



"The Source of Faith..." Examined

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“THE SOURCE OF FAITH...” EXAMINED

I.

Someone who wants to understand the content of Jewish faith, who wonders what and whom religious Jews *qua* religious Jews have faith in, can pick up nearly any article or listen to any number of *sihot* by *morenu ve-rabbenu*, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, *shlit”a*, and find an illuminating treatment of some aspect of that issue. The same can be said of someone who seeks to know what being a *ma’amin* entails, what sort of intellectual stance and emotional attitudes are required in order to be a faithful Jew. But the same cannot be said of someone who asks, especially in light of everything else he knows and all the intellectual challenges he confronts as a religious Jew, whether he should or at least may have such faith. Religious ethics, theology, and the phenomenology of faith figure prominently in R. Lichtenstein’s thought; normative epistemology barely figures at all.¹

To be clear, pointing this out does not constitute and is certainly not intended as a criticism. A variety of plausible explanations of this lacuna come to mind, each one sufficient to render it perfectly understandable. First, the *yeshiva* has long been the main venue for R. Lichtenstein’s *sihot* and its *talmidim* their audience, a place and a population ideally dedicated to redoubling a commitment to *avodat Hashem* rather than to re-visiting it. And though the intended audience of his published articles is clearly broader, the primary target of much of his writing appears to be an

¹ Normative epistemology deals with the conditions under which one must or may believe something and whether those conditions are satisfied in a given case.

Orthodox community that is assumed to be beset more by spiritual atrophy and a corrosive anthropocentrism than by a full-blown crisis of faith.² Second, it is hard to see how such normative epistemological questions could be of more than academic interest to a person, how they could *matter* to him, unless he were willing and able to accept a negative answer, together with that answer's far-reaching practical implications, if that is where his investigation would lead. To the extent, then, that R. Lichtenstein has reasonably chosen to focus on questions that matter to him, he would raise normative epistemological questions only if he were willing and able to do just that, and he might well be neither willing nor able to do so. Unwilling, because faith requires faithfulness, religious commitment demands steadfastness; as R. Lichtenstein puts it, "Answers, I of course continued – and continue – to seek, and have found many. But commitment has not been conditioned upon them."³ And unable, if R. Lichtenstein's deep and abiding *emuna* is such that it simply cannot be given up. When asked to address the question 'Why learn Gemara?' R. Lichtenstein characteristically prefaces his answer with several animadversions on the question. He writes as follows:

² Note, for example, the relatively peripheral role that straightforwardly epistemological concerns play in R. Lichtenstein's "Contemporary Impediments to *Yirat Shamayim*," in *Yirat Shamayim: Awe, Reverence, and the Fear of God*, ed. Marc D. Stern (Newark, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2008), 231-264. To the extent that such concerns are recognized they are generally taken to be symptomatic of an underlying religious or spiritual pathology; they need not be directly addressed, then, if the disease itself can be treated.

³ "The Source of Faith is Faith Itself," *Jewish Action* (1992), 80. (Reprinted in *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2 (Jersey City: Ktav, 2004), 363-367, and in this volume.)

For a contemporary philosophical discussion of whether absolutely unconditional commitment is required by genuine religious devotion, see C.S. Lewis, "On Obstinacy in Belief," *The Sewanee Review*, 63(4) (1955), Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), Robert Adams, "Kierkegaard's Arguments Against Objective Reasoning in Religion," *The Virtue of Faith and Other Philosophical Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), and David Shatz, "So What Else is Neo? Theism and Epistemic Recalcitrance," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 37 (2013). While most traditional Jewish thinkers have not explicitly advocated for an intellectual or religious requirement to remain steadfast "come what may," there are exceptions. See, e.g., Rav Nahman of Bratslav, *Likkutei Moharan*, 64.

Of course, the question of what one ought to do after encountering overwhelming difficulties is distinct from the question of what sort of inquiry one ought to conduct *ab initio*. One might think that unconditional commitment is not required once you find yourself with unanswerable questions, and yet – or, precisely because of that – think that you ought not investigate questions that might well turn out unanswerable. On some of the philosophical and halakhic considerations involved in the latter issue, see the exchange between R. Yehuda Parnes, R. Shalom Carmy, Dr. David Berger, and Dr. Lawrence Kaplan in the first three issues of *The Torah u-Madda Journal*.

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Perhaps someone like myself, steeped from childhood in the world of Abbaye and Rava, passionately devoted to exploring and explicating it, is not equipped to provide the response. Camus apart, what would we answer if asked ‘Why live?’⁴

Indeed, someone who cannot fail to breathe, or learn Gemara – or sustain his faith – might have a difficult time taking seriously the question whether he should.⁵ Third, and more prosaically, questions about epistemic rights and duties are just not everyone’s cup of tea.

