**Website: The Torah’s Story**

**First Draft**

*The idea is to create a new website that not only will be much newer and more exciting/contemporary in its graphics and style and serve as the centerpiece for presenting me and everything I have to offer to the world [with all the stuff that is on the old one, plus more – basically a repository or portal to all of my online content including videos], with all of the sections that are on the old site plus at least one new one advertising myself as a speaker/scholar in residence. But it will also, and most importantly, all be organized around a central section with an online “course” of videos and articles presenting my hashkafa to the world.*

*The website will also serve as a hub for regular content I will be’h begin to send out through various channels – TBD whether this is a renewed blog or some other written format, audio/podcast format or video, and also whether or not there should be some kind of organizing framework like parshat hashavua.*

*The idea is that the home page will contain a large window of a professionally-filmed video of me giving a Ted Talk (which maybe I will even film live at a by-invitation-only event in Jerusalem just before this website is launched? Or maybe just have this filmed in a studio with the others?) introducing the entire thing. At the end of the video and/or right below it should be an actionable item getting people to the intro to the course [with perhaps a requirement to login/register for the rest of it?].*

*The course is composed of individual units that will each be introduced by a short video and then will contain a short article to read. I can also add certain “excurses” – places where people can click or something and get harchavot that are outside the scope of this course. These can be other things I have already written (or video/audio content I already have on the web), or companion articles that I can write for those who want more depth. And this can grow as time goes on, and maybe eventually this whole thing can be reworked into a book*

*One thing I need to consider is how to balance my desire to present a source-based presentation which is serious Torah and not fluff, vs. the reality of an internet-based discussion in today’s world that doesn’t easily allow for that much depth. This balance may be partially accomplished by having each article summarized with little or no sources in the videos, with moderately more depth in the articles and additional sources in excurses or footnotes. And if it ever becomes a book, it can have a lot more depth added at that point.*

I. Intro – Opening TED Talk-style video (perhaps to be filmed in front of live audience in Jerusalem): *The Meaning, Message, and Mission of Torah*

*Why are you an Orthodox Jew?*

*It’s a reasonable question to ask – after all, being an Orthodox Jew means following a strict regimen of laws that regulate, and often restrict, almost every aspect of our lives. So why do we do it?*

*Well, if you ask Orthodox Jews, you’ll (unsurprisingly) get lots of different answers. I believe that these are the main ones:*

* *I love being part of an Orthodox community – it’s warm, embracing, and provides lots of support*
* *I love the emphasis on family. Things like Shabbat really help keep families together*
* *It’s a great way to raise children – Orthodox education gives them values*
* *It’s our TRADITION – it connects me with my past and my ancestors*
* *It gives my life meaning*

*Maybe there are other reasons, but these seem to be among the most common.*

*But here’s the thing. It’s true that living an Orthodox life brings those benefits, and if people say that’s why they do it, I assume it is. But to me, those reasons are not enough. I think there needs to be something more.*

*Because if you think about it, all those reasons explain what people GET out of being Orthodox. Which means, if that’s why I’m Orthodox, in the end of the day, it’s about ME. It seems to me that there needs to be something more than that – you need to be dedicated to some higher cause and purpose. Especially if what you’re looking for is meaning in your life – it would seem to me that being Orthodox can only give your life meaning if you believe it actually means something!!*

*So I think it’s OK to express and embrace all the wonderful things about an Orthodox lifestyle, but I also think the commitment itself has to be based on something more fundamental and transcendent.*

*So that brings us back to square one. On a deeper level, why are we Orthodox Jews? What do we stand for?*

*Well, what we stand for is* ***the Torah****, and our lifestyle that’s based on keeping its laws as interpreted in the system called* ***halakha****.*

*So let’s talk about the Torah (by which I mean not just the five books of the Torah, but the entire Tanakh, the halakha, as well as all rabbinic and Jewish literature that’s based upon it). What is it all about? What does it mean? What are its main messages?*

*Of course, the Torah says many, many different things and addresses many topics, but can we somehow summarize it all? I think we can:* ***At its most basic level, the Torah tells a story****. It’s a true story; a great and noble story about the evolution and transformation of human society.*

*This story began thousands of years ago at the beginning of history, and it ends somewhere in the future (we know the end, even though it hasn’t happened yet). So, in some ways, it’s a story that is still being written.*

*Most of the main characters in this story are us, the Jewish People (or “Am Yisrael” as we’re more properly called). But the rest of the world is in the story also – in fact, the story is mainly about them.*

*The whole Torah, in all of its parts including the Tanakh, Midrash, Talmud, the Halacha, Jewish Philosophy, Chassidut… all of the collected wisdom of thousands of years of Jewish sages and thinkers – when you look at the entire thing in its entirety, all of these are simply details in this great story.*

*But at the same time, this entire detailed story can be summarized in just three short passages from the Bible.*

*The first is from the book of Bereishit/Genesis, which tells of the origin of עם ישראל. It all begins with one man, who was given a mission. Most Orthodox Jews know these verses, but many – perhaps most of them – don’t fully understand their significance. Let’s read:*

(Read, and translate, these psukim from Bereishit 12 as they show on screen behind me which is also visible on camera):

וַיֹּ֤אמֶר ה' אֶל־אַבְרָ֔ם לֶךְ־לְךָ֛ מֵאַרְצְךָ֥ וּמִמּֽוֹלַדְתְּךָ֖ וּמִבֵּ֣ית אָבִ֑יךָ אֶל־הָאָ֖רֶץ אֲשֶׁ֥ר אַרְאֶֽךָּ׃

*Avraham was told, at the age of 75 (!), to leave behind everyone and everything he had ever known and to follow God on a journey to an unknown destination. If he did this, he was promised great rewards:*

(ב) וְאֶֽעֶשְׂךָ֙ לְג֣וֹי גָּד֔וֹל וַאֲבָ֣רֶכְךָ֔ וַאֲגַדְּלָ֖ה שְׁמֶ֑ךָ וֶהְיֵ֖ה בְּרָכָֽה׃

*Hashem told him I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, and I will make you famous – and then He said “והיה ברכה” – you shall be a blessing. What does that mean? He was already told that God will bless him, so what does it mean that he will also be a blessing? The next verse explains:*

(ג) וַאֲבָֽרְכָה֙ מְבָ֣רְכֶ֔יךָ וּמְקַלֶּלְךָ֖ אָאֹ֑ר וְנִבְרְכ֣וּ בְךָ֔ כֹּ֖ל מִשְׁפְּחֹ֥ת הָאֲדָמָֽה׃

*This verse is extraordinarily significant! It closes the passage clarifying how Avraham was chosen, and it explains why he was chosen, and why his descendants would eventually become known as the “Chosen People”.*

*What comes out of it is something that I think many Orthodox Jews would consider a completely revolutionary idea, even though it’s right there, black on white in the Torah: Avraham and the nation that came from him were indeed chosen – but this choice was* ***not*** *about him, or about them. Rather, they were chosen to bring God’s blessings* ***to the rest of the world****! כל משפחות האדמה!!*

*And how are they supposed to do that? Let’s read on.*

(ד) וַיֵּ֣לֶךְ אַבְרָ֗ם כַּאֲשֶׁ֨ר דִּבֶּ֤ר אֵלָיו֙ ה' ... וַיֵּצְא֗וּ לָלֶ֙כֶת֙ אַ֣רְצָה כְּנַ֔עַן וַיָּבֹ֖אוּ אַ֥רְצָה כְּנָֽעַן׃ (ו) וַיַּעֲבֹ֤ר אַבְרָם֙ בָּאָ֔רֶץ עַ֚ד מְק֣וֹם שְׁכֶ֔ם ... (ז) וַיֵּרָ֤א ה' אֶל־אַבְרָ֔ם וַיֹּ֕אמֶר לְזַ֨רְעֲךָ֔ אֶתֵּ֖ן אֶת־הָאָ֣רֶץ הַזֹּ֑את

*At this point, Avraham realized that he had reached the land where he was to begin to fulfill his mission of bringing blessings to the world. Of course, he knew that the mission would only be completely fulfilled by the great nation that would come from him, but it was his responsibility to get started. And it seems he knew exactly what he needed to do:*

