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Jewish Faith and Scepticism— The Example of Yeshayahu Leibowitz¹

Introduction

Religious faith is generally perceived as being in contrast with sceptical approaches, even though some advocates of faith may present doubt as an important feature of religious development. The more you confront and overcome greater doubts, these advocates of faith say, the stronger and firmer your faith. It is quite easy to note, though, that even from this broad-minded religious viewpoint, scepticism is considered an obstacle that should eventually be overcome, and that the ideal of faith still remains the termination of scepticism. Here, however, I would like to discuss a rather different religious approach: one in which scepticism can and should be constantly maintained alongside faith. It is a religious approach that not only accepts scepticism as an essential feature of religious development, but also regards a lack of scepticism as corruptive for a genuinely faithful position. This unusual religious approach is exemplified by the Jewish thinker Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903–1994).

The term ‘scepticism’ should first be elucidated here. Usually, it refers to the characteristic of being doubtful in regard to the beliefs and opinions that one confronts. However, the more rigorous meaning of the term, which stems from the ancient Greek sceptical schools of philosophy, is a constant and deliberate aim to detach oneself from one’s own judgments, which determine the truth value of views, opinions, and beliefs. The ancient sceptics conceived of *epoché*—the state of mind in which one neither denies nor affirms any belief or knowledge—as leading to the most perfect tranquillity of the mind (*ataraxia*).² In the context of our investigation here, scepticism would indeed be considered in the sense of *epoché*, though not as a means of achieving *ataraxia*, but of achieving purified, genuine religious faith. In Leibowitz’s religious conception, scepticism is specifically used towards traditional Jewish beliefs, with the aim of achieving the highest form of Jewish faith: *אמונה לשמה* (‘faith for its own sake,’ henceforth *lishmah*).

Of course, the term ‘faith’ must be explicated here too, especially since Leibowitz’s understanding of religious faith is certainly not a usual one. In this regard, we must stress Leibowitz’s distinction between ‘faith’ and ‘belief.’ Whereas ‘belief,’

1 This article was first begun at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies, University of Hamburg, and was finally completed within the framework of the Hessian Ministry for Science and Art funded LOEWE research hub “Religious Positioning: Modalities and Constellations in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Contexts” at the Goethe University Frankfurt and the Justus-Liebig-University Giessen.

2 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. Benson Mates (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 3.

in his terms, is a cognitive determination of our minds, ‘faith,’ he claims, is a *conative* determination:

[R]eligious faith [...] is rather a value decision that one makes, and, like all value determinations, it does not result from any information one has acquired, but is a commitment to which one binds himself. In other words, faith is not a form of cognition; it is a conative element of consciousness.³

‘Cognitive determinations’ refer to our judgments of whether what we think of as reflecting a state of affairs in reality is true or false. This category generally includes our opinions, beliefs, and knowledge regarding the world that we perceive and its objects. ‘*Conative* determinations,’ by contrast, are determinations of our willpower rather than our intellect. These determinations include our desires and aversions, our tastes, our intentions, and also our values. Faith, according to Leibowitz, belongs to the second category, and as such, in principle, it does not rely on what we know or believe.

According to Leibowitz, religious faith is specifically a value determination, and any value, in his view (including moral values), is the product of one’s will rather than one’s cognitive capacities. In other words, religious faith, like value determinations in general, does not reflect one’s knowledge or beliefs, but what one wishes to realise and fulfil in reality. In a Kantian fashion (which Leibowitz frequently adopted), we may say that faith does not refer to *what is*, but to *what ought to be*.

The philosophical foundation of Leibowitz’s concept of faith may be disputable. Our contemporary philosophers of morals, for example, would consider Leibowitz a *non-realist* and a *non-cognitivist*, and challenge him in the ways in which these moral positions are usually challenged. However, it is not our concern here to support or dispute this philosophical viewpoint. We only wish to elucidate Leibowitz’s concept of faith in a way that would allow us to understand how scepticism could be integrated into it and even become essential to it. I would only note that the fact that these two realms—our intellect and our willpower—usually interact did not escape Leibowitz’s mind. It may be true that our desires are often influenced by our opinions and *vice versa*; nonetheless, this does not exclude the possibility that certain *conative* determinations are indeed independent of what we know or believe in, just as certain cognitive determinations (for example, mathematical truths) are indeed indifferent to what we want and desire.

Jewish faith specifically, in Leibowitz’s conception, is absolutely independent of one’s beliefs. It is defined as one’s binding decision to live under the restraints im-

³ Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. Eliezer Goldman, trans. Eliezer Goldman, Yoram Navon, Zvi Jacobson, Gershon Levi, and Raphael Levy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992) [henceforth abbreviated *Judaism*]: 37. I have slightly revised the English translation in the quotation above, which originally employs the misleading term ‘evaluative decision.’

posed by the Halakhah (the Jewish system of laws), and this practical decision— analogous to one’s determination to abide by moral principles—does not necessarily rely on any belief that one might have. It may only express what a person desires to realise in his or her life as a superior value. This definition of faith, we may observe, enables, in principle, the integration of scepticism in Leibowitz’s religious conception.

Despite presenting quite an unusual concept of faith, Leibowitz is not the only thinker who conceives of religious faith in this manner. The Protestant Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard, for example, had a very similar notion of faith. He too understood faith as a passionate, existential choice rather than a belief or set of beliefs, and like Leibowitz he found proofs, evidence, and demonstrations to be senseless in the realm of religion. I have already elaborately discussed the analogy between these two religious thinkers elsewhere.⁴ My interest here, however, is to show how this particular concept of religious faith renders possible the incorporation of scepticism into a religious framework, and especially into the framework of Judaism.

Leibowitz’s definition of faith as a pure *conative* determination, independent of all cognitive determinations, lays the ground for the integration of scepticism within the Jewish religion. Belief, from this perspective, becomes a superfluous element of the Jewish religion that may be—or, should better be—suspended. This is certainly a radical and uncommon religious position, and one would want to enquire whether an Orthodox Jewish practitioner may really be sceptical in regard to well-rooted traditional Jewish beliefs while still maintaining his or her faith in Judaism. Could it really be possible, for example, to be sceptical of whether the reception of the Torah on Mount Sinai actually took place, or about the very existence of God, without losing faith in Judaism? This is what we are about to find out by reviewing Leibowitz’s approach to some central Jewish beliefs.