Anyone familiar with R. Lichtenstein’s essay, “The Source of Faith is Faith Itself” (henceforth, “The Source”), will likely find the previous two paragraphs – in which I cite that very essay – more than a little peculiar, for one of two reasons. Some will point to it and say, “asked and answered.” “The Source” is R. Lichtenstein’s contribution to a symposium in a 1992 issue of *Jewish Action*, in which the participants were asked to address, among other questions, “What are the most significant factors which support your faith in God and Torah? What is most convincing to you on an intellectual level and what is most meaningful and inspiring on an existential level... What advice would you give someone who is struggling to develop faith?” In response, R. Lichtenstein outlines three central factors that have grounded his faith and protected against its erosion. While he notes explicitly that his response may be of limited use to someone who does not have access to the grounds he does, he nevertheless explains why he has sustained his faith and defends the propriety of basing that faith on the sources he has. Does that defense not count as an answer to the normative epistemological questions raised above? Why, then, do I say that R. Lichtenstein has disregarded those questions and how can I claim they do not matter to him?

Others will instead suggest that “The Source” provides R. Lichtenstein’s own explanation of the epistemological lacuna in his thought – one that I have apparently overlooked – viz. that there can be no satisfying answer to the epistemological quandaries that confront a *ma’amin*, or at least none that played any role in nurturing R. Lichtenstein’s own *emuna*. After all, R. Lichtenstein begins his response by saying, “without question, during my formative years, and to a lesser extent beyond, the source and bulwark of my commitment was not so much a cluster of abstract factors or arguments as key persons.” But how could a “key person” or

⁴ “Why Learn Gemara?” *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 1 (Jersey City: Ktav, 2003), 2.

⁵ Not only might he have a difficult time taking the question seriously, the answer is to some extent obvious. Assuming a person ought to do something only if he can, one who cannot but maintain his faith can be under no obligation to relinquish it.

one's relationship with him properly constitute an answer to epistemological questions? The problem is not so much that only a few are privileged to have such relationships, but that people and personal relationships are the wrong sorts of things to serve as an answer: they are, to use a piece of philosophical jargon, non-propositional. Answering 'R. Hutner' to the question 'Why should I have faith?' – where the former is not elliptical for some statement *about* R. Hutner – hardly makes any sense, even if addressed to a fellow student of R. Hutner. Of course, R. Hutner, or a relationship with him, might explain why someone in fact has faith – as R. Lichtenstein indeed says of himself – but that's another story. And *mutatis mutandis* for the other two sources of R. Lichtenstein's faith: Jewish history and the *Ribbono Shel Olam* Himself. As R. Lichtenstein goes on to note with respect to the latter,

At the level of rational demonstration, this is, of course, patently circular. I hold no brief for Anselm's ontological proof and I recognized the possibility of self-delusion long before I had ever heard of Feuerbach. Existentially, however, nothing has been more authentic than [*sic*] the encounter with *Avinu Malkeinu*, the source and ground of all being. Nothing more sustaining, nothing more strengthening, nothing more vivifying.

Not everything that causally explains a belief can be cited as a reason to hold it. In some cases, like that of R. Lichtenstein's faith, *nothing* that causally explains it can be cited as a reason to hold it. So, this suggestion goes, since what grounds and sustains R. Lichtenstein's own faith cannot answer any epistemological questions about faith, it is only natural that R. Lichtenstein refrains from addressing such questions. So why even bother with my other explanations of the lacuna? Isn't the correct explanation readily available? Indeed, isn't it explicitly proffered by R. Lichtenstein himself?

The upshot: either R. Lichtenstein deems our epistemological questions about faith important and interesting enough to offer a substantive reply or he informs us that none is forthcoming. One way or another, "The Source" proves my proposed explanations are far wide of the mark. So goes the objection.

In reply I say that neither of these two interpretations of "The Source" is right. It is not wholly obvious how "The Source" should be understood, as evidenced by the fact that one of its central contentions can be plausibly construed in at least the two very different ways our imagined objector has. But when its intent is properly understood, what emerges, I

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think, is a compelling response to an important epistemological question or set of questions. The interpretation according to which R. Lichtenstein sees any and all epistemological questions about faith unanswerable is thus incorrect. On the other hand, the epistemological questions that he addresses are of a very different sort from the normative ones about duties and rights, obligations and entitlements. Thus, the interpretation according to which R. Lichtenstein provides a justification for being a faithful Jew, or even just for maintaining his own faith, is similarly mistaken. His concerns lie elsewhere. To see what they are, and how he addresses them, one needs to examine “The Source” more carefully.

II.

Probably the most crucial paragraph in that essay, at least with respect to its epistemological implications, is the following:

What I received from all my mentors, at home or in *yeshivot*, was the key to confronting life, particularly modern life, in all its complexity: the recognition that it was not so necessary to have all the answers as to learn to live with the questions. Regardless of what issues – moral, theological, textual, or historical – vexed me, I was confident that they had been raised by masters far sharper and wiser than myself; and if they had remained impregnablely steadfast in their commitment, so should and could I. I intuited that, his categorical formulations and imperial certitude notwithstanding, Rav Hutner had surely confronted whatever questions occurred to me. Later, I felt virtually certain the Rav had, so that the depth and intensity of their *avodat Hashem* was doubly reassuring.⁶

Clearly enough, R. Lichtenstein learned something critical from his mentors about confronting challenges and objections to his religious faith (and perhaps still more): that it is not necessary to have all the answers. Less clear is what exactly that means and how he in fact learned it. With regard to what it means, we might wonder what R. Lichtenstein has in mind with the phrase, ‘not necessary.’ Not necessary for what? For *yirat Shamayim*? For being moral? For being within one’s epistemic rights? As I say, it is not entirely clear. And whatever it is that R. Lichtenstein learned, how exactly did he learn it? A cursory reading suggests that he made use of the following simple line of argument: those who are wiser than I have

⁶ Pp. 79-80.

asked all my questions and have steadfastly maintained their faith. Therefore, I should maintain my faith. But that line of argument is not very promising. For one thing, an inference of what one *ought* to do from what others *have* done, is, at least without further qualification, a non-sequitur. Perhaps the faith of the wiser ones was so deeply entrenched that it simply could not be given up: how would anything follow about whether the faith of the less wise, but more doxastically malleable, ought to be maintained? This cannot be what R. Lichtenstein has in mind.