וַיִּ֤בֶן שָׁם֙ מִזְבֵּ֔חַ לה' הַנִּרְאֶ֥ה אֵלָֽיו׃ (ח) וַיַּעְתֵּ֨ק מִשָּׁ֜ם הָהָ֗רָה … וַיִּֽבֶן־שָׁ֤ם מִזְבֵּ֙חַ֙ לַה' וַיִּקְרָ֖א בְּשֵׁ֥ם ה' ׃

*What does it mean that he “called out in the name of God”? It means that he began to teach, or to preach, about God. To simply tell people about God. At a time when almost everyone in the world was pagan, Avraham began to spread a message that eventually came to be called* ***monotheism****: the belief in one God who rules the entire world.*

*This belief is not just about theology – it’s much more than that. The God of Avraham is kind and just, and He commands us all to live our lives based on principles of justice, kindness, and holiness. And it seems that this powerful idea,* ***belief in One God****, was the blessing that Avraham and his descendants were chosen to bring to the world. That’s the first part of the story of the Torah.*

*The story has a middle part, but before we get to that, let’s jump to the end. As I said, the end of the story hasn’t happened yet, but it’s been written – among other places, in these verses from the book of Yeshayahu, Isaiah:*

 (ב) וְהָיָ֣ה׀ בְּאַחֲרִ֣ית הַיָּמִ֗ים נָכ֨וֹן יִֽהְיֶ֜ה הַ֤ר בֵּית־ה' בְּרֹ֣אשׁ הֶהָרִ֔ים וְנִשָּׂ֖א מִגְּבָע֑וֹת וְנָהֲר֥וּ אֵלָ֖יו כׇּל־הַגּוֹיִֽם׃

*Yeshayahu sees a vision of the Later Days – all the nations of the world come streaming to Jerusalem. And why do they come?*

(ג) וְֽהָלְכ֞וּ עַמִּ֣ים רַבִּ֗ים וְאָֽמְרוּ֙ לְכ֣וּ׀ וְנַעֲלֶ֣ה אֶל־הַר־ה' אֶל־בֵּית֙ אֱלֹהֵ֣י יַעֲקֹ֔ב

*Here we see two things – they say they want to go up to the House of God. They call Him by the four-letter name used only for the One true God, and they also call Him the “God of Yaakov,” referring to us, עם ישראל. So this means that at the end of history, the entire world will come to recognize the true God, and also to recognize our historic role as His messengers!*

*And why do they want to go to the* Bet Hamikdash*?*

וְיֹרֵ֙נוּ֙ מִדְּרָכָ֔יו וְנֵלְכָ֖ה בְּאֹרְחֹתָ֑יו

*This is incredible! It says that the nations of the world want to learn the Torah (יורנו) so that they can follow it! According to this, the end of history is that* ***the entire world will follow the Torah****!*

*Now, this goes against what a lot of us were told in school. Many of us were taught something that goes like this: “Judaism is different from every other religion, because all others try to convert people to their religion, but we don’t.” That sentence is true in a certain sense – but only according to a specific interpretation of the words “Jewish religion” and “conversion.” But the bottom line, as these verses indicate, is that although we don’t try to convince Gentiles to “become Jewish,” we do aspire for the entire world to learn the Torah and to follow it!*

*And then, the verse continues with words that are familiar to every Jew who goes to synagogue. The words are familiar, but again, I suspect that most of us do not understand their implications:*

**כִּ֤י מִצִּיּוֹן֙ תֵּצֵ֣א תוֹרָ֔ה וּדְבַר־ה' מִירוּשָׁלָֽ͏ִם׃**

*In that verse, when the Torah and the Word of God go forth from Jerusalem, they aren’t going to the Jews, but to* ***ALL OF HUMANITY****! And once that happens, it leads to the rest of the inspiring vision:*

וְכִתְּת֨וּ חַרְבוֹתָ֜ם לְאִתִּ֗ים וַחֲנִיתֽוֹתֵיהֶם֙ לְמַזְמֵר֔וֹת לֹא־יִשָּׂ֨א ג֤וֹי אֶל־גּוֹי֙ חֶ֔רֶב וְלֹֽא־יִלְמְד֥וּ ע֖וֹד מִלְחָמָֽה׃

*This, then, is the culmination of all of history – the concept that later came to be called ימות המשיח, the “Messianic Era”, a time when all of humanity will be united and there will be peace on earth. How does that come about, according to Isaiah? Through all the nations learning – and following – the Torah that was given to עם ישראל.*

*In other words, Isaiah’s prophecy of the Later Days is the end of the story that began with Avraham! And the perfection of the world* ***is*** *the blessing that Avraham was chosen to bring to the nations.*

*OK, so now we know the beginning of the story and the end. What happens in the middle? How is the world supposed to get from Avraham’s message to Isaiah’s vision? That missing middle covers most of history and is the goal of the entire Torah.*

*It can all be summarized in these short verses from Shemot/Exodus:*

בַּחֹ֙דֶשׁ֙ הַשְּׁלִישִׁ֔י לְצֵ֥את בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵ֖ל מֵאֶ֣רֶץ מִצְרָ֑יִם בַּיּ֣וֹם הַזֶּ֔ה בָּ֖אוּ מִדְבַּ֥ר סִינָֽי ... (ג) וּמֹשֶׁ֥ה עָלָ֖ה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִ֑ים וַיִּקְרָ֨א אֵלָ֤יו ה' מִן־הָהָ֣ר לֵאמֹ֔ר כֹּ֤ה תֹאמַר֙ לְבֵ֣ית יַעֲקֹ֔ב וְתַגֵּ֖יד לִבְנֵ֥י יִשְׂרָאֵֽל ... (ה) ... אִם־שָׁמ֤וֹעַ תִּשְׁמְעוּ֙ בְּקֹלִ֔י וּשְׁמַרְתֶּ֖ם אֶת־בְּרִיתִ֑י וִהְיִ֨יתֶם לִ֤י סְגֻלָּה֙ מִכׇּל־הָ֣עַמִּ֔ים כִּי־לִ֖י כׇּל־הָאָֽרֶץ׃

*At this moment, when Avraham’s descendants stood at Mount Sinai, they were offered the opportunity to become עם סגולה – the “great and chosen nation” that was promised to their ancestor Avraham. The condition for this is that they must agree to keep God’s covenant and observe His commandments. And the purpose of that is:*

(ו) וְאַתֶּ֧ם תִּהְיוּ־לִ֛י מַמְלֶ֥כֶת כֹּהֲנִ֖ים וְג֣וֹי קָד֑וֹשׁ אֵ֚לֶּה הַדְּבָרִ֔ים אֲשֶׁ֥ר תְּדַבֵּ֖ר אֶל־בְּנֵ֥י יִשְׂרָאֵֽל׃

*What does it mean to be "ממלכת כהנים" – a kingdom of priests? Well, we know what a כהן does according to the Torah – he officiates in the Temple and helps everyone else bring their offerings to the מזבח. He’s also meant to teach the Torah, and when Hashem wants to send someone out to the people to raise his hands and transmit God’s blessings to them, it’s the same כהן that is chosen. So that means that essentially, a כהן is a mediator. He helps bring God’s messages to the people, and to bring the people closer to God. And therefore, the phrase ממלכת כהנים means that we are meant to serve that same purpose for the rest of humanity.*

*In other words, at that moment at Sinai, the mission given to Avraham became a plan of action: His children were now to become God’s messengers, leading the rest of humanity by example. By living according to the commandments of the Torah, and doing so as a nation in the land of Israel (which just so happens to be located at the very center of the world, especially before the past few hundred years when North and South America were only sparsely inhabited), Avraham’s descendants would represent his message to the world.*

*So, this is the missing link between Avraham and Isaiah – the entire Torah, our observance of it, and all of Jewish History is that missing link. And it also explains what the title “Chosen People” actually means: We are obligated to follow all of God’s commandments – not just as individuals, but following all the laws that regulate how to run a holy nation that can be worthy of the title “Kingdom of Priests”.*

*So that’s it – those are the three stages in the story, and the three messages of the Torah:*

1. ***Avraham’s mission and message – about the existence of God;***
2. ***the messages of true prophecy and the Torah, as first articulated at Sinai;***
3. ***and the future Redemption, predicted by prophets like Isaiah, brought about through* Am Yisrael*’s role as the Kingdom of Priests that slowly transmits Avraham’s message to the world****.*

*There’s a lot more to say, for example about how this story that was first written thousands of years ago in the Torah has mostly happened already, and very accurately describes most of what is today called “history.” And there’s also much more to say and many more details about the Torah’s messages and methods – essentially elaborating on the three stages we have enumerated here.*

*But we’re out of time now. If you want to explore any of this further, I invite you to explore the website that I will be launching in the next few days:* [*www.rabbihaber.net*](http://www.rabbihaber.net)

*Thank you.*

**Unit #1: INTRODUCTION**

About 850 years ago the Rambam (Maimonides) formulated his famous “13 principles of faith”.