1 The Belief in God’s Existence

The existence of God is a fundamental matter of belief for religious practices, individuals, and schools of thought, especially within the scope of the monotheistic religions. To others (mainly philosophers), God’s existence may be a matter of strict knowledge. In Leibowitz’s religious conception, however, the existence of God—specifically the God to which the biblical text refers—is neither a matter of belief nor of knowledge, but of practical decision: the decision to adhere to the halakhic system of duties as absolutely binding, which is essentially what constitutes faith in Judaism.

According to Leibowitz, the belief in or the presumed knowledge of the existence of God has no religious significance whatsoever, since one may very well acknowl-

⁴ Roi Benbassat, “Yeshayahu Leibowitz – Jewish Existentialism,” *Religious Studies* 51.2 (2015): 141–163.

edge the existence of God and yet rebel against Him, or ignore His demands. The biblical story of the revelation on Mount Sinai—and the making of the golden calf right after it—teaches us, according to Leibowitz, this simple lesson: ‘even if one cites a notarised approval of God’s revelation to the people of Israel on Mount Sinai and of the granting of the Torah from the heavens, one may still refuse to worship the lord.’⁵ Therefore, the crucial thing that the Jewish religion demands is not knowing or believing in God, but obeying God’s commands in practice.

But isn’t obeying God’s commands dependent on prior acknowledgment of God’s existence? No, claims Leibowitz: religious practice is ‘prior to any cognitive and emotional aspect of Jewish religiosity.’⁶ In Judaism, one is obliged to undertake the halakhic duties regardless of what one believes, even in regard to the existence of God. This peculiar claim is central in Leibowitz’s religious thought. For him, acknowledging the existence of God is the consequence of undertaking the religious practice, not the reason for this undertaking. It is not that ‘I believe, and therefore I observe my religious duties,’ but rather, ‘I observe the halakhic duties and therefore I believe in the God of Israel.’ In Leibowitz’s words: ‘I have been privileged to recognize the giver of the Torah as a result of having accepted the yoke of the Torah and its *Mitzvoth*.’⁷

Hence the importance of distinguishing between ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ in Leibowitz’s thought. Whereas a ‘belief’ in God is normally conceived of as a reason for engaging with religious practice, ‘faith,’ according to Leibowitz, is this very engagement itself—one’s commitment to live under the constraints of religious practice. We cannot understand the uniqueness of Judaism, Leibowitz claims, unless we consider the Torah as ‘data preceding recognition of the giver of the Torah “to whom there is no analogy whatsoever.”’⁸

Note that the concept of ‘God’ remains here, in itself, quite empty and uncharacterised. God is nothing but ‘the giver of the Torah,’ whose nature is inscrutable. Following Maimonides’ theory of negation of divine attributes (‘to whom there is no analogy whatsoever’ is a reference to Maimonides), Leibowitz does not claim to know God’s nature or works in the world.⁹ The only essential assumption of Jewish faith, in Leibowitz’s view, is that He is ‘the giver of the Torah.’ Thus, he claims, ‘the

5 Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Faith, History, and Values* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Academon, 2002) [henceforth abbreviated *Emuna*]: 39. Passages from this text presented in this article are my translations into English.

6 Leibowitz, *Judaism*, 4.

7 *Ibidem*, 5.

8 *Ibidem*.

9 It is important to note however that Maimonides, contrary to Leibowitz, did consider knowledge—and that of God’s existence in particular—as fundamental for Judaism (see *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer ha-Madda*, and *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, 1:1, as well as his discussions and demonstrations of the existence of God in the first and second parts of *The Guide for the Perplexed*). This may reflect a general difference between the two thinkers’ religious conceptions, which will be touched upon again towards the end of this article.

assumption of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven is nothing other than the assumption of the yoke of Torah and its *Mitzvot*.¹⁰ I will discuss later, separately, this specific assumption (which does not appear to be sceptical at all), however, we may already note at this point that the assumption of God as ‘the giver of the Torah’ must not be understood as a cognitive statement (a statement with regard to what *is*), but rather as a normative one, which concerns the absolute validity of the halakhic laws.

Now, specifically regarding the assumption of God’s existence, let us be clear about Leibowitz’s notion here. He claims that faith does not rely on the cognitive determination (belief or knowledge) of God’s existence. This means that a religious practitioner is allowed (in Judaism) to be sceptical with regard to God’s existence—that is, neither to affirm nor to deny it—as long as it is a matter of mere cognition. We simply do not know enough about what ‘existing’ means in reference to God. Nevertheless, the affirmation of God’s existence is derived from one’s observance of the Halakhah as an absolute duty. The law itself is a given fact, and—although it may have been prescribed by human beings—it determines the exclusive manner of worshipping the divine entity called ‘God.’ Therefore, one who decides to accept the law as absolutely valid and absolutely binding thereby accepts God as ‘the giver of the Torah.’ Thus, in Leibowitz’s view, it is the Halakhah that posits God as its source and not *vice versa*, just as the Halakhah determines the holy status of the Bible, and not *vice versa*.¹¹

In this radical sense, the Halakhah has a constitutive role in Judaism, according to Leibowitz. The law is prior to any belief, knowledge, need, or desire that Jewish practitioners may have. It is even prior to *faith*. As Leibowitz puts it: ‘faith is a superstructure rising above the *Mitzvot*; the *Mitzvot* do not subserve faith [...] Judaism as a historic entity was not constituted by its sets of beliefs.’¹² Thus, faith in Judaism (unlike Christian faith or any other religious form) cannot be separated from halakhic practice: it consists of nothing but the commitment to this practice. And it is the commitment to this practice that affirms God’s existence, rather than it being the affirmation of God’s existence that leads to this commitment.

One may observe, then, that although a Jewish practitioner does have to assume the existence of God as ‘the giver of the Torah,’ this assumption does not belong to the category of beliefs. It is not the type of assumption that could be verified by evidence or by any reasonable procedure of attaining knowledge. The assumption of God’s existence is understood here as the product of a pure determination of the will, as a value determination, which, according to Leibowitz, is the nature of faith. By being defined as pertaining to a category distinctive from that of cognition, faith does not contradict scepticism, nor is it undermined by it in the framework of the Jewish religion. From this perspective, as we shall see, a Jewish practitioner

¹⁰ Leibowitz, *Judaism*, 38.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 11–12.