Let us continue to assume that R. Lichtenstein is indeed concerned with the normative epistemological questions, with whether he is entitled (and perhaps obligated) to keep his faith. Is there another construal of the line of argument suggested by the above passage, consistent with that assumption, which is more promising? I think so. The source of the non-sequitur in the simple line of argument suggests a way forward. If R. Lichtenstein interpreted his mentors' steadfastness in such a way that they tacitly attested to the epistemic credentials of their own religious commitment – that is, to the fact that in spite of the challenges to their faith, they were nevertheless entitled (and perhaps obligated) to hold on to it – then R. Lichtenstein could have easily learned that fact from them, by taking their “word” for it. And from that fact, together with the fact that his mentors confronted every question he had, R. Lichtenstein could have inferred that he too was entitled (and perhaps obligated) to hold on to his faith.

What should we say about this, more refined line of argument? It certainly is an improvement. Since R. Lichtenstein putatively learned not only what his mentors *did*, but what they *ought* to have done, the glaring non-sequitur in the simple line of argument does not present itself in this one. And there is nothing wrong, in general, with taking the word of others. Much of what we take ourselves to know and to be justified in believing is based only on the say-so of others. As R. Saadya Gaon pointed out, you could not know or even reasonably believe that you are the son of the woman who is ostensibly your mother – let alone the man who is ostensibly your father – without relying on the testimony of others.⁷ So, when his mentors tacitly attest to the epistemic credentials of their own faith, R. Lichtenstein can unhesitatingly and legitimately trust them. But if they

⁷ *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 156.

Or, as the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid would later put it, “I found that, if I had not believed what [my parents and tutors] told me, before I could give a reason of my belief, I had to this day been little better than a changeling” (*An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Chapter 6, Section XX).

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are entitled to their faith, then, R. Lichtenstein might conclude, he, who has grappled with no more objections than they, is entitled to his.

While this line of reasoning represents an advance over the simpler version, it too suffers from several serious problems, the most significant of which is that the inference from their entitlement to his own would at best be of dubious validity. The reason for this is that what one is justified in believing depends in part on what one's total evidence is: while I am justified in believing that the city of Newport, RI had in 2012 a population of more than 24,000 people (I just looked it up, and the census figures put it at 24,034), you are probably not justified in believing that (at least not before you read this sentence). That is because we possess different evidence. (When I say 'evidence,' please don't restrict your attention to fingerprints or laboratory results; I mean that term in a much broader sense, one which includes all your experiences, or everything you know, or some such thing. I mean it in the same sense that the nineteenth-century mathematician and philosopher W.K. Clifford meant it when he emphatically pronounced, "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.") And there is little reason to believe that R. Lichtenstein and his mentors shared substantially the same evidence, even if we restrict ourselves to evidence that bears on matters of faith; or the weaker claim that they were in an equivalent evidential position vis-à-vis faith, that each one's faith was justified just in the case that the others' was; or the even weaker claim that R. Lichtenstein's body of evidence was at least as "faith-favorable" as that of his mentors, i.e. faith was justified given their evidence only if it was justified given R. Lichtenstein's as well. His mentors might have confronted every question, challenge, or objection that R. Lichtenstein did – just as R. Lichtenstein says – but that implies nothing about how they were armed for the confrontation. How plausible is it to think that Rav Lichtenstein read no more widely and carefully than his mentors in the heterodox Romantic poets, say, or that R. Lichtenstein precisely replicated every powerful religious experience that his mentors had? We might, of course, pose an analogous question in the other direction: how plausible is it to think that his mentors read no more widely and carefully than he in the positivist philosophers, say, or that his mentors witnessed the revitalization of *Am Yisrael* and *Medinat Yisrael* with the same immediacy and frequency that R. Lichtenstein did? True enough. But to argue from the combination of those two rhetorical questions to the conclusion that R. Lichtenstein and his mentors were at least in equivalent evidential positions is no trivial task: it is not as though we can simply

trade a Coleridge for a Comte – or exchange having a *seder* with R. Hayim of Brisk for carrying the banner of *safra ve-saifa* at this juncture in Jewish history – and expect to maintain an equivalence of evidential position. The bearing of evidence is far too complicated for such a simplistic calculation.

