# A Proof of Exodus[*]

## Yehuda HaLevy and Jonathan Edwards Walk into a Bar

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## 1. A Jewish Proof

I'm going to prove that the miracles of the exodus happened. Some of you already believe as much. You picked up a volume on Jewish philosophy. Much more interesting if you believe the religion is true. But imagine this: trying to convince *skeptics* that the ten plagues, the splitting of the sea, and the revelation to the Israelites at Mount Sinai happened. *That's* what I'm up to.

You, dear skeptics, will think the proof the dumbest thing you've ever seen. You, dear believers, will too. At first. You'll think I'm telling the skeptic to believe in miracles just because everyone else believes they happened. Or just because the Bible says they happened. Either way, pretty dumb. Did I miss the class on *argumentum ad populum or petitio principii*? I wouldn't put such moves past me. I promise it's not what I'm up to here.

Strictly speaking, nothing outside mathematics and such like can be *proved*. We're not speaking strictly. We'll discover *evidence*. I hope you'll be convinced by the end. Convincing a philosopher of anything is harder than splitting the sea. Certainly for me. Probably for God too. I should be satisfied if you come away thinking it all not the dumbest thing ever. Of course, I've lost half the audience already. But for those willing to read on, I plead for patience: get to the end before giving up on me.

The Jewish tradition does not advertise much natural theology, though it's not averse to it. There were medieval Jewish natural theologians: Saadya, Maimonides, Crescas, et al. But there's nothing as impressive *as such* as Thomas Aquinas or Richard Swinburne. The rabbis don't care much for the business. They prefer to rely on testimony. A talkative lot. The Torah itself insists on testimony about the miracles of the exodus and revelation at Sinai. Try on Deuteronomy 4:32–43 for size:

[*] Forthcoming in S. Lebens, D. Rabinowitz and A. Segal (Eds.), *Jewish Thought in the Age of Analytic Philosophy: New Essays in the Philosophy of Judaism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

> For please ask . . . whether there has been anything like this great thing or heard like it: Has a nation heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire, as you heard, and lived? Or has God tried to take himself a nation from the midst of a nation, with trials, with signs, and with wonders, and with war, and with a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terrors, like everything the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?

Or Exodus 13:7–10:

> Unleavened bread will be eaten throughout the seven days . . . You will tell your son on that day, saying: "This is because of what the Lord did for me when I went out of Egypt". It must be a sign for you on your hand and a memorial between your eyes, so that God's law will be in your mouth, for with a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt. You must observe this rule in its season forever.

Ask about it. Tell about it. The festivals and the sabbath are reminders of the exodus. The phylacteries and the redemption of the first born too. To say that the entirety of Jewish religious teaching and practice is about relaying and receiving the testimony would be an exaggeration. But almost all of it is.

The testimony also makes for some natural theology, albeit less abstract than the ontological, cosmological, or even design arguments. The testimony is *evidence* for the miracles of the exodus. The proof is especially Jewish: supported by and supporting the central Jewish narrative. No circularity. Best served with matzo balls. But it's not the only Jewish proof: there's also the unlikely survival of the Jews, their disproportionate contribution to ideals, the unlikely fulfilment of prophecies, etc.—a cumulative case (see Gottlieb 2017).

## 2. The Kuzari Principle

We know a lot on the basis of testimony. If you never visited Napoleon, then you should believe about him on the basis of testimony: of course, there was a Napoleon. All this makes sense so long as testimony should usually be believed. But, believe me, testimony should not always be believed. I drive a Ferrari. QED. We shouldn't believe just anything on the basis of testimony either. If your neighbor reports his visit to Napoleon, keep your kids close. A *Principle of Testimony* (POT) close enough to the truth then: Testimony should usually be believed, except in special circumstances.

Special circumstances are sundry enough. You already know that Napoleon is long dead. Your neighbor smells of something. And it isn't France. Something like POT is widely enough diffused by philosophers, for whatever their testimony is worth. Applied to our case POT gives us: we should believe testimony about the miracles of the exodus, unless we have special reason not to. This doesn't get us far. You, dear skeptics, will have sundry reasons not to. But I'm planting a seed.

Now that you've been softened towards testimony generally, I work my way to another principle about testimony. Enter Saadya Gaon (ninth–tenth century)—Jewish philosopher and head of a rabbinical academy in Babylonia. He presents a quick argument for the miracle of the manna:

> Now it is not likely that the forbears of the children of Israel should have been in agreement upon this matter if they had considered it a lie. Such [proof] suffices, then, as the requisite of every authentic tradition. Besides, if they had told their children: "We lived in the wilderness for forty years eating naught except manna," and there had been no basis for that in fact, their children would have answered them: "Now you are telling us a lie. Thou, so and so, is not this thy field, and thou, so and so, is not this thy garden from which you have always derived your sustenance?" This is, then, something that the children would not have accepted by any manner of means. (Saadia Gaon 1948: 30)

I couldn't convince you that your father grew up on meringues baked and delivered by Dwight Eisenhower. Even if dad was the strong and quiet type, he'd have told you *that*. Harder yet to

convince everyone in the neighborhood that *their* parents enjoyed a daily visit from Eisenhower.

But how about more distant ancestors? Your great-great-great- . . . grandfather grew up on meringues baked and delivered by Pope Boniface IX. You don't believe me. How could I know such things? The rest of the neighborhood won't believe me about their ancestors. Even so, it's not as if you'd have heard about it either way. The Pope's kindness might easily be forgotten after a few generations. I'd have at least more of a chance at convincing you. And what if you and your neighbors were extremely gullible?

Weren't the ancient Israelites extremely gullible? Some fraudster spins a wild tale about their *parents*. The Israelites, however gullible, just won't bite. If it really happened to their own parents, they'd have heard of it before. But what if he told them a tale about their quite distant ancestors? Gullibility increases with distance.