¹² *Ibidem*, 6.

would be allowed not only to avoid affirming or denying the belief in the existence of God (as a matter of cognition), but also other diverse assumptions with regard to God's nature and deeds, which may be claimed by the Bible. This extraordinary viewpoint has led some of Leibowitz's Orthodox Jewish colleagues to regard him as 'an observant heretic.'¹³

2 The Belief in God's Creation of the World

The belief in God's creation of the world as told by the Bible often seems to separate religious people (in the context of monotheism) from those who consider themselves secular, atheistic, or agnostic. It is commonly thought that one cannot possibly be both religious and an advocate of the theory of evolution, for example, or of the Big Bang theory. This might simply reflect a common misunderstanding of the nature of religiousness, which may not be reduced to a set of beliefs with regard to reality. From ancient to modern times, we have examples of religious figures who disprove this common view, thinkers for whom religion and science do not contradict one another. Leibowitz—himself a scientist and an Orthodox Jew—is not a unique figure in this respect.

Leibowitz was able to reconcile his religious and scientific commitments by separating the realm of cognition from that of values. As we have seen, he proclaimed the absolute independence of these two realms from one another. Scientific claims may affect religious faith only when the latter is conceived as relying on knowledge or belief, but *faith*, conceived as a value determination—a pure determination of the will—is, according to Leibowitz, indifferent to science.¹⁴

However, the Bible does not seem to correspond easily to such a Leibowitzian notion of faith, as it opens with a cosmological, metaphysical, and theological description of the formation of the world that seems to be very much a matter of cognition, and which was actually a matter of belief for many individuals during centuries and millennia:

[...] בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ. והארץ היתה תהו ובהו.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty.¹⁵

The fact that the biblical text opens with statements about the origin and formation of the universe may suggest that this issue is fundamental for the Jewish religion, and the other monotheistic religions to follow. We would therefore want to enquire how Leibowitz deals with this section of the Bible, which appears to undermine

¹³ Michael Shashar, *Leibowitz – Heretic or Believer* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter, 2002): 15.

¹⁴ See Leibowitz, *Judaism*, 132–141; idem, *Emuna*, 11.

¹⁵ Genesis 1:1. English translation from <http://www.mechon-mamre.org>.

his particular concept of Judaism, according to which cognitive claims about reality are irrelevant. Let us begin by looking at one of Leibowitz's direct statements on this subject:

The first verse of the Torah does not communicate information concerning what came to pass, since the reader is unable to derive from it any factual data which his mind is capable of grasping. If the reader were to try to impute on it a meaning, he would willy-nilly become involved in the ancient metaphysical problem of the beginning of time, a problem fraught with antinomies and paralogisms. The second word, as well [*bara*], cannot be rendered by any term which might indicate an act, or an event, or a process which the reader is capable of cognizing. What I learn from these verses is [only] the great principle of faith, that the world is not God—the negation of atheism and pantheism.¹⁶

The weight of the hundreds of years during which human civilisation reviewed and quarrelled over this biblical section is marked in these words from Leibowitz. As a modern thinker, familiar with the achievements of modern science in expanding our knowledge of the physical world as well as with the persistent philosophical difficulties regarding the question of the origin of the world, Leibowitz finds it inapt to defend the biblical text in terms of cosmology. Instead, he employs a sceptical strategy to confront the matter. We simply cannot understand the meaning of the first section of the Bible by using our cognitive capacities, he claims. Therefore, as a matter of cognition, there is nothing to affirm or to deny here.

In order to establish our ignorance regarding the matter, Leibowitz points out the philosophical difficulties that prevent us from understanding what 'in the beginning God created the world' means. These difficulties do not mean that the biblical message is false, but they do render it obscure and incomprehensible.

We cannot understand the first act of 'creation' described in the Bible as analogous to any event in history that we know of. It involves abstract notions such as 'time,' 'first cause,' and 'God,' which in this context are not historical or cosmological, but rather metaphysical. These notions therefore require philosophical elucidation, but the philosophical enquiry into these notions reveals irresolvable problems. Firstly, the Bible does not explain what 'God' is in this context, except for being 'the creator' of the world. Secondly, the act of 'creation' has no clear meaning here either. If we assume that we are told that the world came into existence at a certain point in time—the 'starting point' of time—we then encounter the familiar philosophical difficulties concerning the concept of time. I would hardly be able to review these difficulties properly here, but let me note them very briefly.

We generally conceive of 'time' as being infinite—without a beginning or an end—similar to a line drawn to represent the infinite series of real numbers, for example. Any starting point or ending point that one wishes to mark on this line would naturally be artificial and arbitrary, since the line, in principle, continues before the starting point and beyond the end point. Similarly, positing a starting point for time

16 Leibowitz, *Judaism*, 140.

would always raise the persistent question regarding what is (or was) before this point: a *before* that one wishes to deny by the idea of a ‘starting point.’

By the notion of the beginning of time (and this applies to the Big Bang theory just as much), we wish to deny the infinity of time, but at the same time we cannot but assume this infinity (just as we do with regard to the series of real numbers). Any limit imposed on time raises in our minds the notion—from which we cannot escape—of that which is beyond the limit. On the other hand, if we wish to hold on exclusively to our concept of time as infinity, then we are prevented (by the logical form of our thinking) from positing any distinctive points and sections within time, since these divisions produce a multiplicity of infinite sections within time which renders the concept of time paradoxical. For this reason, some philosophers concluded that any infinite whole would be, in principle, indivisible.¹⁷ Nonetheless, in practice, we do have to assume points and sections within time and space if we want to consider everything that we perceive around us (all finite things) as real. This, at a glimpse, is the difficulty that pertains to the notion of ‘the beginning of time,’ and to the concept of time in general.

With regard to the word ברא used in the biblical text (translated as ‘created’), similar difficulties arise. The common way of understanding it would be in the sense of God’s ‘doing’; an action of some sort. However, the way in which we understand the meaning of ‘to do,’ ‘to create,’ ‘to act,’ ‘to build,’ ‘to design,’ etc. is based on our experience of the world of human activity (or, generally, that of finite beings), whereas here it refers to ‘God,’ and specifically to the creation of the world as a whole. Therefore, it seems that ברא is a *sui generis* type of action, just as ‘the creator’ would be an essentially different being from any finite being. But since we may hardly know anything about the nature of God (note again Leibowitz’s acceptance of Maimonides’ negative theology), what then can we possibly know of His act of creation?

