



## Re'eh

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### **WHERE WILL THE KOSHER CHEESEBURGER COME FROM?**

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**A**lthough there are multiple parties that claim to have invented the cheeseburger, all of its creation stories are based in America in the early part of the 20th century. Since its invention, the cheeseburger has wormed its way into American culture and has become a quintessentially American food. To kosher-keeping Jews, though, it is also one which is denied them due to the mixing of meat and dairy products, neither of which can be removed without fundamentally changing the product. Attempts at making an imitation cheeseburger for kosher-keeping Jews

are nearly as old as the cheeseburger itself. Until now, most efforts have focused on using either faux-meat or faux-dairy made from alternative food sources like soy. Recent years have seen advances in the industry to the point where both faux-meat and faux-dairy products have greatly improved and taste very similar to the real thing. However, they are still not the same. There are two recent technological developments that have the potential to produce foods in new ways that may change which foods can be consumed by the kosher consumer. Surveying these new technologies and the halakhic literature that surrounds them can show us what the future of kosher foods holds.

The first evidence we have of someone using legumes to deliberately create an imitation dairy product dates to 1899. Almeda Lambert, a

Seventh-day Adventist, published a cookbook entitled *Guide for Nut Cookery*, which includes recipes for “ice cream” made from almonds, peanut milk, and nut cream.<sup>1</sup> The Seventh-day Adventist Church preaches a vegan diet, so finding substitutes for dairy is a natural endeavor. The history of faux-meat and dairy products in the US is replete with innovations by religious Jews and Seventh-day Adventists. The first patent for a soy based ice cream was awarded in 1922. None other than Henry Ford was an early adopter of soy foods, serving soy ice cream for dessert at the Ford Engineering Laboratory following VIP luncheons in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> In the decades that followed, soy and nut based faux-dairy products continued to appear. However, none enjoyed any large-scale commercial success. It wasn’t until 1971, when Heller Enterprises released Heller’s Non-Dairy Frozen Dessert, that a soy-based non-dairy frozen dessert product had any amount of commercial success.

Perhaps the most famous of the pareve non-dairy ice cream substitutes is Tofutti, developed by David Mintz in the early 1980s. Mintz had been experimenting with tofu-based substitutes for dairy for several years along with running a kosher

restaurant. Mintz’s buffet first sold Tofutti in 1981, and began selling it to other eateries in 1982. Tofutti was a phenomenal success. By 1983, with skyrocketing sales, Mintz’s new company, called Tofu Time Inc., raised 2.76 million dollars in its IPO. By 1985, Tofutti sales had reached 17 million dollars. Mintz is also believed to be the first to use the phrase “dairy free,” in a pamphlet describing Tofutti that he published in 1982.<sup>3</sup> Most importantly for our story, because it was made from soy and not dairy, it was certified pareve from its very inception.<sup>4</sup>

The history of soy-based meats in the United States follows a similar arc. Although the first recorded use of vegetarian meat substitutes in China dates to the 16th and 17th centuries, they did not see commercial success in the United States until the 1960s and 1970s. The first certified kosher fake meat I was able to identify was a group of Worthington Farms products released in 1959.<sup>5</sup> (Worthington Farms was also founded by a group of Seventh-day Adventists.) Since then, the market has continued to expand, and today’s supermarkets are filled with dozens of brands of non-meat meats and non-dairy dairy products.

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<sup>1</sup> Almeda Lambert, *Guide for Nut Cookery*, (Battle Creek, Michigan: Joseph Lambert & Company, 1899), 411-413.

<sup>2</sup> William Shurtleff & Akiko Aoyagi, *History of Soy Ice Cream and Other Non-Dairy Frozen Desserts (1899-2013)*, (Lafayette California: Soy Info Center, 2013), <https://www.soyinfocenter.com/pdf/167/lce.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> SoyInfo Center, *History of Soy Ice Cream and Other Non-Dairy Frozen Desserts (1899-2013)*, SoyInfo Center, <https://www.soyinfocenter.com/books/167>.

<sup>4</sup> A spokesperson for Tofutti told me that they have used the Kof-K for certification since the product was first released.

<sup>5</sup> William Shurtleff & Akiko Aoyagi, *History of the Soyfoods Movement Worldwide (1960s-2019)*, (Lafayette California: Soy Info Center, 2019), <https://www.soyinfocenter.com/pdf/215/SFM2.pdf>.

From a halakhic perspective, today's imitation meat and dairy products pose very little complexity. In many ways, they are a modern manifestation of the teaching of Yalta, wife of Rav Nahman in the Talmud. Yalta is quoted in *Hulin* 109b as stating that for everything God forbade, there is a similar thing that is permitted. Among her list of examples are several forbidden foods with permitted foods that taste similar. In this light, imitation foods are nothing more than the modern shibuta fish – a kosher fish that, according to Yalta, tastes very much like pork. Since most imitation foods are plant-based, they are easy to make kosher, and as long as there are no dairy or meat additives, easy to certify pareve as well. Many of these products, like margarine, non-dairy coffee creamer, and veggie burgers, have become staples of the modern kosher diet, and are no longer new or extraordinary in any meaningful way. Newer products, such as Impossible Beef and Miyoko's cheese, barely raise an eyebrow amongst kosher consumers when they are released.

While putting a piece of cheese on a veggie burger or having soy based ice cream after eating a hamburger might satisfy some, there is no denying that these imitation products do not taste exactly like the real things they are trying to replace. Laboratories may be able to make soy protein taste very similar to a hamburger, but it will probably never be precisely the same as beef. Recent technological advances, however, have brought us to the cusp of two distinct and consequential food revolutions.

While two products can be made to taste similar, their taste will still be different due to the differences in their underlying structure – soybeans and beef are inherently different products. In recent years there have been advances in creating dairy and meat products from artificial non-animal based sources. Cultured meat has garnered most of the headlines; however, dairy proteins produced from genetically modified organisms are already being used commercially, and the major *kashrut* organizations seem to be more inclined to certify them as pareve.

Fermentation has been used in food production for millenia. When a substrate is fermented, the resulting product usually has the same halakhic status as the initial substrate, and the microorganism is disregarded.<sup>6</sup> Traditionally, fermentation has used naturally occurring microorganisms to produce a desired product – for example, yeast added to dough that will produce carbon dioxide to make the bread rise, or yeast added to wheat to make alcohol for beer.