The problem is only exacerbated when we consider a testimonial chain of more than two links. If R. Lichtenstein concludes that his faith is in order based on the line of argument under consideration, then how can he rule out – how can he even think it unlikely – that his mentors came to their conclusion on the very same grounds?⁸ Might not R. Hutner have reasoned to himself as follows: “I face many religious challenges to which I have no adequate reply. But the sharper and wiser R. Kook surely confronted all these challenges, and yet he clung to his faith, thereby attesting to his conviction that he was within his rights (and perhaps obligated) to do so. Since he was within his rights, and I have faced raised no more objections than he has, I too am within my rights.” If R. Hutner did in fact reason in that way, then the undeniably significant difference between R. Kook’s and R. Lichtenstein’s bodies of evidence – small differences, after all, can add up to a big difference – threatens to undermine R. Lichtenstein’s further iteration of that line of argument.⁹

If these considerations strike the reader as rather abstract, consider their implications for those “downstream” of R. Lichtenstein, as opposed to those “upstream” of his mentors. That is, consider us. We students of R. Lichtenstein might be tempted to follow our *rebbe*’s lead in coming to grips with challenges to our faith; just as R. Lichtenstein learned from his *rabbeim* to live with questions, we can learn the same from him, and in the same manner. But if we accept the present suggestion about what R. Lichtenstein learned and how he learned it, then we can follow his lead only if our evidence is as “faith-favorable” as that of R. Lichtenstein’s mentors, from whom many of us are separated by several generations. Is it reasonable to think our evidence has that character? Surely, when it comes to some of us. But for those who have been exposed (perhaps unwisely, perhaps unwittingly) to the prevailing winds in cultural anthropology, psychology, comparative religion, Biblical studies, intellectual history, or philosophy, it is far from clear. I do not doubt that R. Lichtenstein’s mentors were quite familiar with many of these disciplines, but that is not

⁸ Granted, it is possible that R. Lichtenstein had independent evidence that his mentors did not come to their conclusion in this way. But there is no indication of that in the passage I cited.

⁹ Or, at least we should be sure that one of the instances of that line of reasoning along the chain is misguided: *some* small difference must make a justificatory difference.

enough to mitigate the problem: these disciplines are hives of ongoing activity – even if one cannot always tell whether the activity constitutes progress – and the arguments being debated have changed since the 60’s and 70’s. Thus, R. Lichtenstein’s argument would be of little relevance to those who would stand to gain the most from it.

A more minor, but still significant problem besets not the inference itself, but its basis. Suppose R. Lichtenstein and his mentors really were in equivalent, or perhaps even identical, evidential positions. So their attestation to the epistemic credentials of their own faith applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to R. Lichtenstein’s. But while their attestation is something that R. Lichtenstein must reckon with, it is far from the only evidence he has which bears on the justification of his and their faith: there is, after all, the *rest of the evidence* that he shares with his mentors.¹⁰ And there is no reason to think that in all such cases one’s testimonial evidence swamps the rest of one’s evidence.¹¹ So why shouldn’t R. Lichtenstein have to evaluate his faith for himself (taking into account, of course, the opinion of his mentors)? Why is the opinion of his mentors the definitive word on the matter? Relatedly, why wouldn’t uncritical reliance on this line of argument constitute an abdication of personal responsibility for one’s own intellectual life?

One might resist the entire foregoing analysis on the grounds that I have neglected to take account of an implicit assumption in the argument: that R. Lichtenstein’s mentors possess what we might call “religious expertise.” We often trust experts in a certain domain – scientific experts, say – when they report to us on matters in that domain. More specifically, we trust those experts when they tell us that we need not be overly impressed by certain as-yet unanswered challenges to a given theory in their domain of expertise; when they tell us, that is, that the given theory is likely true given the best available evidence and that we should believe it, despite the unresolved difficulties it faces.¹² And when we trust them in these circumstances, we indeed seem to be justified in believing both the given theory and that we are so justified in believing it – even if we would not be justified in believing those things on the say-so of a

¹⁰ I assume that the evidence bears not only on the correctness of his faith, but on his justification in holding it.

¹¹ For a similar point about cases of disagreement between equally well-positioned agents, see Thomas Kelly, “Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence,” in Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield (eds.) *Disagreement* (New York; Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹² For example, a plurality of theoretical physicists endorse both General Relativity and Quantum Field Theory, even though their conjunction is apparently inconsistent. They widely affirm that there is *some* way to reconcile them, but no particular resolution is currently without problems.

non-expert or on the rest of our evidence – since we rightly take them to have the *best available evidence*. Perhaps, then, R. Lichtenstein takes his mentors to possess a significant degree of religious expertise that he lacks: he calls them “sharper and wiser,” and presumably part of what is intended is a wisdom to navigate the deep waters of faith. So, R. Lichtenstein need not assume that his original evidential position is at least as “faith-favorable” as that of his mentors, just as I need not assume that my original evidential position is at least as “General-Relativity-favorable” as that of the community of physicists. In the same way that I can properly ignore the justificatory significance of the rest of my evidence when assessing the theory of general relativity – since I rightly take the physicists’ evidence to be the best available (with respect to that issue) and I justifiably trust them about the likelihood of the theory given that evidence – R. Lichtenstein can properly ignore the justificatory significance of the rest of his evidence when assessing the merits of his faith. On this way of looking at the matter, R. Lichtenstein’s argument faces no problem stemming from a difference in evidence – and *a fortiori* no problem that is exacerbated by consideration of longer testimonial chains – nor does it exhibit any problematic abdication of personal responsibility.

