

Arguing for Arguments (for Jewish Commitment and Continuity)

by Ben Winton

1. Rabbi Shalom Carmy, 2015. "The Gate Matches the Home": On R. Lichtenstein's Depiction of Faith. *Tradition* 47:4, p.221

Over forty years ago, R. Lichtenstein wrote an essay on conversion, outlining two essential ingredients in the Jewish identity into which the potential convert must enter: commitment to God and identification with the Jewish people. He ended that article: "The gate matches the home." Meaning, it is only appropriate that the portal through which the outsider enters Judaism partake of the nature of living Jewish experience as well. The same is true of the experience of faith [even for Jews]: how we enter the house of faith has a great deal to do with the vitality of the life we discover and cultivate within its chambers.

2. Deuteronomy 6:4-7

(4) Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. (5) You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (6) Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. (7) Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up.

דברים ו':ד'-ז'

ד' שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד:
(ה) וְאַהֲבַתְּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְּךָ
וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ: (ו) וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים
הָאֵלֶּה לְךָ אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל-לִבְּךָ:
(ז) וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ וְדִבַּרְתָּ בָם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ
בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלֶכְתְּךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ:

3. Jack Wertheimer and Steven M. Cohen. 2014. The Pew Survey Reanalyzed: More Bad News, but a Glimmer of Hope. Retrieved from mosaicmagazine.com

American Jews now stand on the precipice of a demographic cliff, and the choice before them is simple: either fall off, or turn around. Alas, much of organized Jewish life—which is to say, much of American Jewish leadership—shows no sense of urgency but proceeds as if a few small tweaks will miraculously reverse the destructive patterns eroding secular and non-Orthodox Jewish life. Seeing their roles as cheerleaders, reasoning that donors and volunteers can be recruited only if guaranteed of success, too many leaders cannot bring themselves to admit that American Jewry is in the midst of a deep-seated crisis. They therefore ignore not only the Pew data but, even more damagingly, a raft of other studies in recent decades that, for anyone truly interested in rebuilding American Jewish life, point to a number of ways out of the crisis.

All such studies make evident that the most effective initiatives share three critical features.

(1) They create social networks that enhance interactions among Jews centering on matters of Jewish interest. (2) They target individuals in the same stages of life, enabling them to heighten their involvement in Jewish life along with their peers. And (3) they communicate Jewish content by exposing learners to sacred texts and the cultural heritage of the Jewish people.

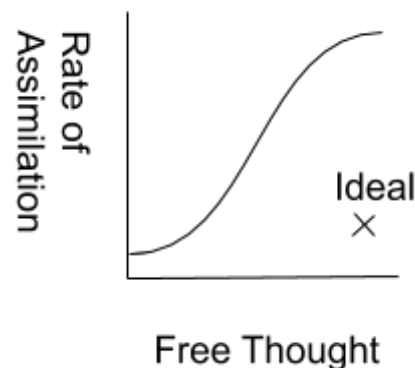
4. Rabbi Antony Gordon and Richard M. Horowitz. 2016. Will your Grandchildren be Jews: Updated. Retrieved from simpletoremember.com

	Intermarriage Rate (Pew Research Report, 2013)	Average number of Children per Woman (Per Research Report, 2013)	First Generation	Second Generation	Third Generation	Fourth Generation
Hasidic/ Yeshiva Orthodox*	0%	6.45**	100	327	1039	3398
Centrist Orthodox*	2%	2.96**	100	150	225	337
Conservative	24%	1.82	100	81	65	52
Reform	79%	1.73	100	51	26	13
Secular	85%	1.45	100	31	11	4

*Although there is no clear definition of ‘Centrist Orthodox’ or ‘Hasidic-Yeshiva Orthodox’, the main distinguishing factors relate to attitudes regarding formal secular studies, family size and the type of day school children attend.

**Statistics pertaining to fertility rates for Orthodox were based primarily on data extrapolated by Dr. Marvin Schick (See: “A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States - 2013-2014” - October 2014)

5.



6. Joshua Golding, 2000, The rational defensibility of being a traditional religious Jew. *Religious Studies* 35:4, pp.391-423

To say that a position (or a claim, or a way of life) is ‘rationally defensible’ is different from saying that it is ‘rationally compelling’. A position is ‘rationally compelling’ if it can be shown that any rational being ought to adopt that position. A position is ‘rationally defensible’ if an argument can be marshaled to support that claim or position, and if criticisms and objections to that argument can be rebutted. However, that argument might not be compelling upon all rational beings. For example, it might rest on certain assumptions which are intuitively plausible to some persons but not others. Alternatively, the argument might rest on an appeal to certain experiences which not everyone has had. Now a position is not rationally defensible if the denial or opposite of that position can be shown to be rationally compelling. However, it is possible that two opposing positions could be rationally defensible for different people.

7. Rabbi Dr. Zev Farber, 2019. "Torah Is from Heaven!" What Do We Really Mean?. Retrieved from TheTorah.com.

Is it that we happen to believe that God literally dictated the Torah to Moses and taught him the mitzvot and for this reason we are attached to them, or are we primarily attached to Torah and mitzvot and as a result feel that they are divine or from God?