What is new is scientists being able to genetically modify microorganisms to produce a specific product instead of being limited to the ones nature has provided. This process is called precision fermentation, and it has been around for decades. It is used to make everything from pharmaceuticals like insulin to food additives like citric acid. The modified organisms essentially become microscopic factories for the desired chemical. One previous use of precision

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<sup>6</sup> [Zushe Blech, \*Kosher Food Production\*](#), (Ames, Iowa: Wiley & Blackwell, 2008), 104.

fermentation that had an impact on kosher products in the 1980s was a new process to produce rennet (used for curdling milk to make cheese). Previously, rennet was extracted from the stomachs of calves – a process that gets coverage in the Talmud and other halakhic works due to concerns over the potential for mixing meat and dairy products. Today, in the United States, commercial cheese makers largely use artificially produced animal-free rennet; more than 95% of the hard cheese made in America is now produced with microbial rennet.<sup>7</sup> This fact is part of the reason for Rav Soloveitchik’s famous *heter* that allowed him to eat Kraft American cheese, which was not independently certified kosher.<sup>8</sup> (His full reasoning is complex, and a discussion of that position is outside the scope of this article.)

Recently, a company called Perfect Day has genetically modified a strain of the *Trichoderma reesei* fungus to produce milk whey proteins. The modified fungi are put in a tank with sugar. They consume the sugar and produce whey protein – one of the two proteins that are present in milk. The final product is identical to the protein produced by cows, but with one key difference for the kosher consumer – no animals are involved in the production. Perfect Day’s protein is currently

certified kosher and pareve by the Star-K, despite being the exact same whey protein that is normally derived from milk. This proves what is likely most people’s intuition that chemicals excreted from genetically modified microorganisms are kosher and pareve.<sup>9</sup> Several consumer products are already available that use Perfect Day’s protein, some of which carry *hashgachah*.

Hard cheese, however, is made with casein protein, not whey protein. Several startups are working on producing precision fermented casein protein, which could be used to make animal-free hard cheese. Although none have yet managed to progress to the point of producing commercial products, and I have not been able to identify one that is certified kosher, precision fermentation is a proven technology and it is clearly only a matter of time before animal-free casein protein, and then cheese, can be developed.

Meat, on the other hand, is more complex. It is not a single molecule, but an amalgamation of proteins, fats, and sinews which combine to give meat its taste and texture. Current research is focused not on generating it via microorganisms, but on growing meat cells in a lab from a small sample. While significant strides have been made

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<sup>7</sup> Jeanne Yacoubou, “An Update ON Rennet,” The Vegetarian Resource Group, [https://www.vrg.org/journal/vj2008issue3/2008\\_issue3\\_update\\_renet.php](https://www.vrg.org/journal/vj2008issue3/2008_issue3_update_renet.php)

<sup>8</sup> Shlomo Brody, “Have Halakha Handbooks Changed Pesikat Halakha? Laws We Don’t Teach in Public,” in *Text and Texture*, (Rabbinical Council of America, September 7 2009), [https://www.academia.edu/38977213/Have\\_Halakha\\_Handbooks\\_Changed\\_Pesikat\\_Halakha\\_Laws\\_We\\_Dont\\_Teach](https://www.academia.edu/38977213/Have_Halakha_Handbooks_Changed_Pesikat_Halakha_Laws_We_Dont_Teach_in_Public&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1723170206453242&usg=AOvVaw2EUxhAr4Ddh-7qf-UNpCIh)

[in Public&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1723170206453242&usg=AOvVaw2EUxhAr4Ddh-7qf-UNpCIh](https://www.academia.edu/38977213/Have_Halakha_Handbooks_Changed_Pesikat_Halakha_Laws_We_Dont_Teach_in_Public&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1723170206453242&usg=AOvVaw2EUxhAr4Ddh-7qf-UNpCIh)

<sup>9</sup> The Star-K provides no specific guidance on this product with respect to *marit ayin*. However, it is worth noting that this is not a consumer product. It is a protein sold commercially and used in the manufacturing process to produce consumer products like milk, ice cream, and cheese.

in the last few years, the technology is still being developed. Only a few products have been approved for sale in the US, and there is still nothing available to consumers in grocery stores. The field is filled with many startups, all trying to develop their technology. Not all of these companies are open about the details of what they are doing, and it is, of course, impossible to predict with certainty which technologies will or will not prove themselves in the long run. That being said, there are three methods of producing cultured meat that are worthy of discussion.

The initial method scientists have been pursuing to produce cultured meat is to use muscle precursor cells. After taking a muscle sample from a living animal, these cells can be grown in a laboratory environment where they will multiply and create muscle fibers, eventually growing into a piece of meat. There were some in the Israeli Chief Rabbinate who argued for a time that cultured meat growth should be considered analogous to fermentation.<sup>10</sup> This would have led to a very strict ruling, as the medium fed to the cells is usually not kosher, and as a fermented

product's halakhic status is based on the substrate, cultivated meat would be extremely difficult to make kosher.<sup>11</sup> However, most of the recent halakhic opinions written on the topic have abandoned the fermentation analogy.

Although there are not many published opinions to go on, there are a variety of opinions as to how to treat this product halakhically. Some of the reasons to treat it as pareve have included the possibility of treating cultured meat the same as a cow created through the study of *Sefer Yetzira*<sup>12</sup> or meat that fell from heaven,<sup>13</sup> both of which are treated as kosher and pareve by the Talmud.<sup>14</sup> However, intriguing as these possibilities are, most of the published positions seem clear that meat grown from an existing cow's muscle would also be halakhically treated as meat.<sup>15,16,17</sup> This means that all of the stringencies usually applied to meat would apply here too – the sample must come from a kosher animal and it must be killed in a kosher manner.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, it is unlikely that this topic will ever receive the full halakhic treatment that it deserves, as to date no product using this technology has asked for a ruling from

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<sup>10</sup> John D. Loike, Ira Bedzow, and Moshe D. Tandler, "Pareve Cloned Beef Burgers: Health and Halakhic Considerations," *Hakirah* 24 (2018): 201.

<sup>11</sup> It is also possible that this will not be an issue at some point in the future, as the growth medium is an area of significant scientific research, and new advances will involve kosher substances.

<sup>12</sup> *Sanhedrin* 65b.