Some interpreters of the Bible, in consideration of this philosophical difficulty, suggested that the word ברא specifically denotes a ‘formation of something out of nothing’: a unique act that only God, as a first cause beyond the world (beyond the succession of worldly causes), could perform. Nonetheless, here too we face difficulties in understanding an action of a transcendent cause. However, it is not necessary to become further involved with these difficulties here, as Leibowitz claims that even if we could supposedly comprehend a transcendent cause’s action, it would still be unlikely, and impossible to verify, that our particular notion of it is the true interpretation of the biblical term ברא.¹⁸

Thus, the effort to make sense of the very first verse of the Bible leads, according to Leibowitz, to an awareness of our ignorance with regard to the biblical message; to an *aporia*, if you like. ‘Eventually,’ Leibowitz says, ‘we do not know the meaning of

¹⁷ See Spinoza, *Ethics*, I, Propositions 12 and 13.

¹⁸ See Leibowitz’s discussion of the term ברא in *Seven Years of Discourses on the Weekly Torah Reading* [in Hebrew], oral material, published privately by the Leibowitz family (Israel: 2003) [henceforth abbreviated *Seven Years*]: 7–8.

the concept ברא, and we do not recognise an act of creation [בריאה] in any category of human understanding.¹⁹ For this reason, there is no sense, literally, in believing that ‘God created the world.’

Nonetheless, in case someone decides to trust in the Bible and hold on to a belief in a cosmological or metaphysical interpretation of its first verses, this belief, according to Leibowitz, would have no religious significance within Judaism. That is to say, whether one believes in the cosmological meaning of the opening passage of the Bible or prefers scientific theories in this respect, the Jewish religion, in principle, tolerates both viewpoints. This tolerant characteristic with regard to cognitive assumptions is rendered possible by acknowledging that the only essential feature of the Jewish religion is the adherence to its practice, which, as stated, does not rely on any cognition. Thus, faith remains indifferent, and resistant, to any cognitive data.

Again, we have an example of how scepticism may be incorporated into Judaism. However, one may observe that Leibowitz does not seem to be entirely sceptical about the truth value of the first section of the Bible, as he writes at the end of the quotation above: ‘What I learn from these verses is...that the world is not God—the negation of atheism and pantheism.’ In this respect, it appears that Leibowitz does embrace a ‘cognitive’ content of the biblical message, though a negative one, namely that God is *different* from the world, or, in other words, God’s transcendence. Moreover, this assertion obviously has major importance for Leibowitz, as it forms, in his view, the distinction of Judaism from paganism, pantheism, and atheism.

3 The Assumption of God’s Transcendence

The problem posed to Leibowitz’s religious conception by the affirmation that ‘God is not the world’ is that this affirmation appears to be a metaphysical assumption, which belongs to the category of cognition no less than that of cosmological assumptions. If this assumption is crucial for a Jewish religious standpoint, as Leibowitz seems to think, this appears to undermine his religious conception, in which *faith* is supposed to be a purely *conative* determination.

As a metaphysical assumption, the statement that ‘God is different from the world’ raises no simpler problems than those we observed regarding the cosmological message of the first verse of the Bible. Philosophically, it may be claimed against dualistic worldviews that the distinction between God and the world is self-contradictory. Spinoza had famously demonstrated that an infinite substance—be it God or Nature—does not ‘leave room’ for a second substance.²⁰ He thus made clear

¹⁹ Leibowitz, *Seven Years*, 8.

²⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, I, Proposition 5. This also applies to the distinction between spirit and matter, which cannot be counted, according to Spinoza, as two substances.

that the distinction between God and Nature leads to grave paralogsms, just as the notion of *bereshit* does. For what reason, then, is Leibowitz sceptical about the assumption of God's creation, but willing to 'learn' the principle of God's transcendence from the first biblical verses?

One might already be able to presume what Leibowitz's reply to this question would be. Certainly, his reply would not consist of resolving the philosophical/meta-physical problems pertaining to the notion of God's transcendence. Rather, it would focus on denying the 'cognitive' nature of this claim. Just as God's existence, God's nature, and God's deeds are not matters of belief or knowledge for Leibowitz, as we have seen, so he would deny that God's transcendence is a cognitive assumption.

'When one realises that the world is not God,' Leibowitz states, 'one thereby recognizes that this world is not the value and the end, but rather the end is beyond the world.'²¹ We may observe, therefore, that just as Leibowitz did not relate to the assumption of God's existence as a cognitive one, but rather as a specific practical postulate, so also does he relate to the assumption of God's transcendence within the practical realm, the realm of values, and not in the realm of cognition.

In a rather obscure statement, Leibowitz says that 'God is not a metaphysical entity, but He is beyond metaphysics.'²² What could 'beyond metaphysics' mean? In light of the quotation above, it is quite clear that God signifies a *value*, and values, as stated above, do not refer to 'what is.' Specifically, God denotes an end, which is posited 'outside' the world. That is, God's transcendence must be understood as signifying an absolute value, which does not manifest itself in anything within this world.

In this sense, the affirmation of the faithful person that 'God is different from the world' means that he or she does not consider anything within this world as valuable in and by itself. Anything within the world can only have a relative value, derived from one's relation to God as an absolute value. This is the demand of Judaism as Leibowitz understands it: it demands that one worships God through halakhic practice as an absolute, unconditional value. For the sake of this value, anything in the world might be renounced, for anything else is only relatively, conditionally valuable. Considering anything within the world as valuable in and by itself would be, from the perspective of Jewish faith, idolatry.²³

The biblical figure of Abraham serves for Leibowitz as the best example of faith in Judaism as a value system. Abraham's behaviour—leaving his family, his homeland, circumcising himself, and later, being willing to sacrifice his beloved son and all the promises related to him—manifests the 'logic' of God's transcendence. For God's transcendence is understood as the postulation of an absolute value, beyond this world. Proclaiming God's transcendence in this sense therefore expresses

²¹ Leibowitz, *Seven Years*, 15.

²² *Ibidem*, 22.

²³ Leibowitz, *Judaism*, 24–25.

one's willingness to renounce everything in this world, or to consider anything in this world as lacking true value in and by itself. This is, in Leibowitz's view, 'the stance of Abraham on Mount Moriah, where all human values were annulled and overridden by fear and love of God.'²⁴

This understanding of the assumption of God's transcendence also explains Leibowitz's conception of Judaism as an exclusive religion which is essentially in conflict with any other ethical or religious position. Christianity, for example, announces the divinity of a human being, whereas moral humanistic standpoints consider the existence of Man in general as an end in itself. From the Jewish perspective, both these positions are clearly forms of idolatry which annul the principle of God's transcendence. For the same reason, in Leibowitz's view, Judaism also condemns fascism (positing the state as a superior value), as well as nationalism and the sanctification of a land (phenomena that also appear within Judaism, and which Leibowitz denounced). All these are forms of idolatry that Judaism—by proclaiming God's transcendence—denounces.