Enter Yehuda HaLevi (eleventh–twelfth century)—Jewish philosopher and poet in Spain. He sets up the same line of reasoning, along with an answer to the question about distance. In his dialogue book, a king is trying to find himself, and summons religious representatives. He ends up particularly puzzled about the rabbi's statement of faith: "I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles" (HaLevi 1964: 44).

Why the God of Abraham rather than the God of the philosophers? Why jump into the exodus rather than a more abstract apologetic? Isn't it more impressive to introduce the first cause of the universe, instead of the deity of some shepherds? The rabbi answers that national continuous testimony is better than abstract theological reasoning: "fitting for the whole of Israel who knew these things, first from personal experience, and afterwards *through uninterrupted* tradition, which is equal to the former" (1964: 44). But we needn't insist that tradition is *equal* to personal experience. We could do with less.

The rabbi applies the general point to establish the credibility of Jewish chronology, which the king enthusiastically agrees to. Much better than "Yes, Socrates":

> An arrangement of this kind [i.e., continuous nationwide testimony of miraculous interventions] removes any suspicion of untruth or common plot. Not ten people could discuss [i.e. make up] such a thing without disagreeing,

> and disclosing their secret understanding [i.e. letting slip their plot]; nor could they refute any one who tried to establish the truth of a matter like this. How is it possible where such a mass of people is concerned? Finally, the period involved is not large enough to admit untruth and fiction. (HaLevi 1964: 49–50)

The last point about the distance of time is reiterated by the rabbi about national events more generally: "Is it likely that any one could to-day invent false statements concerning the origin, history, and languages of well-known nations, the latter being less than five hundred years old?" If you want to sell a tale about all the ancestors of even the most gullible people, you'd better set it in the very distant past.

As it turns out, some skeptical scholars insist that the Torah reached its final form around the fifth century BCE, quite long after the exodus would have occurred. The evidence for this is weak, at least in my amateur opinion. Still, even the skeptical scholars grant that the miracle stories were floating around long before—well within HaLevi's five-hundred-year limit of the events described. Some put the Song of the Sea in the twelfth century—near contemporaneous with the events described (see Russell 2009: 142–5; and see e.g. Kitchen 2003 for evidence putting much of the authorship earlier). If you agree that the Torah was around during the twelfth century BCE, then the game's over.

We can circumvent debates about how close to the alleged events the Israelites accepted their records. I needn't insist on any particular date. What really matters is whether they would *not* have heard about the miracles of the exodus one way or the other. Enter Dovid Gottieb (currently quite with us)—formerly philosophy professor and mathematical logician at Johns Hopkins. Not likely to commit elementary fallacies.

Gottlieb distills the argument around the *Kuzari Principle*, named after HaLevi's dialogue. He states it on one foot: "National Experiential Traditions are true" (Gottlieb 2017: 144). A National Experiential Tradition is:

1. a tradition accepted by a nation about its own history;
2. a tradition that describes a national experience (of a previous generation of that nation);

3. a national experience that would be expected to create a national memory that would continue until the time when the tradition is in place" (Gottlieb 2017: 144).

Distilled into one sentence:

> The Kuzari Principle: A tradition is true if it is (1) accepted by a nation; and describes (2) a national experience of a previous generation of that nation; and (3) the national experience would be expected to create a continuous national memory until the tradition is in place.

You can recite it standing on one foot too. Better you do, and keep practicing. Because if you lose sight of any of the conditions, the argument flops. If you keep them in sight, the objections dissipate.

In condition (1), by a *nation* we need not mean absolutely *everyone*. After all, some don't believe any pre-medieval history. Maybe we don't even need a majority: a nation might believe something even if only a minority of its citizens do (compare Lackey 2016). But a majority will do. In condition (2), by an *experience* we mean an alleged experience. We are not beginning by assuming that the experience really happened, but arguing to it. In condition (3), by a *national memory* we mean a report of the alleged event on a wide enough scale.

For safety's sake, we need not be quite so absolute as the principle. We can convince some of the people some of the time of just about anything. Maybe we can even convince all of the people. We should insert a *likely*: "A tradition is *likely* true if . . ." We should also insert an *absent evidence to the contrary*: "A tradition is likely true, absent evidence to the contrary if . . ." More play with the principle below. Convincing skeptics that the miracles of the exodus are *likely* true—or even likely true *absent evidence to the contrary*—will be more than enough for the time being.

Applied: the principle tells us that e.g. the National Experiential Tradition of the American Civil War is likely true, absent evidence to the contrary, since it (1) is accepted by the Americans about their own history; (2) describes a national experience of a previous generation of Americans; and (3) the experience would be expected to create a continuous

national memory. Whatever other evidence we might dig up about the Civil War, the tradition of it is evidence enough.

Applied to the case at hand: the principle tells us that the National Experiential Tradition of the miracles of the exodus is likely true, absent evidence to the contrary, since it (1) is accepted by the Jewish nation; (2) describes a national experience of a previous generation of Jews; and (3) the experience would be expected to create a national memory.

As for (1): 3000 years of historical evidence has the tradition as a central part of the Jewish narrative. The tradition was accepted by all Jews until just three centuries ago. It is accepted by all Orthodox Jews today. Under the influence of Spinoza and others, some *abandoned* it. But hardly because they weren't taught it.

As for (2): the tradition of the miracles of the exodus is about the Jews' own history. Jews today are descendants of the tribes of Judah and Levi, et al., which were among the Israelite tribes that supposedly witnessed the miracles. Converts joined along the way to become co-nationals. In fact, HaLevi's dialogue is about the conversion of the Khazar king and his subjects (though the extent of the conversion is disputed by historians and geneticists; see Stampfer 2013). In any case, converts didn't bring the tradition to the Jews—but *vice versa*.