<sup>13</sup> *Sanhedrin* 59b.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.machonso.org/hamaayan/?gilayon=40&id=1201>

<sup>15</sup> John D. Loike, Ira Bedzow, and Moshe d. Tandler, "Pareve Cloned Beef Burgers: Health and Halakhic Considerations," *Hakirah* 24 (2018): 196.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.tzohar.org.il/wpcontent/uploads/basar.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <https://jewishlink.news/lab-grown-meat-ou-kosher-approach/>

<sup>18</sup> Making cultured meat from a muscle sample kosher is not a trivial undertaking. However, it is beyond the scope of this article.

a *kashrut* organization, and newer technologies have shown more promise, both from a technological and halakhic perspective, rendering the debate around cultured meat grown from muscle precursor cells somewhat moot.<sup>19</sup>

A second method of growing cultured meat involves using fetal stem cells. A blastocyst is harvested from a cow's uterine horns (the top of the uterus where it meets the fallopian tubes) before it is implanted in the uterus. At this stage of development, the blastocyst is a small mass of cells about 0.1-0.2 mm in diameter. The inner part of the blastocyst is made of stem cells which will develop into the fetus. The outer layer will develop into the placenta. The stem cells from the inner part of the blastocyst can be differentiated to create the various components of a cut of meat such as muscle and collagen. They are then fed the nutrients necessary for growth in a growth reactor until they develop into a piece of meat.

Two Israel-based companies of note that are using fetal stem cells are SuperMeat and Aleph Farms. SuperMeat is focused on making poultry, while Aleph Farms is focused on beef. Both stated a desire early in their process to be kosher and, if possible, pareve. Both have also sought out opinions from leading *kashrut* authorities and have received similar results. Israeli Chief Rabbi

David Lau wrote a *teshuvah* (responsum) on Aleph Farms' process.<sup>20</sup> He ruled that, because the stem cells are taken before implantation into the uterus, they are pareve, and if they are then grown in a pareve growth medium, it would lead to a final product which is pareve, like any vegetable product. He even ruled that there is no issue of *marit ayin* (a permitted action which looks like a forbidden action) when mixing it with dairy, due to the common nature of imitation meat products. However, he also ruled that if the final product looked like meat and was sold like meat, it had the potential to lead people to make mistakes by mixing real dairy and meat, and therefore it should not be eaten or cooked with dairy. The principle he applied was *hergeil aveirah* (accustoming people to sin). The more commonly known principle of *marit ayin* proscribes a permitted action because it looks like something forbidden and might cause an observer to conclude that the forbidden action is permitted. *Hergeil aveirah*, on the other hand, is about the individual themselves and the concern that if they habitually perform certain actions in a permitted scenario, they may accidentally perform that same action in a forbidden one as well. A very similar example is the prohibition of making dairy bread: the sages were concerned that, since bread is commonly eaten with both meat and dairy products, someone making dairy bread

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<sup>19</sup> As with any technological development, it goes without saying that future breakthroughs could change this. However this is the situation as it currently stands.

<sup>20</sup> <https://static.timesofisrael.com/www/uploads/2023/01/%D7%97%D7%95%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%93%D7%A2%D7%AA->

<https://static.timesofisrael.com/www/uploads/2023/01/%D7%94%D7%9C%D7%9B%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%9E%D7%94%D7%A8%D7%91-%D7%94%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%A9%D7%99-%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%9C-%D7%91%D7%A9%D7%A8-%D7%9E%D7%AA%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%AA.pdf>

might accidentally eat their bread with meat.<sup>21</sup> In choosing this principle, the implementation of this ruling will most likely be more restrictive than if the Rabbinat had applied *marit ayin*. As *marit ayin* is about confusing an observer, there are ways to mitigate those concerns with a *hekeir*, a sign that indicates that the action is permitted. *Marit ayin* is also much more fluid: as societal norms change, what might be misconstrued can also change, and, as a product becomes commonplace, there is less of a concern of an onlooker confusing it for something else.<sup>22</sup> Not so with *hergeil*, as that is about an individual's actions and habits, so a product becoming more common and less likely to cause confusion for an onlooker is less relevant.

The Israeli rabbinic group Tzohar, representing the Dati-Leumi wing of the Israeli rabbinical establishment, has also issued a position paper on meat from stem cells and came to the same conclusions regarding the meat being kosher and pareve. Noticeably absent from their position is the Rabbinat's opinion on the potential for leading to sin. It is likely, then, that Tzohar is of the opinion that stem-cell-derived cultured meat may be cooked with dairy.<sup>23</sup>

SuperMeat did much of the early outreach work

in this area, having approached a number of Dati-Leumi rabbis several years ago to get their opinions on whether their chicken was kosher and pareve. Several of them, including R. Dov Lior, R. Yuval Cherlow (one of the founders of Tzohar), and R. Shlomo Aviner, said in an interview posted to Facebook<sup>24</sup> that the product would be pareve. Although detailed halakhic reasoning was not provided at the time, they focused largely on the fact that something grown from individual cells is not an animal and therefore cannot halakhically be considered meat. They felt that the changes it undergoes qualifies it as *panim hadashot ba'u lekhan* –an entirely new creation that is not connected to the previous substance. However, much of the logic this argument uses also applies to gelatin made from a non-kosher animal – a topic that is subject to significant debate and not permitted by most of the major American *kashrut* organizations. More recently, SuperMeat has been granted kosher certification by the OU, which clearly rejected the *panim hadashot* argument and classified the product as meat.<sup>25</sup>

While it appears that the first generation of cultivated meat is likely to produce products that are classified as meat by the major *kashrut* organizations, there is a third possibility raised by John Loike, Ira Bedzow, and Rabbi Moshe Tendler.

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<sup>21</sup> *Pesahim* 36a, *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh Dei'ah* 97:1.

<sup>22</sup> *Kreiti U-Pleiti*, *Yoreh Dei'ah* 87:8. See also *Yabi'a Omer*, *Yoreh Dei'ah* 9:10.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.tzohar.org.il/?p=41799>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1532234013748970>

<sup>25</sup> In an email, the OU told me that they viewed its meat's pareve status as a matter of debate. Obviously, they decided to be strict and consider it meat.



They laid out the main issues surrounding the *kashrut* of stem cell beef in *Hakirah* 24.<sup>26</sup> They suggest that cultured meat would be unlikely to be pareve, unless it were to be made from skin-based stem cells. However, this would have to be another technological advancement, and it does not appear to be a current research focus. The current research aimed at making muscles from muscle precursor cells and stem cells has a global market. Assuming it succeeds, the market for growing muscle from skin stem cells would essentially only be the kosher consumer wanting the product for its halakhic advantages. Much of the money that has been invested in companies working to produce cultured meat with the promise of a financial return would be unlikely to see nearly as much of a return investing in a product with a much smaller potential market share. It is also worth noting that this article was published before the *teshuvot* from the Chief Rabbinate were published, and it is possible that the Rabbinate (and other agencies following their lead) would still classify the product as meat for the reasons that R. Lau laid out in his response.