The publication of this text sparked a lively debate, with other authorities arguing that there are actually fewer, or more, principles of faith. A few even challenged the very idea of “fundamental principles of faith.” There is also much debate about many of the details. Nevertheless, in a general sense, this list of 13 has become the most commonly accepted definition of Jewish faith.

In a later unit, we’ll discuss the notion of “faith” (including the fact that Rambam himself probably wouldn’t have used this term), the question of whether that concept is even meaningful any longer in our post-modern world, and various viewpoints on how to acquire (or not to acquire) such faith. For now, though, we will relate to this list as **a succinct summary of the Torah’s most essential ideas**.

(NOTE: the term “Torah,” used in the previous sentence, has different meanings. In its most literal, restricted form, it refers to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Tanakh [Bible]. More generally, it refers to the entire Tanakh, and also to the Oral Law [Hebrew: *Torah sheb’al peh*] as recorded in the Talmud and other rabbinic literature. In an even broader sense, though, it can refer to all of the commentaries on those works and all the discussions and disciplines that have been developed from them, including Halakha, Jewish Philosophy, Chassidut, Mussar, and more. When I use the term in these essays, I will generally have this broadest meaning in mind.)

Rambam formulated his 13 principles as part of his commentary to the Mishnah, in the introduction to the tenth chapter of tractate Sanhedrin. The full text, originally written in Judeo-Arabic, fills multiple pages, but at some point in the Middle Ages, an anonymous author summarized them into 13 formulaic Hebrew sentences, each of which begins with the phrase, “I believe with perfect faith….” Eventually, these sentences found their way into the standard prayer book, and today, some people are accustomed to reciting them daily, at the end of the morning prayer service.

Here is the full list of 13 principles (translation is my own):

1. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, may His name be blessed, is the Creator and Ruler of all creatures and that He alone has done, does, and will do everything that is done.
2. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, may His name be blessed, is One, that there is no Oneness like His in any way, and that He alone is our God; He was, is, and will always be.
3. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, may His name be blessed, has no physical/corporeal body and that He cannot be comprehended in physical terms, and there is nothing at all comparable to Him.
4. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, may His name be blessed, is first and last.
5. I believe with perfect faith that it is appropriate to pray only to the Creator, may His name be blessed – and that it is not appropriate to pray to anyone (or anything) else.
6. I believe with perfect faith that all the words of the prophets are true.
7. I believe with perfect faith that the prophecy of Moshe (Moses), our teacher – may peace be upon him – was true, and that he is the head of all prophets: those who preceded him and those who came after him.
8. I believe with perfect faith that the entire Torah presently in our possession is the same Torah that was given to Moshe, our teacher – may peace be upon him.
9. I believe with perfect faith that this Torah will not be replaced and that there will not be another Torah from the Creator, may His name be blessed.
10. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, may His name be blessed, knows all people’s actions and all their thoughts, as it says, “He who fashions the hearts of them all, who discerns all their doings.” (Psalms 33:15)
11. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, may His name be blessed, rewards those who observe His commandments and punishes those who violate His commandments.
12. I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah; although he may tarry, I await his coming every day.
13. I believe with perfect faith that there will be a resurrection of the dead, at the time that the Creator, may His name be blessed, determines; then, His name will be exalted forever and all of eternity.

We’ll have a chance to describe these principles in detail throughout the coming essays. For now, let’s look at the list as a whole. Glancing at it quickly, it becomes clear that the principles are organized in a logical progression, with the later ones depending on the earlier ones. For example, one cannot accept the truth of prophecy (principle #6) without first accepting the existence of God (principles #1-4) – although one could, potentially, believe in God but reject the idea of prophecy. Similarly, only by acknowledging the truth of prophecy can one be certain that the Messiah will come (principle #12), as the prophets predicted.

Also, these principles can be grouped into three sections or stages. The first five principles discuss the existence of **God**, the next four affirm the truth of **prophecy** in general and **the Torah** in particular, and the last four are about the **redemption,** of individuals, of the nation of Israel, and of the world.

And what’s amazing is that these three groups are the same three concepts that we discussed in the opening video, when we explained how the entire Torah is essentially a story with three parts: Avraham’s message about **God**, the mission his descendants were charged with when they received the **Torah** at Sinai, and the **redemption** of the world (predicted by **prophets** like Isaiah), brought about through the fulfillment of that mission!

This, then, will be the organization of the units ahead. This series of ten essays (of which this introduction is the first) is divided into three sections, according to the three-step structure we’ve just described. In each section, there will be several units, each beginning with a short (approximately 3 minutes) video, and then a short article around the same length as this one. These units will be organized around Rambam’s 13 principles, and as we go through them, we will attempt to tell the story of the Torah in a slightly more detailed version.

**SECTION 1 – God**

**Unit #2**

OPENING VIDEO

*Almost 4000 years ago, Avraham Avinu was sent to the Land of Israel. As we saw in the Introduction, the purpose of that journey was to begin to lay the groundwork for the Chosen People who were to bring God’s blessings to all of mankind.*

*The Torah tells us that Avraham began fulfilling this mission by “calling out in the name of God” – ויקרא בשם ה'.*

*What exactly does it mean to “call out in the name of God?” It means to share a great message with the world – an idea that, at the time, was revolutionary. This great message was a concept that we now call “****monotheism****” – belief in the One true God.*

*Back then, almost all people were idolators, pagans – or* ***polytheists****, meaning that they worshipped multiple gods. And they often made images and statues of these gods to place in their temples. Avraham taught the people a different way of thinking – only one God, who is the Creator and Ruler of the entire universe. A rabbinic Midrash gives us some insight into how Avraham may have arrived at this understanding:*

*[Young Avraham] thought to himself, “Who created the heaven and the earth, and me?” He first thought it was the sun, so he prayed all day to the sun. But in the evening, the sun set in the west and the moon rose in the east. When he saw the moon surrounded by the starts, he said, “This must be the one that created the heaven and the earth and me, and these stars are his officers and servants.” So he stood all night and prayed to the moon. But in the morning, the moon set in the west and the sun rose again in the east. Then Avraham said, “Neither of these has any strength. There is a Master over them all. It is to Him that I will pray and to Him that I will bow.”*

*The midrash also discusses Avraham’s attempts to engage in the idolatrous worship of his day, offering various sacrifices in front of the wooden statues that represented the various deities, but realizing that this was futile and meaningless.*

*But what’s so important about all of this? Is Avraham’s God so different from the pagan gods his contemporaries worshipped?*

To understand the significance of the belief that Avraham taught to the world [which, as we’ve said, is Part One of the Torah’s story], let’s look at the first four of Rambam’s principles. These principles define exactly who God is, and what we mean when we talk about Him.

As the first step in our discussion, we’ll focus on three of these first four (we’ll save #2 for a separate discussion in the next unit):

1. *I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, may His name be blessed, is the Creator and Ruler of all creatures and that He alone has done, does, and will do everything that is done.*

This sentence summarizes Rambam’s first principle: that there is an all-powerful God who not only created everything that exists but also continues to sustain it. In the full version of his description of this principle, Rambam writes, “One cannot [even] consider the idea that He does not exist, for if He did not exist, the existence of everything would immediately be nullified…. Conversely, if we are to imagine that absolutely nothing else existed, this would not affect Him at all.” So essentially, this principle means that God is the uncreated Creator and Ruler of the universe. Everything that exists is completely dependent upon Him, but He is dependent upon nothing.

3. *I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, may His name be blessed, has no physical/corporeal body and that He cannot be comprehended in physical terms, and there is nothing at all comparable to Him.*

The idea here is that God is infinite, whereas anything physical is, by definition, finite. If something is physical – even if it is very large – it is located only within the boundaries of its existence. Since God is infinite, He cannot be limited to any one place. This means that although we often say that God is “everywhere”, it’s actually more accurate to say that He is “nowhere”! He exists outside of physical space.