As for (3): the experiences of the miracles of the exodus would have created a national memory because they would have caused "an immediate sweeping change in the beliefs and behavior of the people" (Gottlieb 2017: 160). The revelation also reports that it must and will be transmitted so as to never have been forgotten (see e.g. Deuteronomy 4:9–11, 31:9–13): "How are we to imagine accepting belief in a story that says that it will not be forgotten, at a time when the story is unknown?" (Gottlieb 2017: 180).

So the Kuzari Principle tells us that the National Experiential Tradition of the miracles of the exodus is likely true. The line of reasoning from the Kuzari Principle is the *Kuzari Argument*. But the Kuzari Argument is only as strong as the principle. Is there any reason for believing the Kuzari Principle?

Again, if Dwight Eisenhower baked meringues for your dad, how come you never heard of it? And how come the Australians never heard that their ancestors all arrived 500 years ago by swimming from Durban to Perth? Pressing questions. Here's some speculative projection onto ancient psychology. Ancient Israelites would protest a teller of such tall tales: "If God performed these miracles in front of all our ancestors, wouldn't we have heard of it?" Still, the ancient Israelites might not have been so much like us. Ancient psychology is a risky

business. It certainly wouldn't bring home the bacon in ancient Israel—though it probably would've paid the bills better than ancient philosophy.

The real force of the Kuzari Principle is that it gives all the right verdicts, and no wrong verdicts—so far as we can otherwise tell. It's serviceable. Substitute into it: Mohammed's conquests of Arabia, the American Civil War, the Allied victory of World War II. These traditions satisfy the three conditions. And they *are* likely true. Contrast: Florence Nightingale's conquest of China, the Australian Civil War, the Axis victory of World War II. The principle does not give us the wrong verdicts on these. Gottlieb summarizes:

> The Kuzari Principle describes what people actually do when they decide what to believe. It is an assertion about how people behave in the real world. The only way to find decisive evidence for the Kuzari Principle is to survey the beliefs that people have actually held and see that it holds true. This includes finding National Experiential Traditions that are known to be true. The only way to find evidence against the Kuzari Principle is to find real cases in human history of people whose beliefs violate it. If we find many National Experiential Traditions that are true, and no National Experiential Traditions that are false, then we have decisive evidence that the Kuzari Principle is true. (Gottlieb 2017: 165; non-italics not in original)

We can settle with less than decisive evidence. An extensive survey of mythology, especially from ancient times—the same milieu of the Jewish tradition—turns up no counterexample to the Kuzari Principle (see Gottlieb 2017: 248–83). The myths violate the conditions insofar as they variously describe events that did not happen to the entire nation, happened to another nation, would not have created national experiences, would not have created national memories, or were not even believed by any nation. The most tricky case not addressed by Gottlieb is from the Lotus Sutra. More on this alleged counterexample below.

## 3. Preaching to Another Choir

The same kind of argument is defended by early modern Christian theologians too, even while they would likely never have read Saadya or HaLevi. Great minds think alike! Enter Charles Leslie (seventeenth–eighteenth century)—Anglican theologian and polemicist. He first lays down four conditions to test historical claims, and then he shows that the miracles of the exodus satisfy the conditions:

> 1st. That the matters of fact be such as that men's outward senses, their eyes and ears, may be judges of it. 2nd. That it be done publickly, in the face of the world. 3rd. That not only publick monuments be kept up in memory of it, but some outward actions to be performed. 4th. That such monuments, and such actions or observances, be instituted, and do commence from the time that the matter of fact was done. (Leslie, 1841: 5–6)

The conditions refer to both history and practice. The first two conditions rule out a fraudster selling a tale to an audience about what they would have personally experienced. Applied to the case at hand: No fraudster is likely to convince the Israelites that the sea split for them yesterday. The next two conditions rule out the fraudster selling tales about the distant past, since the audience will dispute the existence or meaning of the monuments and observances said to have continued uninterrupted. For example, a fraudster won't convince us that for the last thousand years everyone had "a joint in his little a finger" (Leslie 1841: 7) amputated in memory of some event. We'd just take a look at our fingers. Easier than Moore.

Applied to the case at hand: the fraudster would not have successfully sold the Torah to a later generation of Israelites because the Torah describes itself as the law of the land, and the audience would have discovered no such thing: just as no fraudster could "invent a book of statutes or acts of parliament for England, and make it pass upon the nation, as the only book of statutes that ever they had known", so too no fraudster could "have persuaded the Jews, that they had owned and acknowledged [the Torah], all along from the days of Moses" (Leslie 1841: 9–10). Convincing a nation to adopt a long-lost history or a new code of law would be hard enough; convincing a nation to adopt history and laws that are supposed to have been long-preserved is even harder.

The Torah further contains historical rationales for the laws and historical institutions, especially about the festivals, Sabbath, temple services, and priestly paraphernalia. The fraudster could not have convinced the Israelites that they and their ancestors had all observed such and other things:

> [W]as it possible to have persuaded a whole nation of men, that they had known and practised all these things, if they had not done it? or, secondly, to have received a book for truth, which said they had practised them, and appealed to that practice? (Leslie 1841: 12)

The critic might object that the laws and institutions were already in place, but that the fraudster conferred a new religious meaning on them: for example, that the Israelites already refrained from leaven over a week, but the fraudster convinced them that the practice was in memory of the exodus. Groundless speculation straining credulity. First, because some of these laws are *fitting* just to their purported history: the Israelites refrain from leaven one week since their leaven had no time to rise as they hurried from Egypt, they reside in booths one week since they resided in booths in the desert, etc. Second, because imbuing so many laws with new religious meaning would have been very tricky, or—to use Leslie's preferred term—*impossible*. Not strictly. But close enough. To illustrate:

> [S]uppose I should now forge some romantic story of strange things done a thousand years ago; and in confirmation of this, should endeavour to persuade the Christian world that they had all along, from that day to this, kept the first day of the week, in memory of such an hero, an Appollonius, a Barcosbas, or a Mahomet; and had all been baptized in his name; and swore by his name, and upon that very book, (which I had then forged, and which they never saw before,) in their public judicatures; that this book was their gospel and law, which they had ever since that time, these thousand years past, universally received and owned, and none other. (Leslie 1841: 13)

Similarly, imbuing monuments with new religious meaning would have been impossible. Leslie illustrates with the mysterious Stonehenge:

> [S]uppose I should write a book to-morrow, and tell there, that these stones were set up by Hercules, Polyphemus, or Garagantua, in memory of such and such of their actions. And for a further confirmation of this, should say in this book, that it was wrote at the time when such actions were done, and by the very actors themselves, or eye-witnesses; and that this book had been received as truth and quoted by authors of the greatest reputation in all ages since. Moreover, that this book was well known in England, and enjoined by act of parliament to be taught our children, and that we did teach it to our children, and had been taught it ourselves when we were children. (Leslie 1841: 13–14)

Such a fraudster would sooner be "sent to Bedlam" (1841: 14) than believed. Leslie draws the same moral about the memorial stones set up by Joshua at Gilgal (Joshua 4:6–9; compare Joshua 8:30–2). A fraudster could not have succeeded here.

Leslie further argues that the reasoning should convince Jews about the miracles of the Gospels as much as the miracles of the exodus. His four conditions are supposed to apply similarly to support Christianity, but not Islam or any other religions (see Leslie 1841: 20–1). However, his treatment of Gospel miracles is much shorter, and not nearly as convincing. The Christian miracles described are not nearly as public—and not at all *public* in the sense of *national* at work throughout his argument for the exodus, or in condition 1 of the Kuzari Principle (see Gottlieb 2017: 153, n. 5). The Gospel miracles don't satisfy the other conditions of the Kuzari Principle either. Here is not the place for a disputation between Judaism and Christianity though; I hardly want a bar fight.

Leslie is not the only Christian theologian to invoke a kind of Kuzari Argument. Enter Jonathan Edwards (eighteenth century)—American revivalist preacher and theologian. His philosophical works display a genius and style rivalling any of his contemporaries; had he written more philosophy, he might have surpassed even Hume or Leibniz. But, hell, he had other priorities. Yet he leaves us a scrappy but useful manuscript on the antiquity and Mosaic

authorship of the Torah—by which he likely means *written* by Moses at the *dictation* of God (see Edwards 1743; also compare Edwards 1722). That's the Orthodox Jewish view, or close enough.

Whatever his precise views, he includes an argument against a fraudster selling the Torah to the Israelites. That's unlikely since:

> If any would palm this book containing the laws and history of facts, they must make the people believe that they always had those laws and this account of facts among them, and all those things in their state dependent on the laws and facts from the beginning, though the senses of the whole nation would contradict it, and all would know that it was now new, and that they never had heard of it before. (Edwards 1743)

Just as Leslie emphasizes both legal practice and historical testimony, Edwards writes of both "laws and facts." We can distill two points—naturally enough, one about laws and one about facts. The point about facts: the fraudster would have had a really hard time fabricating a National Experiential Tradition. Edwards first lists some general considerations about what makes forgery more or less likely to succeed:

> A forgery of a great and wonderful fact pretended to be in SIGHT of a WHOLE NATION, every man, woman and child in it, is more easily detected than what is pretended to be seen only by a few; and a forgery published among that very nation, before whom the fact is pretended to be done, is more likely to be detected than that which was pretended to be before some other nation; and a forgery of such a fact pretended to be done on the spot where the forgery is first published, or in places in view, is more easily detected than of a fact pretended to be in some remote corner. (Edwards 1743)

Edwards captures here, as elsewhere, just the kind of conditions listed in the Kuzari Principle: that the testimony be accepted by the nation about their own national experiences that are likely to have created a continuous memory. He then applies the conditions to the case at

hand—with the addition of some useful details. For example, Edwards adds this point about the manna:

> [F]orgers of the history would not be likely to put into it such things as would be likely to lead people to suspect the truth . . . such precepts as those, where they were commanded to lay up a part of their manna to be kept for their generations, that their posterity might see what bread their forefathers lived upon in the wilderness [see Exodus 16:33]; which naturally, whenever the history first came abroad, would excite such inquiries as these: Where is this pot of manna? what is become of it? how came it to be lost? (Edwards 1743)

Of course, the fraudster could make up stories, but he'd be setting himself up for more work. Like Leslie, Edwards notes the trickiness about monuments in particular: "One of the laws of Moses was to set up great stones as an altar in the land of Canaan, and engrave the words of the Law very plainly, Deuteronomy 27:1, Deuteronomy 27:8; which we have an account of the fulfillment of, in Joshua 8: 30–32" (1743). A pot is as easy to discover as to misplace; great stone monuments—not so much. A fraudster could set up the monuments and spin some tale about why no one ever noticed them before, or if he chooses to do without the monuments, he could spin some tale about their removal. Either way, he's setting himself up for more work, and more *risky* work: maybe his audience just won't buy it.

Another addition: the tradition is in part insulting towards the Israelites. The Torah recounts in detail "the faults of the whole nation, excepting a very few": the patriarchs and the Israelites—even Moses—sin, and the punishments are severe. Edwards summarizes:

> The behavior of the children of Israel in Egypt and the wilderness, is represented as in the highest degree vile and odious, foolish, childish, as well as monstrously unreasonable and wicked. They are set forth as worse than other people, often stigmatized as a stiff-necked people. (Edwards 1743)

Shaming the ancestors of the audience seems to run yet another risk. You don't usually sell a product by insulting your customer. It may be better to flatter. Was ancient psychology really

*so* different? They likely thought more of their ancestors than moderns do. The Greeks and Romans said they descended from gods. *That's* the way to go.