*Mahloket* (debate) is obviously nothing new to religious Judaism, and it seems inevitable that some will consider a cultured meat product to be meat while others will consider it pareve. If the gelatin debate is to be used as a guide, the major American *hashgachah* agencies will probably rule strictly.<sup>27</sup> There is always the possibility of developing meat from stem cells found in the skin,

which would be universally accepted as pareve, but this would take research and development effort that may not be worth the payout, especially since it's very possible that the same stringencies that have been applied to fetal stem cells could also be applied to skin-derived stem cells.

It would seem then that pareve cheese made from precision fermented dairy proteins is going to come much sooner than cultured meat. The technology has been proven over a period of decades and is already being used to produce food for consumers. Although it has made tremendous strides in the last few years, cultured meat is still working towards being ready for consumer consumption. When it is available, the first generation of cultured meat products is not going to be universally recognized as pareve – it will be, at best, subject to a *mahloket* over whether it is considered pareve or meat. A meat product that can be universally recognized as pareve would require, at a minimum, further technological research and development, or, if the Chief Rabbinate's position on leading to sin takes hold, it could be impossible. Cultured meat may continue to garner headlines, and for good reasons – cultured meat is going to have a much wider impact on the world as a whole. However, at least for the kosher consumer, precision fermented dairy proteins are going to give us a kosher cheeseburger far sooner.

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<sup>26</sup> John D. Loike, Ira Bedzow, and Moshe D. Tendler, "Pareve Cloned Beef Burgers: Health and Halakhic Considerations," *Hakirah* 24 (2018).

<sup>27</sup> <https://oukosher.org/halacha-yomis/ou-position-gelatin-non-kosher-animals/>.



## QUESTIONING BELIEF AND BELIEF IN QUESTIONS

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### **R**evue of Raphael Zarum, *Questioning Belief: Torah and Tradition in an Age of Doubt* (New Milford, Maggid Books; 2023)

Just before starting rabbinical school, I asked a teacher for advice. He said to “always believe in your questions and have the courage to walk towards the answers.” This is effectively the approach that Rabbi Dr. Raphael Zarum takes in his recent book, [\*Questioning Belief: Torah and Tradition in an Age of Doubt\*](#). Zarum is Dean of the London School of Jewish Studies (formerly Jews’ College), where he holds the Rabbi Sacks Chair of Modern Jewish Thought. He also has a PhD in Theoretical Physics from King’s College London and two rabbinic ordinations – one from Rabbi Sacks and one from the S&P Montefiore Kollel. If his credentials weren’t enough, the book also has a powerful, if perhaps unusual, endorsement from R. Sacks’ daughter, Gila Sacks:

The first time I heard Rabbi Dr. Raphael Zarum teach I was seventeen... Over four short classes, he opened up the windows of Torah and flooded the classroom with light. He walked us through the structure of the Torah, grounding us in its facts, its history, maps, and characters. And then he taught us to ask questions of

any text, to have confidence in our ability to find answers to those questions, and to give a *devar Torah*.

... At the time, I thought that the magic of what Rabbi Zarum was doing in that classroom was giving legitimacy to our questions. But that is not unique – indeed, to be told that our questions are valid has rightly become a more mainstream expectation for today’s students of Torah. Instead, over time, as I saw him teach more, I realized he was doing something else – he was teaching us to take seriously the pursuit of answers. Questions might take confidence, but answers take work. We needed to take seriously the work involved in finding answers to our questions, because while all questions may be valid, all answers are not. In his teaching, Rabbi Zarum modeled the pursuit of answers. (xi-xii)<sup>1</sup>

Zarum himself states a similar mission in his introduction, after first acknowledging not only the legitimacy of asking questions, but also where they come from. The questions he hears, Zarum admits, “are rarely intended to provoke or belittle Judaism.” Rather, “they come from an honest desire to better appreciate our religious tradition. At times, when questions are expressed forcefully, they may come from feelings of

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<sup>1</sup> All in-text citations are from the book under review.

frustration or even anger, but they tend to arise from a genuine desire to live a fulfilling Jewish life” (xix-xx).

Zarum also acknowledges that many feel (rightly!) that their most pressing religious questions have been left unanswered, which ultimately leads them away from living a Jewish life. In another refreshing moment, Zarum speaks strongly against those who fail to provide meaningful answers to legitimate questions:

A weak reply to a real question, or ignoring it completely, confirms the feeling in the questioner that Judaism is ill-equipped to respond to contemporary issues. Besides being insensitive, teachers who give flippant or dismissive answers fail to understand the religious angst of the sincere individual who stands before them. Receiving a pat answer can cause further problems. It shuts down the asker rather than opening them up to further exploration. Answering a question with a quick and clever retort comes across well at the time, but often crumbles when scrutinized. Rabbi Yehoshua Engelman, a teacher of mine and a good friend, is fond of saying, “Never ruin a first-rate question with a second-rate answer.” (xx)

If this all reads like Zarum is writing from personal experience, it’s because his journey reflects one that many of his self-selecting readers have also

embarked on. He explains that he himself had been asking questions for a long time and that he, too, was frustrated “with many of the stock responses and formulations” he received in return. In response, he “sought out ideas, books, and people that might help” and it was only “years of learning with some wonderful rabbis, pursuing academic studies, exploring [his] Yemenite-Ashkenazi heritage, reading widely, teaching reflectively, and having endless late-night conversations” that gave him a working approach. This experience taught him that “serious questions should be treasured.” After all, such questions “reveal a genuine interest; they show that the asker is trying to make sense of what they are learning and attempting to see how it fits into their view of the world. Inquiry is the springboard to further knowledge and new perspectives” (xxi).

In the following lengthy quote, Zarum outlines the approach that he and his book follow in responding to the types of questions that troubled him throughout his religious quest. He is quite open about what he is, and is not, trying to provide his readers:

Rabbi Yehuda Henkin (1945-2020) once asked his grandfather, the prominent halakhist Rabbi Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, whether it was permissible to interpret non-legal parts of the Torah in ways different from those of the rabbinic sages. “Yes,” he answered, “provided the intention is to strengthen *yirat Shamayim* (reverence for God).” This is my intention here: to suggest new ways of seeing and

understanding the Torah that make sense to the modern mind and facilitate a deeper connection with our traditions and our creator.