The rejection of atheism and pantheism by the principle of God's transcendence can also be understood in normative rather than in cosmological and metaphysical terms. Atheistic and pantheistic worldviews may have various moral consequences, be they universal humanism, utilitarianism, or consequentialism. The principle of God's transcendence, as it is understood here, is the negation of all these consequences. All value systems that posit a superior value within the world essentially contradict Judaism, if Judaism is understood as positing an absolute value outside and beyond the world.

Now, a reflection on the way in which the principle of God's transcendence (understood in the realm of values) is manifested by a biblical model like Abraham makes us wonder whether such a religious position could still correspond with a sceptical approach. The decisiveness and pathos that characterise this position do not seem to resemble the nature of sceptical attitudes. However, I would suggest that the sceptical standpoint, as the Greeks conceived of it, was no less decisive and pathos-filled. It takes a great deal of decisiveness to maintain the Socratic position, for example, which stressed human all-encompassing ignorance. And one may recall that Socrates himself did not fail to sacrifice his life for the sake of his awareness of ignorance. Would it be wrong to suggest, then, that Socrates too may have been so decisive in regard to his own philosophical standpoint not because he *believed* it was true, but because he considered it an absolute value?

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 14.

4 The Assumption of the Halakhah as a Divine Command

This brings us to consider the question of whether Jewish faith, understood as such a decisive value determination, is necessarily a non-sceptical attitude. For even if one accepts Leibowitz's exclusion of faith from the realm of cognition, we do know that scepticism may apply not only to our beliefs regarding reality, but also to moral certainties and values. This question becomes especially vital as we come to an inspection of Leibowitz's acceptance of the Orthodox Jewish postulation of halakhic practice as the exclusive form of relating to God.

Earlier, during the discussion of Leibowitz's approach to the assumption of God's existence, I already noted this postulate, which determines the *law* as the only positive content of the concept of God. According to Leibowitz, Jewish faith does not attribute anything to God except that He is 'the giver of the Torah.'²⁵ Therefore, as we have seen, 'the assumption of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven is nothing other than the assumption of the yoke of Torah and its *Mitzvoth*.' Now, can this assertion correspond with a sceptical attitude?

It is true, in my view, that if one 'believes' that the law (Torah) was given to the Israelites from God as described by the Bible, then one can hardly be considered sceptical. For if scepticism were an attitude in which one refrains from affirming or denying any opinion or belief as true, then the belief in the divinity of the Torah would be no exception. Leibowitz, however, did not hold that the holiness or divinity of the Torah is based on the belief in the reception of the law by the Israelites from God. His references to the biblical description of the events which took place on Mount Sinai make this clear: 'The event on Mount Sinai was the greatest failure in the history of Judaism,' he says, 'for it did not bring the people of Israel to faith and worship of God.'²⁶

It is not whether this event truly occurred or not that is in question here, but rather the connection between revelation and faith. In accordance with his general concept of faith, according to which faith 'does not result from any information one has acquired,' Leibowitz does not think that a testament of a revelation in the past (or even a revelation that one experiences in the present) can establish faith in Judaism. This is precisely the lesson that the Bible teaches us, in his view, by telling the story of the revelation experienced by the Israelites on Mount Sinai, after which the golden calf was made:

Hazal [i.e. the wise old Jewish rabbis] knew that it is possible to know the Lord and rebel against Him. Even if one proves that God created the world during six days, freed Israel from Egypt, opened the Red Sea, and gave them the Torah on Sinai, still one can say 'but I do not undertake to worship the lord.' Psychologically and logically, events do not have the power to establish

²⁵ I also noted above that according to Leibowitz Jewish faith also assumes that 'God is different from the world,' but this is only a negative statement with regard to God's nature.

²⁶ Leibowitz, *Emuna*, 151.

faith [...] to conclude, any knowledge we have or learn of God's deeds cannot by itself bring a man to act for the sake of heaven.²⁷

If these kinds of events cannot bring human beings to faith and worship of the lord, then what can? The answer to this question has already been given to us: only one's *value determination* constitutes faith in Judaism, a determination of the will that is not dependent on any knowledge or belief one might have. This value determination is also the grounds for accepting the Halakhah as a divine command, and as forming the exclusive manner in which one may relate to God, that of worship in practice.

It is true that Leibowitz stressed that the Halakhah is the first and foremost pillar of the Jewish religion, prior even to faith, which is, as stated above, 'a superstructure rising above the *Mitzvoth*.' Nonetheless, in order to accept the Halakhah as an absolute authority, as a divine law, one ought either to believe in a story of its divinity or to have faith in the Leibowitzian sense. In any case, a subjective determination is required so that one adheres to the halakhic system of laws as an absolute authority.

Indeed, the Halakhah proclaims itself as a divine command. The first of the Ten *Mitzvoth* (which are fundamental to the Halakhah) announces the God who commands the Israelites. However, the truth value of this proclamation of the law may be challenged, of course, especially if one wishes to be sceptical. It is plausible, for example, that Moses (like the Egyptians before him and the Greeks after him) presented as divine commands laws that he himself established, for socio-political reasons, as a means of enforcement. However, whether this was indeed the case or not, it is a matter of belief. And as a matter of belief, Judaism, in Leibowitz's view, can in principle tolerate various views on the origin of the law. Leibowitz himself often highlighted the fact that some halakhic rulings were obviously man-made and could often be modified by rabbinic rulings in view of the changing circumstances of the Jewish community. And yet Leibowitz, in consent with Orthodox Judaism, assumes the divinity of the law. The law, at its core, is not aimed to attain any human (personal or social) purpose, but expresses only the demand of God from His people. The sole purpose of fulfilling the law must therefore be the worship of God.

This purpose, however, for Leibowitz, is not determined by belief or knowledge, but by faith as a value determination: it is a product of one's will. A faithful person views the Halakhah as a divine command regardless of the beliefs and opinions he or she might have about the origin of the law. The faithful accept the law's proclamation of its own divinity as a demand to adhere to it as an absolute duty. It is a demand to obey the law unconditionally, despite one's particular beliefs, views, needs, wishes, or requirements—as a 'categorical imperative,' if you will.²⁸ Accepting

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 145.