This objection relies on an assumption about the relative merits of R. Lichtenstein’s and his mentors’ bodies of evidence and their abilities to assess them that seems nothing short of preposterous. It is impossible for me to take seriously the idea that R. Lichtenstein is a spiritual novice – analogous to a “physics layman” – even relative to spiritual greats like his mentors. In any case, the assumption has no firm textual basis in R. Lichtenstein’s essay. Again, this cannot be what R. Lichtenstein has in mind.

III.

At this point I can imagine some readers grumbling. (These are the readers whose interpretation of “The Source” was that there can be no satisfying answer to the epistemological quandaries that confront a *ma’amin*.) I hear them protest that the foregoing has badly misconstrued R. Lichtenstein’s point about what he learned from his mentors – all the while getting bogged down in pedantic discussions of ‘evidence’ and ‘justification,’ terms entirely foreign to the lexicon R. Lichtenstein brings to discussions of faith – and so it is no wonder I haven’t been able to supply a sensible explanation of his argument. R. Lichtenstein, they say, did not learn a *truth* about the epistemological consequences of challenges to his faith. Rather, he learned a *skill*, the skill of maintaining one’s faith in the face of

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challenges and objections, the ability “not to die from a *kasha*,” as it is often put.¹³ R. Lichtenstein’s mentors seem to have played a role in cultivating this skill on several levels, or at several stages. To some degree, one acquires the ability not to die from a *kasha* before even encountering any *kasha* at all. R. Lichtenstein draws the crucial distinction between “judging faith and its tenets as an outsider or probing its contents while firmly ensconced within.”¹⁴ Those firmly ensconced within are not so easily dislodged, and, as R. Lichtenstein remarks elsewhere, questions asked from within often have a different tone and a different purpose.¹⁵ Naturally, parents and mentors often play a critical role in ensuring that faith is in the air a youngster breathes, and R. Lichtenstein’s case was no exception. As he goes on to say, “the bulwark of my mentors’ support assured that my situation would be the latter [firmly ensconced within].”¹⁶ But the skill can be further honed when one’s faith is put to the test, and mentors can facilitate that as well. R. Lichtenstein tells us of ethical questions he raised in his late teens about certain *mitsvot*. When he recalled having read that “Rav Chaim Brisker would awaken nightly to see if someone hadn’t placed a foundling at his doorstep,” he concluded that “if a paragon of *chesed* coped with these *halachot*, evidently the source of my anxiety did not lie in my greater sensitivity but in my weaker faith. And I set myself to enhancing it.”¹⁷ Clearly enough, it is possible to learn from others what sort of faith can withstand challenges, and armed with that knowledge to undertake to achieve it.¹⁸

¹³ Thanks to Adam Friedmann for suggesting this interpretation.

¹⁴ “The Source,” 80.

¹⁵ *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God*, ed. Reuven Ziegler (Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2003), 156: “Our illustrious forebears have already posed the question of why the righteous suffer...The issue is rather the background and tone of the question. When one asks why people suffer, does he preface his question as does Yirmiyahu (12:1): “God, You are righteous, and therefore I will contend with You and question Your justice?” Or does he simply hurl rebellious and angry accusations at God?”

¹⁶ “The Source,” 80.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ There is very likely another facet to his mentors’ role in grounding R. Lichtenstein’s faith, one which is bound up with his faith’s other two sources (Jewish history and the *Ribbono shel Olam* Himself). As R. Lichtenstein says about his mentors, “they communicated a powerful sense of relation to the past, immediate and distant, of *k’illu kiblah mehar Sinai*, of being and becoming a link in the chain of the *mesorah*.” (79) Sitting at his mentors’ feet was, it seems, a way of experiencing the many generations of Jewish history that preceded him, and, more significantly, He who revealed Himself at a particular moment in that history. That a relationship with one’s *rabbeim* can serve as such a conduit is, as R. Lichtenstein often emphasizes, the import of a well-known comment in the *Sifre* (*Ekev* 49) that we can cleave to Him

This interpretive suggestion is undoubtedly correct in noting that the contribution of R. Lichtenstein's mentors to the fortitude of his faith cannot be reduced to some epistemological truth he learned from them. But I do not think it is tenable to interpret the essay in such a way that the contribution of R. Lichtenstein's mentors failed to involve the transmission of *any* such truth. The main reason is that such an interpretation makes no more sense of R. Lichtenstein's argument than the interpretations we've already considered. In fact, it makes no sense at all of his argument; the argument's conclusion is, at least in part, that R. Lichtenstein *should* remain steadfast in his commitment, and the force of that 'should' certainly appears to be broadly epistemic. On any reasonable construal of the argument, his mentors' sustained faith played a role in his coming to that conclusion.