A corollary to this is that any biblical or rabbinic references that describe Him in physical terms (called anthropomorphisms) are to be understood as allegorical or metaphoric, not literal.

1. *I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, may His name be blessed, is first and last*. Just as God exists outside of space, He similarly exists outside of time, and is not bound by it at all. For Him, past, present, and future all coexist simultaneously.

Taken together, these three points mean that God is completely unlike anything in this world – He is infinite and eternal, outside of time and space, and completely disconnected from the universe. That’s very different than the gods the pagans believed in, who seemed very similar to humans. Sometimes their images looked human, and their behaviors were definitely human-like.

This understanding, which today is called “monotheism,” was the great blessing that Avraham brought to the world. The same idea (expressed succinctly at the beginning of the so-called Ten Commandments) forms the basis of the Revelation at Sinai and the historic mission of the people of Israel, and the universal recognition of this same idea is the heart of Isaiah’s vision of the Later Days. Simply put, the entire story of the Torah is based on this one single, fundamental concept: monotheism.

Why is this idea so important?

To understand this, it may be useful to look at the stories the Torah tells us about Avraham. As mentioned above, we are told multiple times (Bereishit/Genesis 12:8, 13:4, 21:33) that Avraham “called out” in the Name of God, which assumedly means he taught people the concept of monotheism, as outlined above.

But Avraham’s message wasn’t only about theology. We also find him fighting to rescue captive prisoners (chapter 14), welcoming guests into his tent (18:1-8), pleading with God to spare the residents of Sodom and its neighbors (18:20-32), and exhorting others to act with honesty and justice (20:11, 21:24). Indeed, God Himself testified about Avraham, “For I have known him, in order that he will command his descendants and family after him to preserve the ways of God: to perform [acts of] righteousness and justice, so that God may bring about for Avraham everything he spoke of” (Genesis 18:19).

It seems that these themes of kindness and justice were also central to Avraham’s life and mission. But what do these things have to do with the theological idea of God’s existence, which seems to be the main thing that Avraham stood for?

As it turns out, everything. But for that, we need to look at Rambam’s second principle – the one we skipped earlier.

**Unit #3**

OPENING VIDEO

*We explained that Avraham’s message can be summarized as the belief in one God, or the idea that is now called* ***monotheism****.*

*This belief stands in contrast to several other belief systems that people have accepted at times. The most important two of these are:*

* ***Atheism*** *– the belief that there is no God at all, and*
* ***Polytheism*** *– the belief that there are multiple gods.*

*As we said, in Avraham’s time, pretty much everyone in the world was a polytheist. An amazing fact (which we’ll return to in a later discussion) is that today, in sharp contrast with Avraham’s time,* ***more than half of the people in the world*** *are monotheists,**meaning that the* ***majority of humanity*** *now believes in one God, the God of Avraham! At least in the western world, though, those who aren’t monotheists nowadays are more likely to be atheists than polytheists.*

*So let’s compare these three philosophies. When I discuss this with my students, I often write the terms on the board this way:*

* *Atheist = 0 gods*
* *Monotheist = 1 God*
* *Polytheist = 2 or more gods*

*I then ask them which two of these theories are more like each other, and which of the three is more different. Most people logically respond that monotheists and polytheists are more similar, and atheism is more different. At first glance, that response makes a lot of sense. After all, monotheists and polytheists are both* ***theists*** *– they believe in the existence of God or gods – their only argument is about how many there are. As opposed to the atheist, who denies the entire concept.*

*But then I tell them that actually, as counter-intuitive as this seems, it is the monotheist who is unique in this group. The polytheist and the atheist are actually very similar – in fact, they are almost (though not completely) identical!*

*In this next article, I’ll explain what I mean.*

Rambam’s second principle is:

*I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, may His name be blessed, is One, that there is no Oneness like His in any way, and that He alone is our God; He was, is, and will always be.*

“No Oneness like His” – what does that mean?

In the lengthier original version of this principle, Rambam explains philosophically what it means to be absolutely One: As the cause of everything that exists, there can only be one God. And therefore, when we say there is “One” God, we do not mean this in the same sense as we do when we say “I have ‘one’ chocolate bar” – in that case, I may have only one, but there are many. Nor do we mean it the same way as when we say “one person” – there, although we are talking about a single creature who is indeed unique, as a “person”, he or she is still part of a larger group. In this case, though, there is, and only can be, one. There can never be a second.

Also, if I have one chocolate bar, I can break it in half, and then I will have two pieces of the original whole. And a person is also a composite being, with many different elements composing him or her – a physical body composed of many parts, and also a mind, a soul, a personality, and emotions. But when we say that God is One, we mean that these things are not true about Him either; he is not composed of parts, and could never be subdivided. He is simply and absolutely One.

This may sound like obscure, abstract theology, but it has a very practical impact on the nature of the belief. It’s significant because it means that the difference between monotheism and polytheism is not about numbers; we are talking about two fundamentally different concepts.

In the polytheistic conception of the world, there is no single ruler in charge of everything. Rather, the polytheist sees the universe as a chaotic place controlled by various powers (which he personifies as “gods”). While the specific names and mythologies varied from region to region, there are striking similarities between them. They all believed in a pantheon of gods, each of which was thought to be responsible for a different natural or human phenomenon: there was usually a sun god and a moon god, a god of wind, a god of rain, a god (or often, goddess) of fertility, a god of war, a god of love, and so on. And as we explained in the previous unit, these gods often looked, and acted, pretty much like humans: They were jealous of one another, fought with one another, formed alliances, and deceived one another. To survive in such a world, the polytheist worships the various gods and tries to figure out what they need so he can win their favor and entice them to act in his interest. He may also engage in magical rituals that he believes can harness various forces to help him.

Now let’s compare this to the way an atheist sees the world. Unlike the polytheist, he doesn’t believe in gods with personalities and emotions. But he also sees a chaotic universe in which various forces interact and clash with one another. His universe, like that of the polytheist, has no ruler, nobody in charge. Since he can’t worship the inanimate forces he believes control the world, and since he probably doesn’t believe in magic either, he turns instead to science and technology. But when he does this, his goal is very similar to that of the pagan worshiper or magician: he wants to figure out which forces of nature are the most powerful ones, and harness those forces to do his will.

So, these two philosophies are not identical, but they are much more alike than appears at first. Since they both believe that the world has no creator or ruler, it follows that it has no real purpose. It also becomes very difficult – perhaps impossible – to speak about ethics or acts of kindness. If the gods cheat, steal and attack each other, or if ultimately we are all just random collections of molecules, then why should anyone restrain himself from hurting others, let alone exert efforts on their behalf?

Now we can understand just how radical an idea it was that Avraham brought to the world. He didn’t deny the existence of all those forces that impact our lives; he simply taught people that there is one single God who created and rules them all. Since this God is infinite and perfect, it follows that He doesn’t need anything from us; He created us simply as an act of benevolence. And He commands us to worship Him, to respect each other, and treat each other with justice and kindness. What a revolution!