²⁸ The analogy of Leibowitz's concept of Judaism to Kant's deontological ethics is quite established in the secondary literature on Leibowitz's thought. See Naomi Kasher, "Leibowitz's conception of Judaism compared to Kant's conception of morality" [in Hebrew], in *Sefer Yeshayahu Leibowitz*, eds. Asa Kasher and Yakov Lewinger (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University students union press, 1977): 21–34; Silman

the divinity of the law, in this sense, is simply accepting the law as absolutely binding, in all circumstances and at any cost.

It is important to stress here, though, that the halakhic law cannot pass itself as having such absolute authority over human actions unless the individual person makes a subjective decision to regard it as such. In other words, only by virtue of faith, as a personal value determination, is the law rendered absolutely valid and unconditional.²⁹ Thus, only faith constitutes the acceptance of the divinity of the law. But faith, as understood in this context, is not belief, nor is it dependent on beliefs.

The truth value of the law's proclamation of its divinity is therefore affirmed here, not as a fact (as a matter of cognition), however, but as a matter of the will. In a way, it might be correct to say that the *law* is rendered divine by one's willingness to accept it as such. But this, in Leibowitz's view, is not a unique feature of Judaism, but generally applies to the realm of moral imperatives and duties. Moral imperatives in general have absolute authority not by the force of any objective determination, but only by one's subjective decision (with this claim, Leibowitz definitively rejects the Kantian concepts of ethics). To act with *decency* and refrain from deception and injustice, for example (an example that Leibowitz gives), is a rule that is not objectively valid: its validity is established only by one's choice to posit decency as a value.³⁰ Hence, in the realm of values in general, according to Leibowitz, it is not appropriate to speak of 'truth' in the common sense of the term, as if we were in the realm of cognition, but rather of 'truthfulness.' And this is:

[T]ruth in a completely different sense, truth as a value, the value of truthfulness which is not imposed, which one can ignore, and by which one needs not abide. Such is truth in the relations between man and his fellows, between man and wife, between a man and the task he has undertaken [...]. Here deceit is always possible [...]. The truth of science is not a 'value;' it is datum within science. Values [by contrast] are not anchored in reality. They are what a man aspires to impose upon reality [...]. The value of truthfulness is not a cognitive attribute, but rather a conative one, a matter of intention. A man intends to be truthful [...].³¹

Yochanan, "Kantian motives in Leibowitz's thought" [in Hebrew], in *Sefer Yeshayahu Leibowitz*, 47–55; and Daniel Statman, "Leibowitz's concept of morals" [in Hebrew], in *Olamo Vehaguto shel Yeshayahu Leibowitz*, ed. Avi Sagi (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995): 326–343. Leibowitz himself accepted this analogy to some extent; see idem, "Tguvot" [Hebrew], *Iyyun* 26 (1975): 278–281 and idem, *Emuna*, 31.

²⁹ This reveals that the frequent analogy between Leibowitz's conception of religion and Kant's ethical thought is not entirely correct. There is a structural difference between the two: unlike *reason*, which objectively determines the authority of the moral law in Kantian ethics—determination that can be acknowledged by any reasonable being—Halakhah has no similar capacity and is absolutely dependent on a personal subjective determination in order to gain authority. I have elaborately discussed this issue elsewhere; see Benbassat, "Yeshayahu Leibowitz – Jewish Existentialism."

³⁰ See *Conversations on Faith and Philosophy: Aviezer Ravizki Talks with Yeshayahu Leibowitz* [in Hebrew], broadcasted on the university radio channel *Galei Zahal* (1992) (published and printed privately by www.leibowitz.co.il, 2005): 16.

³¹ Leibowitz, *Judaism*, 139.

This statement may contribute significantly to our enquiry of whether Leibowitz's assumption of the Halakhah as a divine command can correspond with scepticism. The answer implied here is positive. A man of faith can be sceptical with regard to the assumption of the Halakhah as a divine command, considered as a matter of cognition, but he can still affirm this assumption within the realm of values, in which assumptions do not determine whether something is objectively true, or whether something is 'real,' but rather reflect one's subjective determination to impose his or her values upon reality. In the realm of values, the truth value of our assumptions does not refer to the state of affairs in reality, but to one's will and intention. In this context, then, the assumption of the Halakhah as a divine command only reflects that, for the faithful Jew, the halakhic practice constitutes an absolute, unconditional value—a value that he or she strives to realise in reality.

5 The Belief in Divine Providence

The theme of divine providence generally implies the belief that a godly entity somehow watches over us (as individuals or a collective), cares about our deeds and fate, and can, at will, reward those who please it and punish those who upset it. It may then naturally involve various proposed solutions to the problem of theodicy, which are usually also matters of knowledge or belief. In the specific context of Judaism, this notion may include numerous traditional beliefs, among which are the belief in God as the saviour of the Israelites, the belief in the Israelites (or the Jews) as a chosen people, the belief in miracles, and the belief in the arrival of the messiah. Being sceptical about the notion of divine providence would therefore imply scepticism towards quite a rich spectrum of beliefs.

In Leibowitz's religious thought, however, the question of how one should relate to the notion of providence is of major importance, because it essentially involves the crucial distinction between faith *lishmah* ('for its own sake,' or 'for the sake of God') and not-*lishmah* ('not for its own sake,' faith as a means of achieving human ends). This distinction, for Leibowitz, is one between the genuine notion of Jewish faith, attainable (if at all) only to the very few, and the corrupted notion of faith, which is its common form.³²

The idea of faith *lishmah* 'was given its most eloquent expression, its most profound and sublime formulation,' Leibowitz states, 'in the doctrine of Maimonides, and especially in his conception of providence.'³³ Maimonides understood general providence simply as 'the course of the world'; that is, as Leibowitz writes:

Whatever exists in reality, or is necessitated by the causal structure inherent in nature, falls under providence. In this respect the fate of human kind—as one type of natural beings—is

³² *Ibidem*, 67.