The most significant addition to the argument from Leslie and Edwards is their focus on laws. The fraudster would have a hard time fabricating a tradition about laws. Getting any law in place is hard enough. *These* laws would be even harder. Leslie emphasizes their number and fit with the narrative; Edwards their related universality, difficulty, and severity.

As for universality, the laws govern every aspect of Israelite life. According to the rabbinic enumerations, the Torah includes 613 commandments and prohibitions governing absolutely every aspect of personal as well as national life: clothing, food, sex, labor, housing, worship, war. As for difficulty, the laws are restrictive and costly: prohibiting certain clothing, certain foods, sex for a period each month, work one day every week, and a complete cessation of agriculture one year of every seven—for an agrarian society. As for strictness, the laws are enforced with various punishments, commercial, corporal, and capital.

The relevance of laws hasn't fallen beneath the Jewish radar. Enter Ezra Zuckerman-Sivan (currently quite with us). You can't do better on such a topic than an economic sociologist at MIT. If the arguments don't convince you, then the credentials should. I'm trying everything I can here. *Argumentum ad verecundium* is at least better than *argumentum ad populum* and *petitio principii*. It's certainly better than *argumentum ad baculum*, but you're warned to be careful with your criticisms.

Zuckerman-Sivan formulates the problem specifically about the Jewish week—a novel innovation not connected with any natural cycle (ms; see Zerubavel 1985). He identifies seven connected problems the fraudster would face in trying to convince the Israelites to adopt the seventh day, including creating, coordinating, and maintaining the timing and rules among geographically disparate communities who have every economic incentive to reject the timing and rules, given the impact on productivity. I can't do justice to the trickiness of every aspect of this, and so I won't. Yet the problems dissipate if the Israelites were all commanded in the Sabbath in a national theophany after the miracles of the exodus. There'd be no problems of coordination and motivation.

The skeptical side has a hard time making sense of the adoption of the Sabbath; the religious side does not. That counts in favor of the religious side. The Torah insists that the Sabbath is "a sign between me and you throughout your generations to know that I the Lord sanctify you" (Exodus 31:13). Zuckerman-Sivan takes the Torah to address the skeptic directly:

> You could not have done this on your own! You could not have overcome the coordination problems, the communication and commitment problems, the social dilemma, and the fact that no one could have appreciated the Shabbat before experiencing it, and thereby got the Jewish week off the ground, to initiate and institutionalize it. But look and what do you see? The Shabbat is observed! . . . And this leaves only one possibility: God, Creator of the world, intervened in history to make this happen. (Zuckerman-Sivan ms; non-italics not in original)

Leslie and Edward's focus is on the fit between the content of the laws and the context of the historical narrative. Zuckerman-Sivan's response is a little different: economics and sociology restrict the practices likely to take hold naturally.

The coordination problem can be treated alone or connected to the Kuzari Principle. The connection is natural enough for Edwards to treat them together. The Kuzari Principle is about what people will *believe*, the point now is about what people will *practice*.

We can jumble all this together by adding conditions to the principle:

> Jumbled Kuzari Principle: A tradition is likely true if it is (1) accepted by a nation; describes (2) a national experience of a previous generation of that nation; which (3) would be expected to create a continuous national memory until the tradition is in place; is (4) insulting to that nation; and (5) makes universal, difficult and severe demands on that nation; etc.

So far as speculative psychological projection goes, this principle is even more plausible than the previous, and so far as precedent goes, there are no counterexamples. Just imagine trying to convince the Nepalese that 300 years ago Napoleon visited their country for fifty years, and that everything he touched turned into gold. And also that: most everyone he visited tried to molest him, and so he put a curse on them—their enemies will enslave them unless they fast once a week, and tell the story to their children every day. And that they did tell the story

to their children every day. It's not going to happen. The Nepalese *would not* believe this unless it happened.

Now imagine adding such aspects to the Jewish tradition: that e.g. God commanded them to give up work one day every week, to give up agricultural work one of every seven years, not to eat many foods, to refrain from physical contact with spouses for a period every month, that they must constantly retell the tradition and make literary and symbolic reminders of it, and that they did do this continuously, etc. What is the relevant difference between this story and the previous one? Nothing. Except that it happened. The Israelites did believe this. They would not have believed this unless it happened.

Saadya, HaLevi, Gottlieb, Leslie, Edwards, Zuckerman-Sivan—this chapter might have been a bit too ambitious. And there are *many* more scriptural and philosophical details strengthening the argument—especially in the last four authors listed. They're each profound and entertaining reads—recommended to readers who have reached this far. But your objections might be running out of patience.

## 4. Objections and Replies

Some objections are silly; careful readers will immediately see that they have already been accounted for. But there's only so much time in the day—not enough for everyone to read carefully. So quick responses to silly objections might be instructive. Some objections are not silly though; I respond to more serious objections, especially from Yehuda Gellman—another *Rabbi Yehuda*, but who does not invest as much in the Kuzari Argument as his namesake does.

**Objection 1**: Nigel. Nigel believes Florence Nightingale conquered Australia for the Axis. You'll overhear similar things at the asylum, or a meeting of the American Philosophical Association. Contrary to the Kuzari Principle, some will believe just about anything.

Answer: check condition 1. Nigel does not a nation make.

**Objection 2**: Holocaust deniers. Besides a few white supremacists in the West, *millions* motivated by anti-Semitism or anti-Zionism in the Middle East deny the holocaust, or blame the Jews for it, or deny it *and* blame the Jews for it.

Answer: check conditions 2 and 3. Holocaust deniers do not believe that the event happened in their *own* history or that it would have created a *national memory*—not least because they do not believe it happened at all. They don't ignore the absence of expected evidence, but instead deny the abundance of evidence (see Gottlieb 2017: 146–7, n. 100 for further reply).