**Unit #4**

OPENING VIDEO

*At this point, before continuing with our analysis of the Thirteen Principles and the “Story of the Torah”, we need to stop and address the proverbial “elephant in the room”.*

*What do I mean? Well, by now we’ve explained that Avraham taught the world the idea of monotheism, we’ve analyzed the first four of Rambam’s principles to understand what that means, and we’ve also seen that this idea, which was so revolutionary at the time, could possibly motivate people to act in noble ways – most importantly, as God said about Avraham himself, “to perform [acts of] righteousness and justice” and “to command [their] descendants” to do so as well.*

*But here’s the thing. None of that works unless we accept that monotheism is actually true – that God really does exist. What if someone doesn’t believe in God, or even isn’t sure if he believes? A person might say something like “I agree that the idea of monotheism is beautiful and inspiring. I see how believing this could make the world a better place. But that doesn’t mean it’s true! And if it isn’t true, then there is no point in pretending.”*

*At this point, people often begin to look for “proof” of God’s existence, or to ask questions like “How do we know that God exists?” But in this unit’s essay, we won’t use the words “proof” or “know”. Instead, we will talk about reasons to believe in Him.*

*We need to understand that there is a difference between “believing” something is true and “knowing” that it’s true. If something has been proven, then I can say I* ***know*** *– for a fact – that it is true. But if I say I* ***believe*** *that something is true, it actually means I* ***don’t*** *know it for a fact.*

*Significantly, the 13 principles as recorded in our Siddur all begin with the words “Ani Maamin” – I* ***believe****, not “Ani Yodea”, I* ***know*** *(although it is important to note that, as we will discuss, Rambam himself used different language and may have seen this issue differently). Jewish tradition has generally understood monotheism – and the other principles that we will discuss in the next two sections – as matters of* ***faith and belief****, not as* ***factual knowledge****.*

*But that doesn’t have to mean that we’re expected to take the proverbial “leap of faith” and believe it blindly. Not at all, as we shall now see.*

At earlier points in history, many people (both Jewish and not) were convinced that they could *prove* the truth of their religious beliefs. Even Rambam seems to have taken this approach: in the opening sentence of the *Mishneh Torah*, his monumental 14-book compendium of Jewish law, he writes that “the foundation of all foundations and the pillar of all wisdom is to **know** that there is a “First Being” (meaning God, in the philosophic parlance of the time). Indeed, in his later work *Guide of the Perplexed* (Part II), Rambam presents the detailed argument that he defines as proof.

Without getting into the details of Rambam’s analysis, it seems that in our time, for whatever reason, such arguments do not convince many people. When people in the 21st-century western world speak of “proof”, they generally mean scientific proof, supported by physical evidence and experimentation. If that is the criteria, then the existence of something metaphysical (like God) cannot possibly be proven. Of course, though, the same logic means that God’s existence also cannot be disproven! While some atheists (like Richard Dawkins) present science as an alternative to religion, in reality, science (which is based on experimentation and data from the physical world) has no position about whether God exists or not. The discussion is completely outside of the scope of scientific inquiry.

For us scientifically minded people, therefore, it probably doesn’t make sense to speak about “knowledge” or “proof” of God’s existence – or lack thereof. Instead, we need to talk about *belief*. We shouldn’t ask questions like “how do we know God exists?”, but questions like “why should we (or shouldn’t we) *believe* in God’s existence?”

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Previously, we contrasted Avraham’s **monotheistic** belief with the **polytheistic** beliefs common at his time, and with the contemporary philosophy of **atheism**. Now let’s talk about a different approach, which nowadays is often called **agnosticism**.

As opposed to an **atheist**, who **believes** that there is no God, an **agnostic** is someone who declares that he does not know (and often, that it is not possible to know) whether or not there is a God. Note that, perhaps surprisingly, according to this definition, an atheist is actually a **person of faith** – he or she *believes* that God does not exist, just as a monotheist *believes* that He does. The agnostic, however, does not wish to believe anything – he wants to base his life only upon *knowledge*. And since the agnostic does not **know** if God exists, he or she won’t believe in Him either.

At first glance, agnosticism sometimes seems to be the most (or even the only) rational and intellectually honest approach. Believers from all sorts of religions make bold claims to truth based on various texts that they *believe* reflect divine revelation, but we’ve already pointed out that most people nowadays assume that one can’t conclusively *prove* the truth of any religion, or even of God’s existence. If that’s true, then by definition any religious person is making assumptions that might be false, while a secular person isn’t making an assumption like that. So an agnostic might live a secular lifestyle, justified by the lack of proof for religion, saying something like, “If anyone can prove conclusively that God exists and that He has commanded me to do anything, I will obey. But unless and until that happens, I will make my decisions based only upon things I know to be true.”

This may sound very reasonable, but there is a major fallacy in this approach: it treats lack of belief as a kind of default, assuming that acting as though God does not exist is intrinsically more rational than acting as though He does. But the problem is that we’ve already established that the question of God’s existence cannot be tested scientifically. So if one begins by questioning whether or not God exists, and then comes to the conclusion that there is no way to answer this question with proof, there is no logical basis to prefer acting as though He does not exist to acting as though He does.

Furthermore, as philosopher William James wrote in his 1896 lecture “The Will to Believe”, the question of belief in God is what he calls a “genuine option” – a question about which there is no real possibility of not deciding. A monotheist lives his or her life based on the assumption that God exists, while an atheist lives based on the assumption that He doesn’t. While one can maintain agnosticism as an intellectual position, he still needs to decide how to live his life. Either he acts as if he believes God exists (making him a *de facto* theist), or (much more likely) he lives a secular life and acts as though He doesn’t – making him a *de facto* atheist. The option of “refusing to base my life on something that hasn’t been proven” simply does not exist in any practical sense.

At this point, therefore, each person has to ask what are good reasons to believe in God. This is something that philosophers of religion have debated for centuries. There are a number of classical arguments, such as the “cosmological argument,” which says that there needs to be a primary cause that brought everything into existence; the somewhat similar “argument from design,” which points to the incredible complexity and harmony of the universe as a strong indication that it has an intelligent (and assumedly benevolent) Creator; and various forms of the “argument from morality” that accepts moral truths as self-evident and argues that there can be no morality if there is no God. While many people find these arguments or others convincing, other people base their faith on subjective impressions, the power of tradition, or various emotional feelings, and some claim that this is even a stronger basis for faith than philosophical arguments.

We will have more to say about this in Unit #6, in the context of our discussions regarding the “story of the Torah”.

**Unit #5**

OPENING VIDEO

*Earlier, we uncovered a surprising connection between Avraham’s theological message – that there is only One God – and his societal message: the values of justice and kindness. This revolutionary idea, that the world is ruled by a single omnipotent God who commands all of us to follow the path of justice and kindness, was the “great blessing” to mankind that Avraham was chosen to represent.*

*But to obtain the promised blessing, it’s not enough for mankind to simply accept or affirm the truth of monotheism. For the concept to be genuinely transformative, it needed to lead to action. First, the world had to stop worshiping polytheistic deities and reject all pagan practices. But that itself wasn’t enough – people also needed to begin worshiping the one true God. That’s why, at several points in his life, we are told that Avraham not only “called out in the name of God”, but also built an altar to God (Bereishit 12:7,8; 13:18).*

*You may remember that in the opening video, we read Isaiah’s messianic prophecy of the Later Days. There were two main aspects to that vision – Isaiah saw all the nations of the world coming to Jerusalem, united in their desire to ascend the Mountain of God to learn and follow His Torah, and he also saw them beating their swords into plowshares, ushering in an era of universal peace. If we think about what we just said regarding Avraham’s message, I think it’s now even clearer that Isaiah’s vision is nothing other than the ultimate fulfillment of that message! Meaning, as we said at the outset, the great story of the Torah begins with Avraham, and ends with the Messianic Era.*

*We’ve also already described how Avraham battled against the polytheism of his time, and how he also implicitly argued against the related (but still different) philosophy of atheism that developed much later. The truth is, there is another contemporary approach that Avraham also countered pre-emptively with his powerful ideas.* *Read the article in this section for a brief discussion of this fascinating and perhaps unexpected development.*

Rambam’s 5th principle (coming after the first four that define the God of monotheism) is:

*I believe with perfect faith that it is appropriate to pray only to the Creator, may His name be blessed; and that it is not appropriate to pray to anyone (or anything) else.*

There are actually two separate points here.

Let’s start from the second half of the sentence – it is not appropriate to pray to anyone (or anything) else. This is an explicit rejection of idolatry.

It’s important to point out that affirming monotheism does not automatically, intrinsically, require this rejection of idolatry. It’s possible for people to accept the existence of the one God described in the first four principles, while still believing in and worshipping other entities such as angels, minor deities, or forces of nature. While acknowledging that there is one God who rules everything, such idolatrous worship can be based on the assumption that God has assistants and subordinates who have been granted a degree of autonomy. Just as someone who needs assistance from the government will not necessarily approach the king or president (or the mayor of the city) but may instead appeal to a mid-level or low-level officer with the authority to help him, the “monotheistic idolator” may similarly appeal directly to the authority he believes is responsible for health, livelihood, fertility, or whatever else it is that he needs. Indeed, Rambam maintains that idol worship began among monotheists, not polytheists (see *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* 1:1), and the Tanakh indicates that such practices were not uncommon among our ancestors (see, for example, I Kings 18:21. See also Ramban on Exodus 32:1).