Even setting that aside, something seems right about the thought, the *epistemological* thought, that we have been attempting to make more precise. I was bowled over when I first read R. Lichtenstein's contribution to another symposium, on "The State of Jewish Belief," in a 1966 issue of *Commentary*. The first question began by asking, "In what sense do you believe the Torah to be divine revelation?" In his reply, R. Lichtenstein boldly and unapologetically adumbrates an Orthodox theology of revelation, with nary a word about Biblical Criticism or philosophical scruples about the very notion of revelation.¹⁹ In fact, he does not even say – as other Orthodox respondents to the symposium do – that he is being unapologetic, itself an implicit acknowledgement that one is saying something that could conceivably require an apology. Without question, reading that essay bolstered my faith, and it made me more confident that my faith was in some sense on the up-and-up. Importantly, it seemed *reasonable* to become more confident about that; and it still seems to. But why?

IV.

The key to understanding R. Lichtenstein's argument, I suggest, lies in dispensing with the assumption that either R. Lichtenstein is concerned with the question of whether we are entitled to our faith or he is unconcerned

only by cleaving to *talmidei hakhamim*. But this facet appears from "The Source" to play only a minor role in grounding R. Lichtenstein's faith, and is clearly not the thrust of the passage we have been considering. (By way of contrast, it plays a rather central role in grounding R. Jonathan Sacks's faith, as he details in his recent book, *The Great Partnership*, [Schocken Books, 2012] 89-91.)

¹⁹ He does mention Biblical criticism later, when he is explicitly addressing the challenges to contemporary Jewish belief.

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with the epistemology of faith altogether. This is a false dilemma. To get a sense of the sort of epistemological issue that attracts R. Lichtenstein's attention, we would do well to reflect on his description of R. Aaron Soloveichik:

From him too, I learned much, but above all he served as a role model. It wasn't so much what he said or did...I was simply enthralled by what he was – a remarkable fusion of mastery and simplicity, of vigor and humility, and, above all, a pillar of radical integrity.

Each of these admirable qualities, or virtues, has broad scope, but they all have an intellectual dimension, and with respect to some of them that dimension is particularly pronounced. Consider the virtue of integrity. Most fundamentally, it consists in being whole, undivided, consistent. At the level of practice, this involves many things, but chief among them is intellectual honesty: a tendency not to fall into self-deception, and a disposition to follow the evidence where it seems to lead rather than where one wants to go. Anyone who lacks such intellectual honesty is, in a way, divided against himself, and hence lacks integrity.

Notice that R. Lichtenstein does not say that he admired R. Aaron Soloveichik for never flouting any epistemic duties. Notions as thin as duties and rights do not directly figure into what R. Lichtenstein admires and hence strives to achieve in the intellectual realm. Only thicker notions, such as integrity, honesty, sensitivity, and humility seem to figure.²⁰ This shift in aims brings with it a shift in the epistemological questions that one asks about faith, if one asks any at all.²¹ The question is no longer whether, given the objections and challenges a religious Jew confronts, she should or may have faith, *tout court*, but whether faith in those circumstances is compatible with the intellectual traits she takes to be virtuous.²² Given the plethora of intellectual characteristics one might take to

²⁰ On the difference between thin and thick concepts, see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), 140-43.

²¹ This shift is an instance of the general shift recommended by those in the so-called responsibilist tradition in virtue epistemology, a tradition going back to Aristotle and revived recently by such philosophers as Lorraine Code, James Montmarquet, and Linda Zagzebski. For an excellent overview, see Greco, John and Turri, John, "Virtue Epistemology," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2013). With regard to religious faith in particular, see Howard Wettstein, *The Significance of Religious Experience*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 141-43.

²² I have not given any reason to dispense with the first question. There are, however, a couple. For one thing, it is not entirely clear which duty (or right) is being assumed and what its source is. (Is it a duty *to someone*? To whom?) For another thing, it is arguably too easy to fulfill such a duty (or fail to possess such a right) for it to be

be virtuous – those I have already mentioned constitute a small minority of all that there are – the questions that can be raised along these lines are numerous; or, if there is just one central question, i.e. the question whether one's faith is compatible with being fully intellectually virtuous, it can arise from several sources. With regard to the *emuna* of a contemporary religious Jew, two sources spring to mind, both of which R. Lichtenstein highlights. The overarching virtue of intellectual honesty appears to be in tension with complacency or recalcitrance in the face of challenges, no matter what those challenges happen to be. Can one consistently live with a serious *kasha* and be fully intellectually honest? And for the contemporary thoughtful and faithful Jew, is there really any alternative to living with many *kashas*? The particular challenges we face are the source of a second, more specific flash point. Moral sensitivity – one of those qualities that has both affective and cognitive dimensions – sits uneasily with our unwavering commitment to certain *mitsvot*. Is it possible to possess moral sensitivity to a maximal degree and remain wholeheartedly committed to the *mitsva* of *mehiyyat Amalek*?

The answers to these questions are far from obvious. In order to make some headway, we might note that there are virtues (or characteristics that some consider virtues) that “pull in the other direction”: they both demand and are demanded by keeping our faith even in the face of unresolved questions. Foremost among these is intellectual humility, which (like its parent, humility) is multifarious, having as many aspects as there are vices that oppose it.²³

For one, it is opposed to intellectual overconfidence, a tendency not only to think you know more than you do but also to think you would know something (were it true) that you would not. Such overconfidence can easily underwrite the conviction that if there *were* answers to the challenges to our faith, we would be privy to them. Adopting instead an expectation of substantial ignorance naturally undergirds the opposite conviction. This attitude, at least with respect to the divine role in history, is one that R. Lichtenstein imbibed from his mentors, particularly the

of much interest. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 100-102.