³³ *Ibidem*, 55.

no different from that of any other species, whose existence is secured by the general scheme of causality (final cause!). The individual too, of course, is subject *by nature* to this reality [...]. The consequences of all human deeds are necessitated by the nature of men's actions, the regulation of which is the manifestation of providence.³⁴

One may observe that this interpretation of the notion of providence could just as well imply the absolute denial of the belief in providence, in its usual sense. For 'providence' is usually understood as being manifested by deviations from the normal course of nature, by divine interventions in the course of nature or in human history, which may render the impossible possible (miracles, or inexplicable events). Therefore, the Maimonidean notion of providence, understood as the necessary course of nature and of all its events, is the absolute opposite of the ordinary belief in providence. 'The very existence of the world is God's loving kindness,' the powers implanted in all living things are His 'righteousness,' and 'the sequence of events succeeding one another by the necessity inherent in the relations between them' is His 'judgment.'³⁵

In this Maimonidean sense of the notion, as Leibowitz explains it, to have faith in God as providence means to cleave to God 'with a strength which is proportionate to the extent of his [or her] knowledge ("according to the knowledge shall be the love"), and it is this knowledge and this cleaving to God that constitutes "individual providence."³⁶ That is to say, individual providence is never the *lot* of this or that agent (not even of the righteous), but rather is something that 'each individual must achieve [...] by his own endeavor [...] through the perfection of his rational power [...] and through a supreme effort in exercising his capacities for this purpose.'³⁷

The point here is that providence is not conceived of as a result of one's effort to develop his rational capacities and the other capacities of the mind related to it, but is established by this very effort itself. This is actually a typically Socratic interpretation of the notion of providence, equivalent to Socrates' statement that the wisest man is also the happiest and most invulnerable of all.³⁸ The more one knows about the nature of things, according to Socratic-Platonic philosophy, the more one is protected from evil and disaster.

Now, this does not appear to be a sceptical approach, and at this point it is also important to recall again what seems to be an essential difference between Maimonides' concept of Judaism and Leibowitz's own. Maimonides posited דעות ('knowledge,' particularly knowledge of God) as the aim of the Jewish praxis and faith. Lei-

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 57.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 58.

³⁸ Plato, *Apology of Socrates* (trans. Benjamin Jowett), 41c-d: 'No evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death. He and his are not neglected by the gods.'

bowitz, by contrast, as we have seen here, completely separated the realm of Judaism and faith from that of cognition. Jewish faith, in his conception, does not rely on knowledge, nor does it lead to more knowledge of the world and of God. Therefore, it seems that Leibowitz's concept of Judaism corresponds much better, in principle, with sceptical attitudes. This difference, however, may be undermined, to some extent, when we go further into the Maimonidean conception of providence, in which knowledge and ignorance become one and the same, just as they do in Socratic philosophy.³⁹

Maimonides' interpretation of the book of Job stresses that individual providence is anchored in the human understanding, but this understanding consists not of positive knowledge of the world and its purposes, but of one's own ignorance.⁴⁰ In his terrible situation, Job finds relief and comfort not by understanding the lord and His deeds, but by realising that his own severe reproaches of God were based on the illusion of understanding the purposes of things in the world, and particularly the essence of 'good' and 'bad.' It is the awareness of his own ignorance in regard to God and to the purposes of Nature that finally relieves Job's resentment and allows him to establish a new life for himself. And it is this awareness of ignorance that renders Job 'righteous' for God.

Leibowitz connects the lesson taught by the book of Job with that of the story of the *Aqedah* ('The Binding of Isaac') in Genesis: 'Both stories seek to teach the meaning of fear of God.'⁴¹ The fear of God attributed to both Abraham and Job denotes their particular *love* of God⁴² which is expressed by cleaving to God in all conditions and circumstances, especially in those in which the purposes of God are incomprehensible. The religious *test* (נִסּוּיִן) presented to both Abraham and Job is set to verify whether their love of God depends on God's fulfilment of their needs or whether it is unconditional. Both Abraham and Job pass the test, and in both cases it is shown that unconditional love towards God—which is the nature of faith *lishmah*—essentially involves acknowledging one's own ignorance regarding God's purposes, or in other words, the purpose of all that which occurs in Nature:

Abraham is put to the test when fulfilment of the divine demand requires that he renounce all human values; not only personal values such as those involved in the relationship of a father to his only son, but also promises bearing in his seed for all generations to come. He is expected to forgo the Covenant of the Pieces.

³⁹ The following reading of Maimonides' notion of providence as being Socratic does not deny that Maimonides' thought is embedded in a Neo-Platonic and Aristotelian conceptual framework. Nonetheless, I am claiming here that in his interpretation of the book of Job Maimonides is much closer to Socratic (early Platonic) philosophy, which, in contrast with the speculative scientific endeavours of the later Plato and Aristotle, considers the awareness of one's own ignorance as the highest form of human wisdom and righteousness.

⁴⁰ Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, III:14 and 23.

⁴¹ Leibowitz, *Judaism*, 49.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 49–50.

Job is put to the test when God appears to him not as the guardian of his fate who metes out reward and punishment, but *in his sheer divinity* [...] Abraham and Job are tested to determine whether their faith is faith for its own sake, manifested in the worship of God for His sake, and unlike the religious faith of the mass of believers who conceive God as acting for their sake.⁴³

Leibowitz highlights the unconditional nature of faith (*lishmah*) as it is expressed in the realm of values, where the contrast between religious values and human needs is exposed. But as he continues to analyse the figures of Job and Abraham as models of faith, he also reveals the cognitive element of faith *lishmah*, which consists precisely of knowledge of one's own ignorance. Like Maimonides (in his interpretation of the book of Job), Leibowitz too stresses the role of human understanding and human judgment in the process of acquiring faith *lishmah*. This role consists precisely of *detaching oneself from one's own judgments and pretensions of knowledge*. According to both Maimonides and Leibowitz, this is the central insight proposed by the book of Job (which is, again, analogous to the Socratic idea). Gradually, Leibowitz observes, during the development of the book of Job, we notice that:

Job's suffering is no longer the focus of his protest; rather, it is his inability to comprehend the meaning of his suffering, which is but one detail within an incomprehensible world [...] this lack of suffering oppresses and troubles him. But for this suffering there is no remedy. The creator of the world concealed from man its meaning, knowledge of which is the true 'wisdom.'⁴⁴

Job's greatest accusation of God, Leibowitz states, is that God had concealed the meaning of His providence, and this protest is 'ultimately answered by God, an answer that satisfies Job and makes him revoke his accusation.'⁴⁵ At first view, God's answer, as described in the last three chapters of the book of Job, seems irrelevant:

It describes being as it is without judging it. It presents the cosmic and terrestrial world, from the inanimate to the living, from the splendid and wondrous to the awful and monstrous—especially the monstrous phenomena—without hinting at any purpose in this amazing creation, or any secret intention underlying the monstrosity. Such is the Creator's providence, and this is what satisfies Job.⁴⁶