Avraham’s message, though, demanded complete allegiance to God, insisting that we worship Him alone, thereby acknowledging that any intermediaries or “assistants” He may employ have no autonomy or independent will. Rejecting idolatry, therefore, means rejecting the idea that anyone or anything else has any control or power at all.

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But now let’s go back to the first half of principle #5. In addition to demanding that we refrain from worshipping anyone other than God, it also asserts that we should worship God!

This can perhaps be understood as a rejection of a modern ideology that is sometimes known by the name ***Deism*:** the belief that there is in fact a God who created the world, but that He subsequently abandoned that world and isn’t involved with it at all. It follows, therefore, that there is no such thing as prophecy, no genuine religious texts, and no divine judgment. Deism can be quite comfortable both from a philosophical perspective (it seems reasonable that an infinite, eternal, perfect God would not interact with transient imperfect beings such as us) and from a practical one (there are no commandments other than a vague imperative to live an ethical and good life).

But Avraham’s message rejected this as well. Avraham’s God is intimately involved with all His creations. He rules the world, commands the world, and judges the world. He commands His creations to worship Him and – perhaps most importantly – to “perform [acts of] kindness and justice.” The purpose of all this is to perfect and redeem the world.

This, then, concludes the first section of our series. We understand the first part of the Torah’s story – Avraham’s profoundly transformative message to mankind – the concept often called **ethical monotheism**, which is summarized in the first five of Rambam’s 13 Principles.

**SECTION 2 – Prophecy and Torah**

**Unit #6**

OPENING VIDEO

*Welcome to Section Two of our series, and to Part Two of the Torah’s Story. This section is all about* ***prophecy*** *– the idea that God, at times, reveals Himself to humans and communicates with them. It’s through these prophecies (and particularly, the unique prophecies that form the Torah) that the ideas embodied in Avraham’s message were to be inculcated into the world so that they could elevate it and bring about redemption (which will be the subject of Section Three).*

*If you think about it, this striking idea is – on the one hand – a crucially important step. If we don’t accept the concept of prophecy, then it is impossible to accept the Torah, or, for that matter, any revealed religious text whatsoever. In fact, if you don’t accept the validity of prophecy, there can’t be any commandments of any sort. The only religion possible would be something like the Deism that we rejected in the previous unit. So prophecy is really central to our story.*

*But on the other hand, prophecy is one of the aspects of Torah thought that many people have the most trouble accepting. I think there are two main reasons for this discomfort:*

*First of all, the entire concept seems strange, especially since according to our tradition there haven’t been any real prophets in approximately the past two-and-a-half thousand years. So, one may wonder, what happened before that – did God ever really speak to people? Or is this just something that seemed believable back in ancient times?*

*Second, even if one can accept the idea in principle, to believe a prophecy you need to trust a specific person to say that he or she actually did receive divine communication, understood it accurately, and is reporting it honestly. This may be difficult enough by in its own right, and it becomes even more difficult when the content of the prophecy is something you struggle with anyway – for example, commandments that are challenging or troubling, or predictions of a Messianic future that may not seem particularly realistic.*

*So this is our dilemma: Prophecy is central to the Torah’s story, message, and method, and without it, everything falls apart – but it is no small challenge to embrace it. Where do we go from here?*

Rambam’s sixth principle is deceptively simple: “*I believe with perfect faith that all the words of the prophets are true*.”

The Talmud (*Megillah 14*a) tells us that over a period of many centuries, there were hundreds of thousands of true prophets, all of whom received genuine revelations from God. Nevertheless, only a tiny fraction of those prophecies – the ones with timeless, eternal significance – were recorded for posterity in the *Tanakh* (Bible), which is itself divided into three sections reflecting different levels of revelation (the Hebrew names of which form the acronym *Tanakh*):

 *Torah* – the Five Books that represent the literal word of God as revealed to Moshe (we’ll deal with the special significance of this section in the next unit)

 *Neviim*/Prophets – books written by genuine prophets, recording those prophecies they received that are deemed relevant for all future generations, and

 *Ketuvim*/Writings – other books, written by people with the aid of a lower level of divine inspiration (*Ruah HaKodesh*): something less than full-fledged prophecy but still of the same general nature.

Rambam’s sixth principle, therefore, requires us to accept everything written in the Tanakh as true.

The problem, though, is that as we mentioned in this unit’s opening video, it’s not so easy to believe that God really spoke to people. Perhaps in response to this, the Torah tells us that at one key point in history – the moment of the Revelation at Sinai – the entire nation of Israel experienced prophecy, hearing the voice of God speak to Moshe so that all would know that indeed, prophecy really does exist and that Moshe was a true prophet (*Shemot* 19:9, 20:15-18; *Devarim* 5:19-30).

At the same time, the *Tanakh* acknowledges that the concept of prophecy carries a very real danger: since people are commanded to follow the instructions of true prophets, they risk being misled by false ones (see, for example, I Kings 22:7-28; Jeremiah 26 8-11). For this reason, the Torah provides criteria for differentiating a genuine prophet from a fraudulent one (*Devarim* 13:2-6, 18:18-22).

With all of these difficulties, though, prophecy is one of the greatest gifts that God has given to man. As we’ll explore in the next few units, the Torah – which began with a revelation to the entire nation of Israel at Sinai and continued through the unique prophecies of Moshe, as well as the Oral Law, which is based on these prophecies – is what transformed the People of Israel into God’s messengers, setting into motion the historical process that will ultimately perfect and redeem the world, in turn actualizing Avraham’s mission to bring blessing to all the nations. The prophets also laid out the great Messianic vision of hope for the future of mankind, such as the inspiring vision of Isaiah that we read at the beginning of our course, and which is inscribed on the wall outside of the United Nations headquarters in New York.

Additionally, it’s fascinating to contemplate how the challenges of prophecy may have changed from previous generations to our own. At first glance, it appears that the difficulties mentioned above – the need to believe and trust the prophets – have only gotten stronger in today’s skeptical world. On the other hand, though, living at this unique time in history gives us a profound vantage point from which to appreciate the power and truth of biblical prophecies.

While the full Messianic redemption predicted by the prophets remains a vision for the future, certain key aspects of this vision have already come true, or are coming true now. The most significant of these is the prediction that the People of Israel would survive thousands of years of exile and persecution, and then return from exile and dispersion to rebuild the Land of Israel. For much of history, this prediction must have seemed like a wild fantasy. Today, however, these prophecies read like a history book! Particularly in contemporary Israel, so many things that we take for granted as part of our daily lives are nothing short of miraculous and match the ancient prophecies in an uncanny manner.

**Unit #7**

OPENING VIDEO

*Rambam’s Seventh principle is:* ”I believe with perfect faith that the prophecy of Moshe (Moses), our teacher – may peace be upon him – was true, and that he is the head of all prophets: those who preceded him and those who came after him*.*”

*An entire principle, one out of 13, devoted to a single person!*

*The final verses of the Torah – at the very end of the book of Devarim – make the same point in this way:*

*“There never again rose a prophet in Israel like Moshe, whom God knew face to face, with all of the signs and wonders that God sent him to perform… before the eyes of all Israel.”*

*Interestingly, just a few verses earlier, the Torah tells us that Moshe’s burial site will always remain hidden – in sharp contrast to many other charismatic leaders of various cultures, whose tombs became national monuments or places of pilgrimage. It seems, therefore, that while the Torah was concerned that Moshe not become the subject of worship or even adulation, it nevertheless insists that there was something unique and unparalleled about his role as a prophet.*

*Why is it necessary to describe Moshe in such singular terms?*

*Moshe was only one of many true prophets – some lived before him and many others came afterward. But Moshe’s prophecies were of a fundamentally different nature; in his commentary, Rambam describes four different ways in which Moshe’s prophecy was qualitatively superior to all others. And because of that, Moshe’s prophecies became* ***the Torah,*** *which is something completely different than other prophecies, in at least three distinct ways:*

1. *According to traditional Jewish belief, the written Torah was dictated to Moshe, word for word, directly by God. So the Torah is, quite literally, the Word of God. This is different than other books of prophecies (such as the books of Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.), in which the prophet describes – in his own words – the visions he received.*
2. *Whereas other prophecies include exhortations, rebukes, moral guidance, and general instructions, only the Torah contains* ***mitzvot*** *– divine* ***commandments*** *of eternal relevance.*
3. *In addition to the holy text of the written Torah, Moshe’s prophecies are the foundation of the* ***Torah sheb’al peh*** *– the oral tradition, which forms the basis of the* ***halacha*** *– the eternally-binding legal system of Torah law.*

*We’ve already seen that the Revelation and Covenant on Mount Sinai is a central event in the Torah’s story. This covenant – in which the People of Israel committed to observing the Torah – transformed them into a “Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation,” formalizing the mission for which their ancestor Avraham was chosen. We’ve also seen that although the Torah was given to the People of Israel, Isaiah’s vision of the Later Days is built on* ***all the nations studying it and following it****.*

*In a sense, therefore, we can say that the Torah was meant to do nothing less than* ***transform the entire world****. How was it meant to do that?*

As we’ve already mentioned, we have been told that accepting the Torah and committing to follow it makes us into “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Shemot 19:6), which enables us to influence and transform the entire world. How does this work?