To return to the introduction, do parents just happen to feel that their children are the best and for this reason, they love them and cherish them, or is it that they love and cherish their children and as a result feel that they are the best? Obviously, we can all agree that it is the latter. So too, I would argue, when it comes to the Torah and mitzvah observance, for many of us, this is the case as well. This model of religious attachment can be termed "relationship religiosity."

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The position that I have developed briefly above is not what many people want to hear when they ask why they should observe mitzvot, as this explanation seems to lack any "shouldness." The philosophy only works for people who already feel an attachment or at least an attraction to mitzvah observance. But for those who do not feel it, it offers little.

8. Rabbi Dr. Sam Lebens, 2011. The Kuzari Principle. Retrieved from <http://www.theapj.com/the-kuzari-principle-2/>

- (KP*1.) For any widespread historical belief, the belief is either true, or was sold to the general public via some sort of witting or unwitting deception.
- (KP*2.) The historical belief in the national revelation at Sinai is widespread among the Jewish people, as is the belief that this knowledge has been passed down faithfully from generation to generation since the event itself.
- (KP*3.) Given (KP*1) and (KP*2), the Jewish belief in the revelation at Sinai is either true, or was sold to them via some sort of deception.
- (KP*4.) At no point in time could a whole nation have been deceived into the content of the story in question. A nation could certainly be deceived about ancient history, as many Britons were deceived into believing that there was a King Arthur in a court called Camelot. But part of the story that we're talking about, as specified in (KP*2), makes the outlandish claim that every generation, including the generation that is now listening to the story, received the tradition from their parents. Thus the Jewish people would never have adopted the narrative in question, unless all of their parents had already told them the story. At no point would the Jewish nation have bought the lie that millions of their forbears witnessed something and that it was faithfully passed down from generation to generation, unless all, or most of the parents of their generation had already told them, and unless the nation was already a sizeable nation.
- (KP*5.) Given (KP*4), the widespread belief among the Jewish people in the story of the revelation couldn't have been spread by deception.
- (KP*6.) Given (KP*5) and (KP*1), the widespread belief among the Jewish people in the story of the revelation must be true. The same argument will work for the story of the exodus from Egypt.

If this argument is sound, then the Jewish people have good reason to believe that there really was a miraculous escape from Egypt and a revelation at Mount Sinai.

Unfortunately, the arguments which the medieval philosophers used in order to grant Judaism its Divine sanction are open to various criticisms. I think that they can be overcome, if we're willing to revise the argument somewhat...

9. Rabbi Dr. Sam Lebens, 2019. Pascal, Pascalberg, and friends. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, pp.1-22.

Let me introduce you to Baruch Pascalberg. He recognises that there are no knockdown arguments to convince the impartial observer to commit to a Jewish way of life. He's less ambitious than Pascal. Judaism isn't a proselytising religion. Gentiles can achieve union with God in a blissful afterlife without converting to Judaism. Accordingly, Baruch Pascalberg doesn't feel any pressure to proselytise among the Gentiles.

Instead, Pascalberg looks out at the Jewish community. He notices that there exist a number of Jews today, deeply committed to their Jewish identity, without any sense of obligation to follow the laws of the Torah (however they may be interpreted). And yet, they are fully integrated into the Jewish community and reap many of the benefits that come to a person through belonging to a religious community, without the need to adopt stringent religious observance in their lives.

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Pascal's wager failed, but Pascalberg's wager is different. The theological decision that faces every human being, in the abstract, isn't to commit or not to commit to Christianity. The decision is to commit to any one of a dazzling array of religions, or to none. Unlike Pascal, Pascalberg addresses himself not to humanity writ large, but to a specific category of people already immersed in the Jewish community, and already cherishing their Jewish identity. For many of those people, there really are two thinkable options; and two only: To commit to being religious Jews, or not to commit to being religious Jews.

10. Christopher Stephen Lutz. 'Alasdair Chalmers MacIntyre'. *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, retrieved from <https://www.iep.utm.edu/mac-over/#SH6b>

MacIntyre acknowledges that contemporary individualism insists that "the self is detachable from its social and historical roles and statuses" (AV, p. 221), but he illustrates his counterpoint with three national communities in which contemporary citizens continue to bear the debts of their predecessors. The enslavement and oppression of black Americans, the subjugation of Ireland, and the genocide of the Jews in Europe remained quite relevant to the responsibilities of citizens of the United States, England, and Germany in 1981, as they still do today. Thus an American who said "I never owned any slaves," "the Englishman who says 'I never did any wrong to Ireland,'" or "the young German who believes that being born after 1945 means that what Nazis did to Jews has no moral relevance to his relationship to his Jewish contemporaries" all exhibit a kind of intellectual and moral failure. "I am born with a past, and to cut myself off from that past in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships" (p. 221). For MacIntyre, there is no moral identity for the abstract individual; "The self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities" (p. 221).