13 PRINCIPLES: Why do we Jews believe in God?

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In his Pirush haMishnayot, Maimonides (1135-1204) formulated the 13 principles of the Jewish faith.

“The first principle is to believe in the existence of God.”

In his book Mishne Tora Maimonides describes belief in God, first, as “knowing God” (□ □□□□□).
What is knowledge of God?
We, the Jewish people, collectively experienced the revelation of God on Mount Sinai, when we were given the Tora and celebrated the covenant (berit) with HaShem. In a technical sense, our knowledge of God, knowing of His existence, is based on this historic event. At this very basic level, our faith in God is intimately related, and dependent, on the faith we have in our ancestors. That is: I trust my parents, who believed in their parents, who believed in their parents, etc. who believed 120 generations ago in their parents when they asserted having experienced “personally” the revelation of God on Mount Sinai. That generation that left Egypt, “heard” the word of God revealing the 10 commandments (see Shemot-Exodus- cap 19, 20 and 24).

Some thoughts on this point: As Rabbi Yehuda Halevi says in his book “The Cuzari”, no other nation lived this collective experience of the Divine revelation. Other religions, in their own words, are based on “individual revelations.” Islam is based on the testimony of a single individual, Muhammad, who privately received the Koran from the angel Gabriel. The only person who witnessed the resurrection of Yeshu was Mary Magdalene. The subsequent Christian historiography is based on her exclusive testimony. The same happened to Joseph Smith (1805-1844), the founder of the Mormon religion, who had private religious visions and revelations. The people of Israel, however, witnessed God’s revelation collectively, as a people. 600,000 men between 20 and 60 years of age, in

addition to women, elderly and children. A total of no less than 3 million people. The Cuzari explains that no people could “fabricate” to have had a collective experience—and in fact no religion ever claimed so, because, although this argument would give more credibility to their belief that would be an unsustainable claim: it would be enough for one individual of that generation to openly voice his version of the events, for this “collective” testimony to lose all of its historical value. The Jews are the only people who claim to have experienced this “national revelation,” which, by the way, it is a fact accepted by all other Biblical religions: Christianity, Islam, etc.

This historic event, which we call MA’AMAD HAR SINAI, is only the basis of our faith. It is the first element of our faith, that according to Maimonides, we should convey to our children. It is the foundation upon which all other spiritual and philosophical aspects of our faith rest and relay upon. The prophet Yesha’ayahu defined the Jewish people (43:10) with the following words: atem ‘eday, “You are My witnesses”; you, the Jewish people are the only witness who ever witnessed My existence.

The knowledge of God *begins* with this historical foundation but obviously does not end there. The search for God is a long path, and walking that path is the existential mission of a Jewish individual. It is not an easy path, especially for those who were not raised in it. And more especially in our days, when the belief in God’s existence is challenged from the field of biology (evolution), psychology, cosmology, theodicy, biblical criticism etc, etc.

In the coming weeks, BH, we will address these issues in more depth.