A fundamental misunderstanding that many people have when they think about the Torah is to view it as the source of a *religion* (which they call “Judaism”). While the Torah does, of course, speak about religion, this is only one part of what it addresses. If we examine all the laws in the Torah, we see that in addition to commandments about how to worship God (including laws about bringing offerings in the Temple, Shabbat and holidays, prayer, kosher food, and the like) there are also many sections that discuss matters of a completely different nature, such as the judicial system, civil lawsuits, politics, military matters, and more.

Therefore, a much better way to look at the Torah is to see it as *the constitution of a nation* and *a blueprint for society*. The Torah addresses every aspect of *national* life and instructs us how to build those institutions in a way that will be true to the definition of “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

A full treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this short essay, but here (in bullet-point form) are some of the inspiring models the Torah presents for building a model society:

* Political system and Government: While there is a debate about which system of government is ideal from the Torah’s perspective, it describes a monarchy led by a king “from among your brethren” who – uncharacteristically for kings – is limited by various restrictions. He “must not obtain too many horses”, may not take “too many wives” and must not “keep large amounts of silver and gold.” He is also commanded “to write a copy of the Torah in a book…and read it all the days of his life, in order that he will learn to fear God…that his heart not rise up above his brothers, and that he not stray from these commandments" (Devarim 17:14-20).
* Capital city: Every nation, of course, must have a central location that serves as the seat of its government and the headquarters of its national institutions. In the book of Devarim (12:2, 4-11) there is a description of such a place, where the king and the Supreme Court are based, and to which all the people are to gather multiple times a year. This place, though, is called “the place that God will choose to rest His presence there”; at its center is the Temple – ensuring that worship of God remains the focal point of everything that happens.
* Taxation: Although the king is entitled to tax the people in order to fund the government, army national building projects, and other needs, there is a system of taxation built in to directly fund the Temple and the priesthood (*teruma* and other gifts), the education system (run by the Levites, who are given a tithe from all agricultural products), and welfare for the poor. There is also a unique tax called the Second Tithe (*maaser sheni*), which demands that farmers set aside approximately 9% of their produce during four out of every seven years, and eat this produce themselves in Jerusalem. This essentially creates a “vacation fund” that encourages everyone to spend some time in the holy city, absorbing its unique atmosphere and being influenced by it.
* National Holidays: The Kingdom of Priests is to have national holidays like all other nations do. But each of theirs is infused with meaning and symbolism, so that days of leisure spent relaxing with family also reinforce the nation’s relationship with God and dependence on Him, educate the people about their roots and the young about their purpose and values.

The three *regalim* (pilgrimage festivals) are timed at key points in the agricultural cycle: Pesach is the Spring Festival, when the produce begins to grow, Shavuot is the Reaping Festival, when the farmers begin to harvest their crops, and Sukkot is the Gathering Festival, at the end of the harvest, when the nation is to celebrate its bounty and pray for a good rainy season and successful crop in the coming year. At the same time, each of these festivals also commemorates an aspect of the nation’s history and heritage: Pesach commemorates the Exodus from Egypt that took place at that very time of year, Shavuot commemorates the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai seven weeks later, and Sukkot symbolizes the temporary dwellings that the nation lived in during their years in the Wilderness, and Hashem’s protection of them during that time.

* Economic System: The great economic debate of the twentieth century was between two competing systems – capitalism and communism. Each of these systems, of course, is less than perfect. History has demonstrated the flaws of communism, which removes incentives to work while encouraging corruption, but capitalist societies favor the strong and wealthy at the expense of the poor and weak and often suffer from a huge gap between the classes. The Torah provides an ingenious solution to this problem, a unique compromise between the two competing ideas. Its economy is essentially capitalist, but there are social welfare provisions to ensure that the poor are cared for, and periodic “resets” in the form of the Sabbatical year every seven years, and the much more dramatic Jubilee every fifty (see Vayikra 19:9-10; Devarim Vayikra 25:8-10, 13-16). All of this is based on and meant to reinforce in everyone’s consciousness, the profound truth that there is no such thing as genuine private ownership of property – the world and everything in it belongs to God, and ultimately, He decides how wealth is distributed and commands the rich to care for the poor (see Vayikra 25:23-24).
* The Military: Although the Torah's ideal vision is a world without war, it recognizes that until that ideal is realized, there will be a need for warriors and armies. Therefore, the Kingdom of Priests is to have an army and fight the wars it needs to fight. In some cases, the Torah even endorses the idea that wartime has different rules, and grants dispensations for actions ordinarily prohibited (see Devarim 21:10-14). However, the behavior of soldiers is strictly regulated. Although harsh measures are mandated against enemy soldiers, the Torah generally prohibits the killing of non-combatants and demands that when possible, the enemies be given terms for surrender that allow them to coexist peacefully with Am Yisrael. Wanton destruction of property is also prohibited (Devarim 20:19-20). Furthermore, the Torah insists on a high standard of conduct among the soldiers themselves (see Devarim 23:10-15).

This, then, seems to be the ultimate purpose of the Torah. The Children of Israel are meant to live in the land of Israel – at the center of human society – and to follow all the Torah’s laws, thus creating a model society for the rest of the world to imitate.

If they were to live up to this challenge and scrupulously follow all the laws, their society would indeed be an inspiration to the world. Slowly but surely, other nations would begin to adopt similar policies in their own countries, and the world would begin to coalesce around these great ideas. Ultimately, Isaiah’s vision of the Later Days would come about as the natural culmination of the process of history:

\*\*\*PSUKIM FROM ISAIAH 2 HERE

**Unit #8**

OPENING VIDEO

*We’ve now reached the point where the Torah’s story starts to get really interesting!*

*Let’s summarize what we’ve learned until now: The Torah tells us that there is One God who created the world and rules it completely, who at times communicates with mankind via prophets, and who demands that everyone act with kindness and justice. This God chose one man (Avraham), and eventually an entire family of his descendants, to become a great nation destined to bring His blessings to all the nations. To accomplish this objective, He brought His people out of Egypt to Mount Sinai, and there He revealed Himself to them ­– primarily to one particular member of that nation: Moshe, the greatest prophet to ever live.*

*Through Moshe, He gave us the Torah, which tells much of this story, explains many of these principles, and – most importantly – provides detailed instructions for the Chosen People to establish themselves as a nation in the land of Israel. Following these instructions, which address pretty much every aspect of national and individual life, would enable the nation to fulfill the mandate of being “A Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation” – living this way is meant to lead the world by example, and – over a period of many years or centuries – to unite the nations around these inspiring ideals. This will ultimately lead to the fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision.*

*Now, this brings us to Rambam’s Eighth and Ninth principles, both of which build on the previous one, which established the uniqueness of Moshe’s prophecy. The Eighth principle says:*

I believe with perfect faith that the entire Torah presently in our possession is the same Torah that was given to Moshe, our teacher – may peace be upon him.

*This principle establishes the eternity of the Torah – given to the greatest prophet of all time, it remains accessible and in force for all time. It has not been forgotten, corrupted, or changed.*

*And the ninth principle is:*

I believe with perfect faith that this Torah will not be replaced and that there will not be another Torah from the Creator, may His name be blessed.