You may be thinking: Is all this just apologetics then? In its everyday usage, being an apologist has a negative connotation, referring to the process of conjuring up a host of justifications that avoid or excuse the issue at hand and fail to address deeper concerns. However, the technical definition of apologetics is the defense of some value, cause, or religious belief through systematic argumentation and discourse. This is exactly what I want to do here. The book responds to modern challenges to the Torah by making a case based on well-researched and reasonable arguments. Over the next twelve chapters, I try to be a passionate and even-handed advocate for Judaism who takes questions very seriously. (xxii-xxiii)

In responding to these challenges, Zarum does not expect “to provide definitive proofs.” Indeed, he readily admits that “there are no incontrovertible answers to these kinds of questions.” Rather, his mission is to “present rational responses

that make belief possible and that ground commitment on meaningful foundations.” Researching and responding to the questions he addresses led him “again and again to rethink simplified answers,” and he does not hide the fact that he will “present innovative applications and interpretations of traditional texts that show their relevance for today” (xxiii-xxiv).

Zarum’s approach here seems similar not only to R. Henkin, but also to Rabbi Shalom Carmy’s understanding of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. Carmy utilizes a letter of Rav Kook’s to identify three ideas that are of profound importance:

1. All things being equal, one is morally obligated to believe a proposition, if belief in that proposition is a necessary component of his or her national identity.
2. The aforementioned obligation is overridden when an essential national belief is inimical to the welfare of humanity.
3. If an essential national belief is *refuted*, the obligation to believe is overridden as well.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the default position of a Jew ought to be to believe what our tradition provides us *unless* those beliefs are in conflict with human flourishing or are refuted by modern science,

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<sup>2</sup> Shalom Carmy, “Dialectic, Doubters, and a Self-Erasing Letter,” in Lawrence J. Kaplan and David Shatz (eds.) [Rabbi](#)

[Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality](#) (New York: NYU Press, 1995), 212.

philosophy, etc. With these ideas in mind, one must ask: What happens when someone can no longer accept a belief? Based on Rav Kook's writings, R. Carmy writes as follows:

[A]n individual who has concluded that some series of propositions  $P_1... P_n$  is a true and legitimate expression of the Torah's teaching is right to believe it, even if the community disagrees with that evaluation. However...the individual is not justified in expressing his/her belief publicly when that utterance is liable to misunderstanding and condemnation.<sup>3</sup>

One may infer from this that someone can legitimately come to an understanding of Torah that differs dramatically from the Orthodox community as a whole. R. Kook, however, implores such people to keep those understandings to themselves if spreading them will lead to the community misunderstanding and turning on the person who otherwise wants to remain a member. As we examine Zarum's answers to several questions, we ought to keep in mind R. Kook's advice.

Zarum's approach is then applied to twelve specific questions that are split into three broad groups; Origins, Ethics, and Beliefs. Origins includes questions of science and history. Like

Sacks before him, Zarum assumes that science and religion work in great partnership with each other. He writes that "religion has been humankind's way of seeking the purpose and meaning of life," while "scientific methods were developed to analyze observable phenomena systematically in order to deduce how they are fundamentally related." Zarum is thus adamant that "the discoveries of science coupled with the interpretive skills developed by religious thought guide us as we constantly reevaluate ourselves and the universe in which we live," and that "only when they become detached is there a danger of religious fundamentalism on the one hand and fanatical atheism on the other" (24).

Applied to the particular question of evolution, Zarum writes that humanity "is the culmination of Creation that began with very simple creatures," and that while "the study of evolution enables us to comprehend how the almost infinite variety of species developed, it is religious belief that reminds us how this process was initiated, and religious practice that teaches us to respect and appreciate the wonder of life" (51).

This is all well and good for relatively settled questions like the age of the earth and evolution, but Modern Orthodox readers may find Zarum's responses to historical questions to be quite out of the box. For example, he writes that the Flood story "may well have been a regional phenomenon" and that the Torah presented it as global in order to give "dramatic weight which has

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 226.

profound significance today.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Zarum laments that “we are more aware than ever of the threat to our planet that unbridled human productivity and consumption is causing. With the danger of rising sea levels, the Flood story still holds water and continues to bear an urgent message for humanity” (73-74).

Even more remarkably, Zarum applies similar logic to the Exodus from Egypt. He writes that we “should not be so entrenched in the pursuit of historical verification that we lose the capacity to appreciate the nature of the Torah’s unique account,” and that it’s “a mistake to imprint modern sensibilities onto an ancient text.” Indeed, he writes that the narrative “does not aim to give us a historical account of the Exodus; it has a very different set of purposes,” including “educating its readers to remember this momentous experience by constructing a dramatic and miraculous narrative; employing various literary forms to convey symbolic and moral meaning; and appropriating phrases and images common to ancient Egypt in order to affirm the preeminence of God” (98). Zarum directly compares the Torah’s presentation with dramatic historical films like *Schindler’s List* and *Dunkirk*. Watching such adaptations does not mean the core events didn’t happen, but we also do not expect everything to have taken place exactly as presented. In his words,

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<sup>4</sup> While I am not aware of other Orthodox rabbis who have been willing to go this far, it was pointed out to me by Rabbi David Fried that the Babylonian Talmud (*Zevahim* 113a) presents an opinion that the Land of Israel was not affected by the flood and that this could also be read as a concession that the flood was not a truly global event. One who is particularly fundamentalist, though, could respond by

... The Exodus narrative...portrays the bitter *magnitude* of the slavery, making it painful to read; it heaps on the *drama* through the clash of Pharaoh and Moses, the escalating ten plagues, and the sea-splitting finale; and it *personalizes* the story for the committed reader by teaching us how we should remember it in our own lives... The Torah employs educational imperative, literary forms, Egyptological resonance, and so much more, to tell its amazing story. (99)

These sorts of understandings are not new in the realm of biblical scholarship, but Zarum goes farther than perhaps any Orthodox thinker in articulating them to his audience. While it may very well help questioners make sense of the Torah’s seemingly outlandish presentations, it may also leave one asking just how much dramatic license is taken. Might one be able to legitimately argue, based on Zarum’s approach, that Richard Elliot Friedman’s thesis about the Exodus only involving the Levites is correct?<sup>5</sup>

Zarum’s responses to ethical questions are more predictable, albeit still unusual to hear so directly from a leading Orthodox rabbi. His general approach is to view the Torah as a stepping stone

saying that perhaps it was *only* the land of Israel that was unaffected.

<sup>5</sup> Friedman’s position is summarized in this [interview](#) with him.

meant to push humanity towards moral enlightenment rather than being a perfect document by contemporary standards from the get-go. Rather than condemning slavery or animal consumption outright, for example, the Torah instead attempts to inspire its adherents to slowly but surely move beyond such practices. Such approaches are far from original, but interesting to see stated so directly nonetheless.