²³ See Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, “Humility and Epistemic Goods,” eds. Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski, *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). On the nature of humility in general, and how it was understood by prominent *ba’alei musar* and *ba’alei mahashava*, see George N. Schlesinger, “Humility,” *Tradition* 27:3 (1993) and Elyakim Krumbein, “On the “Humility” Dilemma and its Solution,” *Tradition* 39:1 (2005).

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Rav. In an article written in the aftermath of 9/11, he noted this influence:

I have been strongly influenced by the teachings of my revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik z”l, who refrained, categorically, from providing answers as to why given events took place. I do not know the extent to which this was specifically because of the Holocaust; I presume that on principle he would have advocated standing humbly before the Almighty in any case. This attitude was deeply ingrained in the Rav’s personality and thinking. This humility dictates the conclusion that we are incapable of understanding Divine providence.²⁴

For another, intellectual humility is opposed to what we might call intellectual insolence, a tendency to disregard and even display contempt for the stances of others, particularly the stances of those who ought to command one’s respect. The intellectually humble person, by contrast, treads very carefully where great people have tread before. This aspect of intellectual humility likewise undergirds a faithful response to unresolved questions, at least insofar as one’s spiritual and intellectual forebears did the same. To be clear, these attitudes will not blunt the force of the challenges; but they can blunt the force of our having no answers.

However, the fact – supposing it is a fact – that intellectual humility under its various aspects is a virtue allows us to make little headway on the issue of whether our faith is compatible with a fully intellectually virtuous life, and this for at least two reasons. First, intellectual humility can presumably be so excessive as to be a vice. (Rambam, of course, made of humility an exception to the general rule of the golden mean.²⁵ However, I doubt Rambam is referring to intellectual humility, and in any case the vice with which he contrasts humility seems closer to haughtiness or grandiosity – an inflated sense of one’s importance or significance, which makes no room for the *Shekhina* – than to overconfidence.) A question that remains, therefore, is whether we would need to be *too* humble to sustain our faith. Second, and more crucially, there remains a question

²⁴ “‘Is Anything New Under the Sun?’ Reflections on the First Anniversary of the Attack on the Twin Towers,” in *Contending with Catastrophe: Jewish Perspectives on September 11th*, ed. Michael Broyde (New York: K’hal Publishing and Beth Din of America Press, 2011). (This essay is an adapted translation of the earlier, “Is There Something Whereof it is Said ‘This is new’? It Has Always Been: Thoughts on the First Anniversary of the Terror Attack on the Twin Towers” [in Hebrew], *Alon Shevut Bogrim* 18 (2003).)

²⁵ *Mishne Tora*, *Hilkhot Deot* 2:3 and *Perush ha-Mishna*, *Avot* 4:4.

about whether the intellectual humility needed to sustain our faith is compatible with the *other* acknowledged intellectual virtues. Might the challenges to our faith be so great that one can humbly maintain one's faith only at the expense of, say, being honest with oneself? And there are no easy answers to these questions, at least none that we can arrive at by reflecting on the challenges to faith, our evidence, and the nature of intellectual humility.

But there is another method one might helpfully employ to address these questions: not reflection, but observation, and in particular, observation of a person whom one greatly admires. This, I think, is R. Lichtenstein's central contention.

R. Lichtenstein saw his mentors sometimes as role-models and sometimes as "visions of greatness," but always as subjects of his utmost admiration.²⁶ As his description of R. Aaron Soloveichik indicates, R. Lichtenstein took his mentors to embody fully many of the virtues, moral, spiritual, and intellectual, that he thought worthy of possession. So when the question arose whether it was necessary, in order to live a fully virtuous intellectual life, to have all the answers, he needed only to observe that his mentors had remained faithful despite their questions. If they could live in a way worthy of his utmost admiration, with impeccable integrity, profound moral sensitivity...and a combination of deep intellectual humility and profound *yirat Shamayim* – deep enough and profound enough to demand living with R. Lichtenstein's questions in his own circumstances – then it would follow that there is in fact no incompatibility between sustaining his own faith and living a life that he takes to be fully intellectually virtuous. There can be no better way, after all, to demonstrate the compatibility of several qualities than to show that they are in fact all exemplified together. And there does not seem to be anything particularly difficult about establishing that his mentors could live in such a way. As I said, nothing more than observation, or something very much like it, is required.

We can summarize the argument as follows, considering matters from your first-person perspective. You start with the totality of your experience and knowledge, and you ask yourself, "What sort (quality and quantity) of humility, *yirat Shamayim*, and so forth would be required in order for me to maintain my faith in the face of the questions

²⁶ See his description of the function of a *gavra rabba* in "Legitimization of Modernity: Classical and Contemporary," ed. Moshe Z. Sokol, *Engaging Modernity: Rabbinic Leaders and the Challenge of the Twentieth Century* (Jason Aronson, 1997), 3-33. (Reprinted in *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 2 (2004), 279-308.)