**Objection 3**: *Ad populum.* The Kuzari Argument has us leap from popular belief in national experiential testimony to the truth of that belief. But lots of people believe false things—alien abductions, blood libels. The *Jewish* proponent of the argument might have noticed that there are far more Christians, Muslims, and atheists than there are Jews. So, if we should leap from popular belief at all, we should more quickly leap into Christianity or Islam—or into nothing at all.

Answer: check condition 2. Alien abductions and blood libels would not have been experienced by a nation, but are instead supposed to happen in the dark of night. More generally, the principle makes no leap from popular belief to truth, but a carefully choreographed waltz from a national tradition with special features.

**Objection 4**: *Petitio principii*. The Kuzari Argument relies on the tradition of the exodus and Sinai revelation, thus assuming that the narrative of Exodus is true, and assuming what it set out to prove: that the Torah is true, and that the miracles of the exodus happened.

Answer: the argument relies on the tradition of the exodus and Sinai revelation but does not assume at the outset that the tradition is true. The argument begins by pointing out that there is such a tradition—neutral on the truth or falsity of its content. Then it shows that the tradition is a National Experiential Tradition. Then it applies the Kuzari Principle to show that the tradition is true. No circularity.

**Objection 5**: Forgetfulness. Solomon Schimmel (2008: 36) objects: "the Bible itself says that there were periods when the Israelites were unaware of their own early history." He does not tell us what the problem is here, as elsewhere. *Presumably* the point is that the Bible tells us that the Israelites were unaware of National Experiential Traditions that were easily enough reintroduced. So, the Jewish tradition does not satisfy condition 3 of the Kuzari Principle, at least if the Bible is true. The tradition then is at odds with this argument for the tradition.

Where does the Bible tell us the Israelites were not aware of the exodus and Sinai? *Presumably* Schimmel has in mind the discovery recorded in 2 Kings 22–3. Go read that and return here.

*Presumably* then: The Jews were steeped in idolatry, and so were unaware of a national experiential tradition of the exodus, etc. After all, if they were aware of it they'd never have pursued idolatry—just like modern Jews aware of the tradition never assimilate! But the king convinces everyone to adopt the National Experiential Tradition easily enough. This interpretation usually takes the story to disclose the discovery or composition of Deuteronomy by Josiah's court.

First answer, courtesy of Gottlieb: The last *presumption* is not likely, since 2 Kings 22–3 does not take all the Israelites to be steeped in idolatry or to have lost the tradition: there is the "House of the Lord," "Huldah the Prophetess" by whom royal servants must "inquire of the Lord," and "the altar of the Lord in Jerusalem"—"the Lord" being the proper name for the God of Israel. Further, the Jews were aware of Deuteronomy: compare 2 Kings 14:6, 17:13, 18:4, and Deuteronomy 24:16, 18:21. An interpretation that *does* fit with the rest of the tradition: The Jews had not lost the tradition, but many had succumbed to *syncretism* (compare e.g. 1 Kings 6:1, 11:5, 18:21). A very old or otherwise impressive Torah scroll is discovered in the Temple (see Deuteronomy 21:36), and the prohibitions against idolatry are read to the king. This makes an impression, and he strictly imposes the prohibitions on all the Jews.

As straightforward as convincing. A second answer if you dither: how to interpret the story is not clear. Well, I think it's clear. But, if not clear, then we do not have a clear objection against the Kuzari Principle.

**Objection 6**: The Lotus Sutra. The Buddhist scripture reports miracles performed by the Buddha and witnessed by millions of witnesses: flowers rain from the skies, light emanates from the Buddha's head, illuminating the universe and beyond, etc. Indeed:

> The events recounted in this sutra are of such a spectacular magnitude as to make the Sinai story quite unimpressive by comparison. No other religion has ever made claims to miraculous cosmic events of such a grandiose degree . . .

> How could *any* Buddhist have come to believe these things happened if they really didn't? (Gellman 2016: 80)

Since we reject such reasoning about the narrative of the sutra, we should reject it about the exodus.

First answer: so far as I can tell, there's no need to reject the narrative of the sutra. Jews can accept that narrative, and Buddhists can accept the miracles of the exodus. For the counterexample to bite, we'd need to discover a contradiction between the National Experiential Traditions *and* that God would not allow such a contradiction. Or, if not a contradiction, at least some probabilistic tension. Gellman argues elsewhere that God need not tell the truth (see Gellman 1997: 97–9); by his lights, it wouldn't be beyond God to issue contradictory revelations.

Second answer: check condition 3. The Lotus Sutra tradition *wasn't* continuously transmitted or commemorated: "Mahayana tradition teaches that the Lotus Sutra was written at the time of Buddha, then hidden away for hundreds of years and brought to light only after that" (1997: 79). In contrast, the Jewish tradition teaches that it was passed down in an unbroken chain: "You will tell your children" (Exodus 13:8); "Ask you father and he will recount it to you; your elders and they will tell you" (Deuteronomy 32:7); etc.

Gellman doesn't think the Buddhist gap matters:

> When the Lotus Sutra was rediscovered, if people had not known about it already, they would never have believed a word of it. Vast numbers of Buddhists would not have believed the historical truth of this text without a very good explanation for why they had never heard of its contents, if true. No such explanation has been recorded, and it is hard to see what would be such an explanation. (Gellman 2016: 80)

But the difference on condition 3 does matter. The Jewish tradition insists that it was continuously commemorated and transmitted. Thus, there should always have been witnesses to the original events *or* to the transmission of the narrative—which will make a

fabrication harder to get away with. In contrast, the Buddhist tradition reports a gap of hundreds of years. A gap gives gullibility a foothold. The Jewish tradition has no gap.

Whether the Buddhists would have accepted reports of a national experience without a national memory depends, in part, on whether they would have expected the events to produce a national memory. Would light from the Buddha's head or flowers raining from the sky have been witnessed beyond the locale? Could the witnesses have known how far the events extended? Would the events have been remembered after hundreds of years? Hard questions.