Readers sympathetic to this perspective, however, may still take issue with Zarum's treatment of collective punishment in the Torah. He notes that our current readings of such cases is anachronistic: today it is acknowledged that while "each nation has its own influential cultural traditions, we do not assert that every single person of that nation has a built-in national consciousness that completely determines their attitudes and morality." However, he clarifies that this recognition of "ourselves as autonomous individuals who are capable of thinking and behaving independently is a recent phenomenon." Up to only a few centuries ago, "the populations of most kingdoms were under the controlling authority of their rulers," and "they recognized the power of a small ruling family or class as a fact of life." The Torah therefore condones collective punishment

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<sup>6</sup> It was brought to my attention by Rabbi David Fried that the Babylonian Talmud (*Makkot* 24a) may already allude to this sort of shift from thinking about clans as primary moral agents to individuals. The topic is also commonly discussed within the field of anthropology. Bible scholars such as James Kugel and Aaron Koller also reference it in their work.

<sup>7</sup> This point about the psychological harm done to perpetrators of collective punishment is also made by Christian apologist William Lane Craig in attempting to

precisely because such societies "accepted their governors as superior and did not think to question their imperial or religious right to rule" (163-164).<sup>6</sup>

This might explain how collective punishment was justified in a biblical context, but it does little to assuage modern doubts about the Torah literally blessing such actions. This is especially so as Zarum himself notes in a footnote that there is much research demonstrating that "various cultural groupings think in specific ways," (163, n31) and that "viewing a group of people as having a uniform identity that can justify collective punishment has not disappeared" (164). While acknowledging that such understandings are gradually being challenged, we still live in a world in which such judgements are common. Even [recently](#), a mainstream rabbi advocated for Arabs being removed from the West Bank on the assumption that they could be viewed collectively with few exceptions.

Zarum attempts to mitigate this with the caveat that collective punishment ought to only be utilized with explicit divine guidance. After all, "even if it can be rationalized," inflicting such punishment "still sullies those involved in doing it" (173).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, "meting out collective

explain how the "Old Testament" could command the killing of Canaanites:

So whom does God wrong in commanding the destruction of the Canaanites? Not the Canaanite adults, for they were corrupt and deserving of judgment. Not the children, for they inherit eternal life. So who is wronged? Ironically, I think the most difficult part of this whole debate is the apparent wrong done to the Israeli [sic] soldiers themselves.

punishment is so psychologically harmful that it would require God's help to return those involved back to health" and, even then, "this divine assistance is limited to an occasion when the punishment was divinely endorsed in the first place. It cannot be relied upon in any other circumstances" (177).

Whether Zarum's stress that "the general administration of collective punishment should be strenuously avoided" (177) is enough to discourage those who currently believe in administering collective punishment in the spirit of Torah verses, is a question that readers ought to think about as support for Kahanist and similar viewpoints continue to spread throughout religious Zionist communities.

With that, let us turn our attention to Zarum's approach to "belief." He first rejects the common idea that one ought to believe in God based on miracles reported in the Torah, with a perhaps odd combination of Maimonides' and David Hume's theologies. In Zarum's words, "though Biblical miracles are impressive, they serve a particular purpose in the narrative and are not theologically significant," in addition to the fact that "stories of miracles to this day are susceptible to fallibility and fakery, so they should not be relied on for religious belief" (212). He also acknowledges that "though the various proofs for God [cosmological, teleological, ontological, etc.]

are disputable, so are their refutations" (214), and that, even if one escapes a theological stalemate, "acceptance of a prime cause, necessary existence, or intelligent designer does not inevitably lead to a God who is intimately involved with humanity. Such proofs might make you a deist, but not a theist" (215).

How, then, does Zarum recommend the jump from deism to theism? By redefining what it means to believe in God in the first place! "Just as a forge rids a metal of its contaminants by gradually refining it," Zarum writes, "so the search for God involves constant refinement by moving beyond scientific or logic-based conceptions of God" (220). Rather than defining belief as propositional, Zarum instead defines it as an invitation to "seek God ourselves, in our own ways. The process is a lifelong quest, open to all." Thus, believing in God "is not a one-time binary decision – either you believe in God or you do not – rather, it is a journey of realization and discovery...the work of a lifetime which requires constant effort. It is measured by the arc of your lived experience, not by occasional affirmations" (219).

Indeed, since "God's existence cannot be proven with miracles, physics, or metaphysics because God is indescribable and inscrutable" (232), this lifelong quest is the *only* way to really connect. This does not mean that Zarum offers no

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Can you imagine what it would be like to have to break into some house and kill a terrified woman and her children? The brutalising effect on these Israeli [sic] soldiers is disturbing.

"Would you shake hands with a man who could write stuff like that? Would you share a platform with him? I wouldn't, and I won't." (Note that the original article by Craig appears to no longer be on his website. He has, however, recently reasserted it at length in interviews like [this one](#).)

It is apparently for this reason that the prominent atheist Richard Dawkins refuses to ever debate Craig. In [his words](#),



theology, though. He quotes the theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli as writing that

The equations of quantum mechanics and their consequences are used daily in widely varying fields: by physicists, engineers, chemists, and biologists... Yet they remain mysterious. For they do not describe what happens to a physical system, but only how a physical system affects another physical system. What does this mean? That the essential reality of a system is indescribable? Does it mean that we only lack a piece of the puzzle? Or does it mean, as it seems to me, *that we must accept the idea that reality is only interaction?*<sup>8</sup>

Rovelli notes [elsewhere](#) that the “relationalism” he proposes “can be seen as a very mild form of panpsychism,” the idea that some form of consciousness pervades all of reality. Zarum takes this to mean that “we see that *on every level of existence*, from physical matter to plant life to animal bodies and the human mind, *everything* is continuously interacting, and these interactions are so complex that notions of separateness and

self are secondary to the primal reality of relationship” (226). From there, it is our job to contribute to this relationship by realizing that belief in God means participating in the quest for Him.<sup>9</sup> Zarum even offers many practical tips towards that end:

Our relationship to God can be intensified by understanding the interrelated nature of all reality, even of our own self-perception. In finding ourselves, we find God. Regularly mentioning God in our responses increases our connection. There are ups and downs in this relationship... This is only natural. But in being responsive to God we are inspired to live more meaningfully and ethically. That is, if we let God into our lives. (232)

Put differently, “while seeking God is to search for the meaning of life, finding God reframes this to living a life of meaning” (223). This reframing of belief as a quest is not unique to Zarum. Conservative Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove uses almost identical language in writing that “faith can best be described as an ongoing quest to know an ever-elusive God.”<sup>10</sup> Cosgrove continues, writing

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<sup>8</sup> Carlo Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*, trans. Simon Carnell and Erica Segre (Penguin, 2015), 18. Cited in Zarum, 226.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that any theology stemming from Rovelli’s approach would have to be panentheistic rather than traditionally monotheist. As I explore [elsewhere](#), such

theologies have much precedent within Judaism. The shift from how most intuit theology to this sort of approach is unexplored in *Questioning Belief*.

