincing one outside of Halakhic life to join the mainstream. You note that my writing on "Faith and Doubt" seems geared more to one in the inside who is on his way out, rather than one on the outside who would like to come in. In this you are completely correct. I wrote the article specifically for those of us who experience doubt, which means that we accept Judaism but are plagued by doubts. I did not intend this to convince anyone who accepts nothing. However, much as this might shock you, I would not be so very sure that the commandments between man and God were meant only to benefit man. First, I am not quite so sure that these benefits can be spelled out simply and logically. What benefits they do contain for human beings are spiritual and psychological and can only be intuited or experienced. But much more -- and this is what I mean by the shocking part -- there is a great deal in Judaism (though admittedly completely outside the medieval rationalist philosophical tradition) which declares itself in favor of the idea that -- ka'veyakhol -- the performance of the ritual mitzvah benefits God! Here again time does not allow me to elaborate; however, let me just refer this to something that we discussed earlier. The fact that in the creation of man God gave man freedom, means that God gave man some of His own power of decision and creation. This means that, in a sense, God put His own destiny in the hands of man, and that man therefore has the choice of advancing God's will or delaying it and obstructing it. From this point of view, if man performs a mitzvah he "helps" God achieve His design; if he commits a sin, he frustrates the divine purpose. This is what is meant by prayer as tzorekh gavohah, and is a theme that is widely discussed in the Kabbalah and in Hasidism. It won't convince your skeptical friend, but quite possibly if he is a spiritually sensitive individual you may be able to reach him not by telling him of the benefits that religious observance will bring him, but by the appeal to his own sense of purposefulness and meaningfulness: his being Jewish will help not him, but God Almighty!

With this I must conclude, and add that I do look forward to meeting you either in New York or in Chicago; or, best of all, in Jerusalem when all our problems will be solved -- or maybe, most of them...

Sincerely yours,

RABBI NORMAN LAMM

RNL/fz