Third answer: one counterexample is not so bad. Never draw to an inside straight—a fine principle, even if someone draws to an inside straight and wins. The Kuzari Principle can still be a guiding principle, even after a counterexample. Even after one-and-a-half counterexamples. So long as there are no more, a National Experiential Tradition is still evidence of truth.

Exercise: How does the alleged counterexample fair against the Jumbled Kuzari Principle?

**Objection 7**: Partiality. The argument applies only to the Exodus miracles since the tradition about them is a National Experiential Tradition. But the less spectacular events in the Torah are not:

> Genealogies and etymologies in the Bible could have been added at a later time, along with such details as the names of Esau's wives, place-names where Abraham wondered, how many days a plague lasted, . . . and so on for many other small details. The populace would not be in a position to claim that had those details been true, they would have known about them. (Gellman 2016: 77)

Two answers. The first is concessive: if the argument proves only that the miracles of the exodus happened, that would still be impressive. Compare: theistic arguments usually prove only this or that divine attribute, if they prove anything at all. Cosmological arguments would prove a first cause. But is the first cause also intelligent? Design arguments would prove an intelligence. But is the intelligence also the first cause? Stock objections. Nevertheless if either argument shows *anything*, that's impressive.

Second answer: proving the Exodus miracles confirms the other details too. Compare: theism—all the attributes—*is* confirmed by evidence of a first cause, or by evidence of design, if such evidence is more to be expected given theism than otherwise (compare Swinburne 2004). Similarly, the truth of the Torah—all the details—is confirmed by the evidence of the National Experiential Tradition, because such evidence is more to be expected given the truth of the Torah (compare Gottlieb 2017: 188).

Anyhow, the big miracles are what need the most evidence. Place names and minor details require less evidence—since they're anyway more credible. What would be the point of anyone subsequently adding or changing e.g. the place names of Abraham's journey? The addition of a prohibition against tampering with the Torah (Deuteronomy 13:1) would have been an audacious touch.

**Objection 8**: Exclusivity. The Kuzari Argument is not exclusively Jewish. Christians can adopt it. They accept the Exodus narrative, though less centrally. It doesn't support Judaism over Christianity.

Answer: Christians can like matzo ball soup too. It's hardly a problem with the argument—with *any* argument —that it convinces Christians. Still, there's the objection that the argument is useless for *particularly* Jewish apologetics:

> If the Kuzari Argument is to be a defense of Judaism in today's world, its advocates seriously have to address important contemporary defenses of Christianity by such people as Richard Swinburne and William Craig. It is not enough to point out difficulties with Christianity, here and there. To my knowledge this has yet to be done in a satisfactory way. (Gellman 2016: 77, n. 3)

Joseph Albo (fourteenth–fifteenth century) makes a case for Judaism over Christianity on the basis of the same evidence as the Kuzari Argument: since Judaism is founded on the Exodus miracles and Sinai revelation, no religion could supersede Judaism without miracles and revelation of similar national publicity—which Christianity doesn't advertise (compare Lebens forthcoming: ch. 7; also see Gottlieb 2017: 152–3, n. 105, appendix I). But there's only so much time in a day. It will be enough to convince skeptics of the exodus—or at least that the

argument isn't all that bad. To convince them to then convert to Judaism rather than Christianity will take a little longer: I'm guessing another whole essay.

**Objection 9**: Speculation. Gellman sketches *seven* scenarios to show how a National Experiential Tradition could easily enough have been false (see Gellman 2016: 81–7). The first four scenarios illustrate a *partial* fabrication. In each, a small band of a thousand people escape slavery. Then their charismatic leader:

> Scenario 1: inspires a deep spiritual experience in the band, and informs them, as sincerely as mistakenly, that God was appearing to them.
> Scenario 2: takes advantage of a lightning storm, convincing the band that God was appearing to them.
> Scenario 3: stages a revelation with secret accomplices, lighting fires and banging drums to fool the band into thinking God was appearing to them.
> Scenario 4: slips the band hallucinogens, and then hypnotizes them into thinking that God was appearing to them.

They are overawed. They return to their families in slavery to recount their experience—embellishing it quite a bit too. Nobody wonders why there is no memory of the experiences: the band *does* remember; the rest should not expect to. But they are all delighted that God revealed himself to the band—and via them to the rest. Thus everyone applies the revelation to themselves, and passes it onto their descendants as such—just as converts and their descendants take the history of the Jews to be their own.

The next three scenarios illustrate a *complete* fabrication of a National Experiential Tradition, without any basis in memory whatsoever. In each, the nation is easily subject to authority, superstition, and wishful thinking:

> Scenario 5: They are suffering and despondent. Their revered leader teaches them how God chose to appear to them. The story excites and comforts them. So they make themselves believe it, and relay it enthusiastically to their descendants, who eventually embellish it by adding that their ancestors always believed it.

> Scenario 6: The leader has a dream in which God reveals how he appeared to the nation, and also commands the leader to tell them about it. The leader superstitiously believes the dream, and teaches the story to the nation. Since they revere the leader, they accept the story without question, and just assume there *must* be some reason or other the story was forgotten.
>
> Scenario 7: The nation have abandoned God for idol worship. A prophet rebukes them. He tells them how God appeared to their ancestors and commanded them to worship God alone. He explains how the events were forgotten in their turning to idolatry. He scares them with promises of punishment for further abandonment of God. In their fright they accept his stories.

Gellman's target is the Kuzari Principle, not the Exodus tradition; none of the scenarios is actually adopted by Gellman. He proposes merely "that there is nothing absurd, stupid, or implausible in thinking that something like them could have happened" (Gellman 2016: 81).