<sup>10</sup> Elliot J. Cosgrove, “A Quest-Driven Faith,” in Elliot J. Cosgrove (ed.), [Jewish Theology in Our Time: A New](#)

that

In a quest-driven faith, Jewish prayer, inquiry, and observance become a series of opportunities for discovery: of the self, others, and God. Every act of prayer signals not merely the affirmation of hoary catechisms but an effort toward constructing a relationship with the historic God of the Jewish people and all of humanity. So too, by searching the texts of our tradition, I seek to retrieve Judaism's spiritual treasures to give voice to my spiritual questions. Torah is not something to be accepted or rejected, rather it is a palimpsest, to be searched and probed in order to discover again and again traces of God's voice. Finally, by performing *mitzvot*, I reach out toward my God in heaven and the divine spark embedded in all humanity. In a quest-driven faith, *mitzvot* stop becoming a list of do's and don'ts, and start becoming a series of opportunities to bind myself to God's will.<sup>11</sup>

Cosgrove concludes his piece by writing

that "faith is not about beginnings or endings, but about process, forward momentum, and opportunities for discovery." The choice to embark on such a quest is meaningful "not in the answers it provides, but in the spiritual posture it recommends." For Cosgrove, "such a quest directed both toward heaven and the Jewish tradition holds the promise of enabling us to stand in relation to our God, to whom we owe our existence."<sup>12</sup>

Importantly, Cosgrove readily admits (in a footnote) that such a framing is not unique to him, and that he has a particular "intellectual and spiritual debt to Louis Jacobs (1920-2006) and Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972)":

While the language and mood of a quest as an authentic mode of Jewish theology did not originate with Jacobs or Heschel, it is through them that it gained its most articulate contemporary spokesmen. Theology must be personal but it need not be original, and my debt to Jacobs and Heschel is ongoing. In fact, if anything contained herein is worthy of expansion or in need [of] clarification or correction, then I recommend any of their books

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[\*Generation Explores the Foundations and Future of Jewish Belief\*](#) (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2010), 123.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 128.

toward this goal.<sup>13</sup>

Though Cosgrove identifies his indebtedness to both Heschel and Jacobs, his [doctoral dissertation](#) makes it clear that the latter exerted a primary influence on his theological framing. Cosgrove notes that the British thinker “wrote with a refreshing awareness that the individual’s final decision was not so final at all since theological positioning is forever tentative, a personal quest open to being amended throughout a lifetime.” He also wrote that

Jacobs’s quest was never contingent on arriving at an absolute truth. From the beginning through the end of his life, Jacobs sought to encourage an atmosphere that validated both the intellectual and spiritual integrity of a religious search, all the while goading other spiritual pilgrims towards seeking a truth that while present, was perhaps necessarily unattainable. Not so much the answers themselves, but the mood wrought by such a quest filled with religious devotion and intellectual integrity stands as Jacobs’ enduring legacy.

This clear parallel with the framing of *Questioning Belief* is particularly noteworthy, since Zarum is Dean of the London School of Jewish Studies, at which (when it was still Jews’ College) Jacobs served as Moral Tutor and would have become Principal had his invitation not been vetoed by the Chief Rabbi of the time due to his unorthodox beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Jacobs even titled his autobiography *Helping with Inquiries* for reasons that he wrote were “self-explanatory. All the fuss was really about whether traditional Judaism could be seen as a quest rather than as a corpus of dogmas.”<sup>15</sup>

Of course, none of this is meant to imply that Zarum’s Orthodoxy is suspect in any way. The invocation of Jacobs’ language is intriguing given the parallel professional positions of the two British theologians, but Zarum emphasizes his unwavering commitment to Orthodox Judaism throughout. The use of Jacobs-esque language serves as a fascinating case of Orthodoxy appropriating language and ideas that were previously outside its domain.<sup>16</sup>

The obvious question from here is what happens when one is unable to complete their quest, or when their quest leads somewhere other than theism? It is in responding to that question that Zarum doubles down on his redefinition of belief, but first reframes the question itself:

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>14</sup> I examine the “Jacobs Affair” [here](#).

<sup>15</sup> Louis Jacobs, [Helping with Inquiries](#) (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1989), xii.

<sup>16</sup> Another contemporary example of this is the recent trend of Orthodox thinkers reading and quoting the works of Abraham Joshua Heschel, and the republication of his [Torah Min HaShamayim](#) by a prominent Orthodox publisher.

If belief in God is difficult, does that have to detract from being excited and inspired by Judaism? Is Jewish life so founded upon faith that without it everything comes tumbling down? Does lack of belief make you a lesser Jew? Is being an unbeliever unforgivable, or are there other paths that can bind us to tradition in upbeat and compelling ways? (263)

One potential answer is to suggest *Orthopraxy* over *Orthodoxy*. Zarum at first seems sympathetic to this approach, though he ultimately rejects it:

To construct a committed Jewish life that ignores God is problematic. It is, however, quite common. Rather than being *orthodox*, accepting the principles of Jewish belief, many Jews are what can be termed *orthoprax*, meaning that they follow the practices of Judaism rather than accepting the theology. They deeply appreciate the ethical value of Jewish life, while not being enthusiastic about belief. The social and soulful aspects of prayer are what bring them to synagogue. The joy of family get-togethers is what motivates them to observe Shabbat and festivals.