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and knowledge I have?” And you come out with an answer: sort X of humility, sort Y of *yirat Shamayim*, etc. (This is obviously a crude oversimplification. I don’t think there is any function like that, but it’s a useful heuristic.) You then ask yourself, “Can I have that sort of humility and *yirat Shamayim* and still be fully morally, intellectually, and religiously virtuous?”²⁷ Can I have it together with an ideal sort of integrity and sensitivity?” And lo and behold, you observe someone who has sort X of humility and sort Y of *yirat Shamayim*, and, as far as you can tell, is fully morally, intellectually, and religiously virtuous. In particular, they possess just the sort of integrity, sensitivity, and so on that you find admirable. Now, maybe the person you observed didn’t *need* to be so humble and have so much *yirat Shamayim* in order to maintain his faith, because his evidential situation was more “faith-favorable” than yours. Or maybe he did. Whatever the case may be, there he is, and you can just see that that’s the way he is. Then your observations suffice to settle your original question: you can maintain your faith, in your evidential situation, and be fully virtuous.

V.

“The Source of Faith is Faith Itself” is a rich essay, but it does not wear its meaning on its sleeve. We considered and rejected several interpretations of one of its central arguments. According to the first interpretation, R. Lichtenstein inferred that he ought to maintain his faith from the fact that his mentors maintained theirs. The second interpretation agreed with the first on what he inferred, but differed from it on the basis of the inference: not what his mentors did but what they ought to have done. The third interpretation agreed with the first two about R. Lichtenstein’s epistemological concerns, but departed from them in its suggestion that R. Lichtenstein treated his mentors as religious and spiritual experts, whose relevant experience, knowledge, and abilities, rendered them au-

²⁷ I do not mean to imply, of course, that proper *yirat Shamayim* need be opposed to integrity and moral sensitivity. And I do not mean to take issue with R. Lichtenstein’s contention that moral sensitivity, including its attendant grappling with morally perplexing aspects of Torah, is itself a component of *yirat Shamayim*. (See his “Being Frum and Being Good,” in *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God*. Thank you to David Shatz for reminding me of this essay.) Rather, I mean that it can be an open question in some cases whether the sort of *yirat Shamayim* required to maintain one’s faith in the face of challenges is genuine and proper *yirat Shamayim*.

thorities on matters of faith. According to the radically different fourth interpretation, R. Lichtenstein was concerned not with epistemology but causality, not with the propriety of his faith but with how it was in fact nurtured. Each of these interpretations, while not obviously wrong, was subject to serious objection: either it made the central argument invalid, or it neglected to consider differences in evidential position and the role of individual responsibility in epistemological matters, or it was based on an incredible assumption about R. Lichtenstein's spiritual standing, or it ignored the language of the essay.

But the fifth and final interpretation we considered – according to which R. Lichtenstein's concerns were indeed epistemological, but were character-based rather than duty-based – appears to avoid our objections. The argument so construed is not susceptible to the concern that R. Lichtenstein and his mentors might be in different evidential positions. Even if they are, and even if R. Lichtenstein knows that they are, that in no way precludes him from correctly noting that were he to adopt his mentors' character, he would be both intellectually upright and faithful.²⁸ Relatedly, this argument is not susceptible to the concern that R. Lichtenstein's mentors might have reasoned just as he did; ironically, it would only make the argument (or, more exactly, its basis) stronger, since their doing so would have itself manifested an aspect of intellectual humility. Moreover, employing this argument does not obviously involve any problematic abdication of personal responsibility for one's own intellectual life. After all, someone is a role-model for you – or a polestar, or a “vision of greatness” – because *you* admire and identify with them, not vice-versa. As R. Lichtenstein writes in a related context,

One seeks a leader who speaks to one's own inner sanctum, as a convert to *hasidut* would seek a *rebbe*. The quest for a mentor is integrally and dialectically related to self-definition, a process to which conscience and sensibility are indeed crucial.²⁹

Finally, this argument makes clear what I found so reasonable about the bolstering of my faith upon reading R. Lichtenstein's contribution to the

²⁸ To be sure, a difference of evidential position *could* make a difference as to whether a person may legitimately infer that he can be both faithful and intellectually virtuous from the fact that his mentors are both faithful and intellectually virtuous. But it could do so only if, as a result of the difference in evidential position, the “faith-sustaining virtues” of his mentors are not in fact sufficient to maintain the faith of the mentee. Thanks to Menachem Danishefsky for discussion about this point.

²⁹ “Legitimization of Modernity: Classical and Contemporary,” 293.

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Commentary symposium. I can say without a hint of exaggeration – as, I’m sure, can many other of R. Lichtenstein’s *talmidim* – I know no one of more profound integrity, no one of greater humility, no one of deeper moral sensitivity, no one who radiates more *yirat Shamayim*, and no one of stronger faith. I am awestruck by their combination; more importantly, I am reassured.³⁰

³⁰ I would like to thank R. Yitzchak Blau, Menachem Danishefsky, Dr. Samuel Lebens, R. Ozer Glickman, and Dr. David Shatz for invaluable feedback on earlier drafts. I would also like to thank those in attendance at the 2013 Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Yemei Iyun, where I presented a distant ancestor of this article, and the students in my Spring 2014 Epistemology of Religion seminar at Yeshiva College, where I presented a much closer ancestor of this article; this article was enriched by the probing comments and criticisms I received in both venues.