Two answers. First: Insofar as they're not *absurd* in the strict sense of *impossible*, the scenarios are neither here nor there. The Kuzari Principle is about the formation of belief in the actual world; mere possibilities are not relevant. The possibility of the scenarios would bear against the principle only if the conditions were not flagrantly violated *and* if the principle were stated as necessarily exceptionless. No such stipulation is made (see Gottlieb 2017: 173–6). The principle is a mere empirical generalization. Like the generalization that all cats like catnip. *Imagining* some cats that don't won't help. Better: look at actual cats. If you discover any that don't, you might reasonably settle with something less than a perfect generalization. And if you discover enough that don't, then you might reasonably doubt whether Tibbles will.

Second Answer: I wouldn't go as far as to say there's nothing implausible in the scenarios (compare Gottlieb 2017: 53–4, 179–80). Gottlieb argues that, if National Experiential Traditions arose naturalistically and gradually:

> There ought to be other cases where this process produced beliefs that clearly violate the Kuzari Principle—false beliefs in national events that would have created national traditions. While there are certainly many examples of the gradual principle regarding "small and not-particularly-memorable" events, if there are no such parallels regarding large-scale, national memorable events,

> then the believer in the gradual option is appealing to a hypothetical psychological process of which there are no known instances. That is clearly unreasonable. (Gottlieb 2017: 176)

But there are no parallels generally, and no precedent of National Experiential Traditions emerging in the way Gellman describes—even while others would have been no less subject to authority, superstition, and wishful thinking than the Israelites were, and even while others would have had incentive to create their own National Experiential Traditions to rival the Jewish tradition.

I await with due trepidation the criticism that I have not understood the complex dynamics of myth-formation or what-not. Off target. On target: real counterexamples showing that such dynamics produce false National Experiential Traditions. Better yet: real counterexamples against the Jumbled Kuzari Principle.

**Objection 10**: Counterevidence. Even if our little argument is some evidence for the Exodus miracles, there's much better evidence against. Biblical scholars and archeologists have proven the story a fabrication or something close enough. Thus:

> Maybe you believe that the Kuzari Argument in isolation makes the historical accuracy of the Torah *somewhat* more probable . . . Even were that so, when taken together with the total evidence, the increase in the *total* probability seems too small to matter. The Kuzari Argument in isolation has too little force to overcome the modern critical understanding. (Gellman 2016: 90)

The modern critical understanding includes e.g. documentary hypotheses about the later and multiple authorship of the Torah (see Baden 2012; also see Gellman 2016: 33–44 for a summary of the textual and archaeological evidence against the traditional view of the authorship of the Torah—and the rest of Gellman's book for an ingenious defense of Jewish tradition).

Two answers. First: I wanted to give some evidence, and I welcome any concession. But I'm in no mood for concessions myself. So second answer: the relevant parts of biblical scholarship are often based on the thinnest evidence and are sometimes even pseudo-

science. I don't know where to begin, and so I won't, but refer the interested reader to Joshua Berman (2017) and Umberto Cassuto (2006).

Gellman objects against apologists picking out alternative scholars who prove the historicity of the Torah: the apologists "are not in a position to judge whether the scholars they cite have indeed *succeeded* in proving their views, or even whether their argument is to be considered from a scholarly point of view" (Gellman 2016: 59). And citing e.g. Cassuto (2006) in support of the traditional view when he goes on to reject that view too? Hutzpah.

Two answers: First: we need not pick out scholars to prove the historicity of the Torah, but to show that the field is in disarray. Gellman recognizes as much, and criticizes Mordechai Breuer, an Orthodox biblical scholar, for depending on the documentary hypothesis. Second: amateurs are entitled to verdicts about biblical scholarship. It's not the Langlands program. We can easily enough follow and endorse Cassutto's objections against skeptics, even while we can easily enough follow and not endorse his own skepticism. While I don't care much for credentials generally, philosophical credentials should be flaunted. After all, the academic job market in philosophy is a disaster. And, more to the point, philosophers might be *better* placed to assess a subject than those ensconced in it; philosophers of science will be in the best position to distinguish science from pseudo-science.

A more philosophical point against documentary hypotheses—close historical and textual analysis bypassed—makes relevant the *Relevance Criterion*. Roughly: evidence supports one theory over another just in case the evidence is likelier given the one theory than given the other (see Mackie 1969—cited just for the sake of hutzpah; but the application is Gottlieb's). Grant *just* for the sake of argument: diverse textual styles, etc., support documentary hypotheses over the Mosaic hypothesis. Conclude: Moses didn't compose the Torah. But Orthodox Jews take the Torah to have been dictated by God to Moses. The relevant comparison then: the likelihood of diverse textual styles, etc., given the documentary theory vs. given the theory of divine authorship. How likely is God to write in diverse styles, etc? Any pretense at divine psychology here will be more hutzpah than anything I'm capable of. My therapist says I underestimate myself.

So far skeptical biblical scholarship. What of archeology? Similar points, but far less stridently. There is, for example, widespread disagreement in the field (compare Kitchen 2003 vs. Finkelstein and Silberman 2002; also see Gottlieb 2017: appendix IV). I wanted to be an archaeologist, but my parents persuaded me that it was not a lucrative career path. So I

decided on a career in philosophy instead. The reader might find this bit of biography reason enough to evaluate the topic for themselves.

## 5. Conclusion

Objections of a much broader nature remain: arguments against the possibility of miracles or against the existence of God altogether (but see Johnson 1999; Gellman 1997; Swinburne 2004). And then there are further Jewish arguments too; what we've considered is only a part of a cumulative case (see Gottlieb 2017: chs. 5, 8). There's only so much time in a day. I have focused on the arguments of Saadya, HaLevi, Leslie, Edwards, Gottlieb, and Zuckerman-Sivan, and objections that apply especially against them. I might've done more, but not so much more in the space of a chapter.

HaLevi and Edwards walk into bar. I'm good at introductions. But there's no pretense of real originality on my part. I mix some ideas and answer some objections in new ways. New isn't always better.[1]

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