These are, of course, very positive and powerful aspects of Jewish practice. Bringing up children in

such an environment teaches them many important life lessons, as well as grounding them in the values of a caring family and supportive community. But Judaism has much to say about belief and, in the long run, this is sorely needed to live a meaningful Jewish life. (263-264)

The solution, for Zarum, is to offer an understanding of belief based on the word *emuna's* 39 appearances in the Torah. The conclusion reached is rather unintuitive:

In summation, *emuna* focuses on affiliation rather than affirmation. Belonging more than believing. It binds the Jewish people to each other rather than to a catechism. *Emuna* is a collection of ideas that includes faithfulness, trust, steadfastness, citizenship, loyalty, integrity, and a determination that goes back to antiquity. The rabbis of old never thought to exclude Jews who questioned their beliefs, and in the modern period, many have bent over backwards to find ways to include even those who feel little connection to Jewish principles and practices. We can never abandon each other because we were taught that *El Emuna*, our faithful God, would never abandon us... Born in antiquity, *emuna* describes the lived experience of our people: not what they

professed but how they carried themselves, and with whom they decided to build a life and pass on their ancient rituals and values. The scope of this shared project is utterly astounding. It carries on, and it carries us, to this day. (283)

Defining belief in this way is again similar to the theology offered by Jacobs, recently summarized by Miri Freud-Kandel as “a complimentary synthesis of interpretive and factual beliefs, alongside various arguments, indicators, and practices.”<sup>17</sup> This effectively eliminates the distinction between orthopraxy and orthodoxy, provided that the relevant praxes are engaged with in a thoughtful manner and not by rote. Such an idea was also recently expressed by (the also-British) Rabbi Dr. Sam Lebens. In his *Guide for the Jewish Undecided*,<sup>18</sup> religiosity is defined with three criteria:

Criterion 1: A religious life is a life lived as part of a community that defines its identity around a system of beliefs and/or practices.<sup>19</sup>

Criterion 2: To live a religious life requires faith that the fundamentals of the community’s system of beliefs, or that the

fundamental propositions that make sense of the community’s practices are true (or, at least, it requires faith that their conjunction is true).<sup>20</sup>

Criterion 3: To live a religious life requires imaginative engagement...with the canonical narratives, metaphors, prescribed games of make-believe and/or perspectives of the community’s system of beliefs and/or practices.<sup>21</sup>

Fascinatingly, Lebens listed the same three criteria in a general book on the philosophy of religion with a short, yet highly important, addition to the second criterion:

1. A religious life is a life that is meant to be lived as part of a community that defines itself around a system of ideas and/or practices.
2. To live a religious life requires propositional faith directed towards the fundamental principles of the system of ideas referred to in criterion 1 (or, at least to their

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<sup>17</sup> Miri Freud-Kandel, [Louis Jacobs and the Quest for a Contemporary Jewish Theology](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 122.

<sup>18</sup> Reviewed by me [here](#).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>20</sup> 258-259.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 250.

conjunction) and/or towards some set of propositions such that faith in them can warrant commitment to the practices referred to in criterion 1.

3. To live a religious life requires imaginative engagement...with the canonical narratives, metaphors, prescribed games of make-belief persons, and/or perspectives of that system of ideas and/or practices.<sup>22</sup>

The second version of criterion 2 implies that religiosity is legitimate not only if it is based on accepting the religion's propositions as presented internally, but also if it is based on different internal justifications to align with that religion. One may understand this as allowing for orthopraxy as long as the person engaging in it legitimately wants to sign-on to the community.

A deeply profound articulation of this can be found in the words of Rabbi Shai Held, quoted here in full:

Not long ago, an interviewer who considers himself an atheist asked me what I thought about people finding my interpretations of the Jewish tradition compelling but not subscribing to my theological assumptions or commitments. I responded by saying that although

such reinterpretations would not likely ever be my own, I respect the fact that we live in a world that is fundamentally ambiguous, and that we can have no absolute certainty about how the world ultimately is. In my view, there are good reasons for belief and good reasons for unbelief. If readers who do not believe, or who believe differently, can find nourishment or inspiration in what I've written, if they can feel challenged or prodded by the interpretations that I offer, I will feel only gratitude.

Let me take this one step further. I do not think of believers and nonbelievers as "us" and "them." Belief and nonbelief are both part of us, and to be totally honest, they are both part of me. When I talk about a God who loves and cares about the dignity of every human being, I am aware that there are readers who will wonder, How on earth can anyone still believe that? I am aware not least because I too hear those voices, both in my heart and in my head. In this day and age, I think, a theologian has to be able to imagine secularity from the inside. In ways I sometimes wish

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<sup>22</sup> Samuel Lebens, *Philosophy of Religion: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 22-23. Emphasis added.

that I didn't, I imagine that secularity every day.

How can I write theology when I am beset with doubt? I often think of a wonderful story told about the Hasidic master Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (1787-1859). A student approaches the rebbe and says, "Rebbe, I am not sure there is a God," to which the rebbe responds, "What do you care?" Perplexed, the student replies, "What do you mean, what do I care? If there is no God, then the Torah doesn't matter." The Kotzker replies, again: "What do you care?" Frustrated, indignant, the student begins to yell: "If there is no God and the Torah doesn't matter, then I have no idea what the purpose of my life is! *Of course I care!*" To which the Kotzker responds, "You care that much? You are a kosher Jew." I wrestle with and write about theology because I care about it to the depths of my being, because questions about who and what God is, and about what it means to be a Jew and a human being in the twenty-first century matter to me like almost nothing else does. I care – I want God to be. And for me

faith is at least as much about

possibility as it is about certainty.<sup>23</sup>

Zarum's redefinition of belief as signing on to the Jewish mission through "faithfulness, trust, steadfastness, citizenship, loyalty, integrity, and a determination that goes back to antiquity" rather than accepting or rejecting particular propositions, then, finds itself in good company, and his overall project will no-doubt find itself highly impactful on those who need it. The explicit allowance for continued questioning and doubt as part of the religious experience does much to separate this book from other recent projects in Orthodox apologetics. Zarum's approach may open him to more criticism from the mainstream than others, but it also allows his work to be taken more seriously amongst those who need it. Whether this trade-off is worthwhile is a question best directed towards him.

The Psychologist Ray Hyman wrote that statisticians often mention two types of errors that can occur in experimentation. A *Type I Error* "is that involved in saying that an effect is really so when, in fact, only chance was operating," while *Type II Errors* "were those involved in *not* finding something that is really there."<sup>24</sup> He goes on to propose the existence of *Type III Errors*, which are "involved in wrongly believing you understand the basis for the opposition to your position," and *Type IV Errors*, which involve "oversimplifying what is an enormously complex

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<sup>23</sup> Shai Held, [\*Judaism is About Love: Recovering the Heart of Jewish Life\*](#) (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2024), 15-16.

<sup>24</sup> Ray Hyman, [\*The Elusive Quarry: A Scientific Appraisal of Psychical Research\*](#) (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989), 422.



situation.”<sup>25</sup> Rabbi Zarum’s book, as refreshingly out-of-the-box as it is, ensures that wherever his readers’ quests take them, they will certainly be immune from such errors in their thinking, and that is a tremendous gift.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 423.