Oddly, this seemingly hollow reply satisfies Job. Something is revealed to Job by these words from God, although there is nothing here but 'a description of natural matters.'⁴⁷ Leibowitz adopts Maimonides' notion of the message of the book, an interpretation that he considers to be 'the most profound.'⁴⁸ Whatever exists in reality

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 50–51.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 51.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 52.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

reflects God's providence: this, as we have seen, is Maimonides' concept of general providence, which is the case even though we have no understanding of God's intentions and of the purposes of natural events. This is a real revelation for Job, as he now advances from the lower stage of faith—'the way prevalent among the masses, who believe in God and undertake to serve Him because He—in their conception—acts for their benefit'—to the superior stage of faith *lishmah*, of those who undertake to worship God with no expectation, to worship a God 'whose world, precisely as it is, is His providence.'⁴⁹ In Socratic terms, we could say, Job advances here from the state of ordinary men 'who pretend to know what they really don't,' to that of the philosopher, the truly wise man, who is aware of his own ignorance.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Through an exploration of Leibowitz's treatment of various beliefs, which are central in the Jewish tradition, I believe I have established the possibility of a strong relation between Judaism and scepticism. This connection is already exposed in Maimonides' concept of Judaism, as we have seen in the last discussion of the notion of providence, and it can be detected even in the book of Job itself. However, in Leibowitz's thought, this connection is significantly reinforced by the stark distinction of the realm of Jewish faith from that of cognition. Leibowitz's definition of faith as a value determination—and his philosophical account of values in general, understood as pure products of the will and intention—renders faith absolutely independent of any belief and knowledge. Consequently, scepticism is no longer considered the opponent of faith, but its natural companion.

I have pointed out Leibowitz's sceptical approach to fundamental matters such as the existence of God, the belief in God's creation of the world, God's transcendence, the perception of the Torah as a divine command, and the notion of divine providence. All these assumptions, although being affirmed within the realm of values (by faith as a determination of the will), are suspended as matters of cognition in Leibowitz's thought. They cannot, and should not, in Leibowitz's view, be accepted as true by human understanding.

They *cannot* be accepted as true, because we simply do not recognise the necessity by which they could be perceived as true (knowledge) and because the attempt to understand them confronts us with paradoxes and paralogisms; and even if we wish to *believe* that these assumptions are true (without knowing this), we mostly do not even understand their meaning—such, as we have seen, is the notion of God's existence, as well as the notion of creation and that of God's transcendence. But also, a religious person *should* not accept them as true by his or her human un-

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 23b-d.

derstanding, because by doing so one generally renders religion a service to oneself and thereby annuls it as a genuine religion aimed at worshipping the lord. Such is especially the case with regard to the assumption of the Halakhah as a divine command and to the notion of providence. In general, Leibowitz claims, 'faith that relies on information that explains the world to man, may be called not-*lishmah* ["not for its own sake"].'⁵¹

For this reason, scepticism towards beliefs—and especially towards prevalent beliefs within Jewish circles—is not only possible, but also crucial for the maintenance of a genuine religious position. This was rendered especially clear in the discussion of the notion of providence. One who believes in providence as being manifested in a particular way in the course of history—be it in miracles or merely in ordinary events that occur in one's own favour—is one whose faith is corrupted. Thus,

the question of faith addressed to man is: do you have faith in God [...] also when providence is **not** proven to you by the course of history? In other words, do you accept the yoke of the kingdom of heaven—the yoke of Torah and *Mitzvoth*—even if this kingdom is not revealed in certain events in history? The answer to this question differentiates between worship *lishmah* and not-*lishmah*.⁵²

Clearly, then, it is not scepticism that jeopardises faith, but rather one's judgments and beliefs. And this applies to a very rich spectrum of beliefs that may be accepted within wide Jewish circles—including beliefs in miracles, in the Israelites as a chosen people, in messianism, in the holiness of Zion, in kabbalistic notions, and more—all of which Leibowitz considered as idolatrous and as corrupting the essential notion of Jewish faith.

Of course, Leibowitz acknowledges that the majority of Jewish practitioners cannot refrain from grounding their faith on such beliefs. He also acknowledges that the Jewish religion generally tolerates this corrupted form of faith by insisting on halakhic practice regardless of its basis. However, as Maimonides emphasised, Judaism and its scriptures speak in a double language: one for the ordinary and one for the extraordinary man. And the highest model of faith—exemplified by Abraham and Job—is that of faith that is not grounded on belief. The sceptical feature of this model of faith, as I have stressed, goes hand in hand with the nature of faith *lishmah*, portrayed as unconditional love. For only the one who acknowledges his own ignorance with regard to God's nature, God's deeds, and generally to the occurrences in this world and their purposes, can relate to God as an absolute, unconditional, and transcendent value, posited beyond this world.

Finally, I have made an analogy between Maimonides' and Leibowitz's understanding of providence and that of Socrates. This must not be understood as if I am claiming that the two Jewish conceptions are analogous to the philosophical po-

⁵¹ Leibowitz, *Seven Years*, 6.

⁵² Leibowitz, *Emuna*, 144.

sition of Socrates, which is the source of all sceptical schools. Whereas Socratic philosophy refers to an abstract idea of ‘the good’—which is indeed absolute and divine from its perspective, but which actually has no positive or concrete content—Judaism, by contrast, relates to a divinity that has definite, concrete, and positive content: the Torah. Judaism establishes its system of duties as the exclusive manner in which a Jew may relate to God in this world, by subordinating his or her life to it. This aspect is absolutely absent, in my view, from Socratic philosophy.⁵³

My claim consisted mainly of showing that Maimonides’ and Leibowitz’s notion of providence presents a typical Socratic insight, according to which the ‘righteous’ one—the wise and the faithful alike—is not one who knows or understands the purposes of things in life, who knows what is ‘good’ and what is ‘bad’ or what brings favourable results or terrible ones, but is, on the contrary, one who acknowledges his own ignorance with regard to these issues and who therefore refrains from affirming or denying them. This typical sceptical feature, as I have demonstrated, is generally compatible with Leibowitz’s concept of Judaism.

53 Even when Socrates claims unconditional obedience to the laws of the State in Plato’s *Crito*, this claim is contradicted by his no-less-important claim in the *Apology* when he assures the judges of Athens that, in the case of contradiction with his philosophy, he would not obey the law.