*This contradicts the claims of other religions, such as Christianity and Islam, as well as lots of smaller religions, which affirm that the Torah was indeed given by God to Moshe, but believe that He later replaced it with other things. Since Moshe was greater than any other prophet who will ever live, nobody will ever have the authority to replace his Torah. The Torah, therefore, is eternal – and it is only the Torah that can bring redemption to the world.*

*This is a powerful idea, but it also causes difficulty: How can it be that the same laws and principles that governed our lives thousands of years ago when the Torah was first given are still relevant today, when the world has changed so much? How can we possibly follow the same Torah in different generations and eras, with such profound differences between them?*

A while back, I was approached by a serious, thoughtful, and committed Reform Jew who wanted to understand more about Orthodoxy. I asked him what he thought the difference is between Orthodox and Reform Judaism. After thinking for a moment, he told me, “While Reform believes that religious practices must be updated and changed to meet the times, the Orthodox live exactly as our ancestors did.”

In response, I pointed out that, despite some similarities in stereotypical dress and appearance, Orthodox Jews are not Amish. Unlike the Amish, Orthodox Jews drive cars, use cell phones, and avail themselves of other technological conveniences. More significantly, while there are substantial differences between various Orthodox groups regarding the extent to which this idea is applied, *all* agree that the practical application of laws and traditions must be appropriate for the specific generation, community, and individual involved. So, I told him, his definition is incorrect – Orthodox Jews do *not* live “exactly as our ancestors did.” In fact, from a certain perspective, his self-definition of Reform belief, “that religious practices must be updated and changed to meet the times,” defines Orthodoxy as well.

So, what, then, is the difference? Or – to put it differently – how can the undeniable reality that we today do not live the same way our ancestors did be reconciled with the Rambam’s eighth and ninth principles, which assert that the Torah has not been changed and can never be replaced?

The answer lies in what is perhaps the most unusual aspect of the divine wisdom evident in the Torah: the system of *Torah sheb’al Peh* (the Oral Law) and *Halakha* (the legal system through which the Torah’s commandments are put into action).

When one studies this system, several paradoxes become apparent: according to its own self-definition, it is both eternal and dynamic, unchangeable yet highly flexible and adaptable. It is also both human and divine – in fact, it’s a partnership between God and man.

The secret behind this is the Torah’s surprising decision to formulate religious, philosophical, and ethical principles into *commandments* that, together, form a *legal system*. More than theologians, thinkers, or spiritual leaders, the Talmudic sages and later rabbis were and are *lawyers*. This may seem odd at first, but its power is enormous. As any skilled lawyer can attest, a legal system is both grounded and evolutionary, conservative and adaptable. Laws evolve to meet changing needs through the constant interplay of legislation, litigation, public convention, legal decisions, and precedent – and all of these elements are present in halakha as well.

A wonderful rabbinic legend (*Menahot 29b*) says that upon ascending Mount Sinai, Moshe found the Almighty “tying crowns” to the letters of the Torah. Not understanding the significance of these, Moshe inquired, and God informed him that well over 1000 years later, a great sage named Rabbi Akiva would live, who would be able to derive many important insights from these crowns. Moshe replied that he would like to see this man, and God obliged by sending him into the future, where he found himself at the back of Rabbi Akiva’s study hall. Moshe quickly became very distressed, because he did not understand any part of the lecture – could it be that, after being transmitted over so many generations, the Torah would become distorted beyond recognition? However, the conclusion of the story is that Moshe heard one of the students ask Rabbi Akiva the source for one of his points. When Rabbi Akiva responded, “it is a *halakha* taught to Moshe on Mount Sinai”, Moshe was comforted.

This poetic image encapsulates the secret of *Torah sheb’al peh.* Indeed, Moshe could not understand Rabbi Akiva any more than Rabbi Akiva would have been able to understand today’s halakhic debates about subjects such as brain death, electronic commerce, or feminism. But the decisions that Rabbi Akiva taught were based upon the principles Moshe transmitted, just as today’s decisions are based upon those of Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues. In this way, the *halakha* can react to societal change and development, as it simultaneously molds and shapes that development. The *halakha* can adapt and evolve while remaining true to its original source.

Human beings have a major role in this evolution and adaption, and yet the *halakha* remains divine – as Rabbi Akiva said in the story, it all goes back to “the *halakha* taught to Moshe on Mount Sinai.” Therefore, Rambam’s eighth and ninth principles can be affirmed: the Torah has not been changed, distorted, or replaced. And at the same time, its timeless messages can be applied to the unique circumstances of each generation and can help move the world step by step toward redemption.

**SECTION 3 – Redemption**

**Unit #9**

OPENING VIDEO

*We have now reached the third and final stage of this series – the climax of the Torah’s story, and its very purpose: Redemption.*

*Redemption – what exactly does that word mean? If you look the word up in a dictionary (or if you look at all the times the Bible uses the parallel Hebrew term גאולה) you will come up with a few related meanings: the term can refer to release or salvation from danger, or to recovering or buying back property that had been lost or sold, or to paying a debt or fulfilling a promise. And it can also mean improving something or changing it for the better.*

*When used in conversations about Torah, the term usually means the Messianic Era ­– that future time predicted by the prophets when the world will reach a state of perfection. In this context, Redemption refers to the nation of Israel as a whole, or even to all of humanity.*

*Of course, that is the ultimate goal, and we’ll discuss that in the final unit of this series. But first, we need to focus on a different, more local meaning of the term: the redemption of an* individual*.*

*The great medieval authority Rashi, commenting on the Talmud (Megillah, daf יז:) compares the future redemption of the nation of Israel from exile to the redemption of each person from various troubles and difficulties one experiences in life. Rambam’s 13 principles also seem to recognize this principle, as the 10th and 11th principles describe the Torah’s ability to redeem* individuals*, while the final two discuss the redemption of* all humanity. *These two aspects will be the subjects of our final two units.*

Rambam’s tenth and eleventh principles are:

*I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, may His name be blessed, knows all people’s actions and all their thoughts, as it says, “He who fashions the hearts of them all, who discerns all their doings.” (Psalms 33:15)*

*I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, may His name be blessed, rewards those who observe His commandments and punishes those who violate His commandments.*

Upon quick reflection it becomes clear that the second of these two principles is dependent on the first – only because of God’s omniscience (knowledge of everything) can it be guaranteed that ultimate justice will be served.

Discussing the principle of reward and punishment inevitably leads one to consider the problem of theodicy: the philosophical and theological questions regarding why good people suffer and why God, who is good, allows for the existence of evil in the world. Indeed, this question is perhaps the most difficult problem that people of faith encounter.

A full discussion of this weighty issue is beyond the scope of the current essay but we should note that (as we will briefly discuss in the final unit), another core Torah principle affirms the existence of an afterlife. So, any discussion of reward and punishment needs to look beyond the physical world and the specific events that befall a person during his or her life on earth.

Without delving into this difficulty – but also without making light of it – we should contemplate the power of the belief in reward and punishment.

Of course, one who accepts and internalizes this principle will assumedly be motivated to live a good life and to fulfill the commandments; promises of divine reward, and – probably even more so – fear of divine punishment can be powerful motivators. At the same time, though, a person motivated primarily by these concerns seems somewhat selfish: if this is the reason for keeping the commandments, the person is ultimately serving himself or herself, not God. The early sage Antigonus of Sokho put it this way: “Do not be like those servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward. Rather, be like those servants who serve their master without conditioning this upon a reward – and let the fear of heaven be upon you” (Avot 1:3).

But what, then, is the purpose and meaning of reward and punishment, if these are not meant to be our motivators? Perhaps the point is that reward and punishment indicate that ultimately, each of our lives has value and significance. If we are held accountable for our actions and decisions, this assumedly means that they are important; they matter. A person who internalizes this awareness and acts accordingly lives a purposeful and directed life, steadfast in the knowledge that everything he or she does is meaningful and essential, both to his or her personal future and to the entire world. Life is perhaps less carefree and relaxed, but it is filled with purpose and resolve.

Therefore, this recognition itself can be transformative, and indeed, redemptive.

**Unit #10**

OPENING VIDEO

*Rambam’s 12th principle is perhaps the most significant, and undoubtedly the most famous:*

*אני מאמין באמונה שלמה בביאת המשיח – I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the messiah*

*ואע"פ שיתמהמה, עם כל זה אחכה לו בכל יום שיבא – and even though he may tarry, I will wait for his coming every day.*

*And the 13th principle discusses תחיית המתים, the resurrection – when all those who have died are to rise and live again.*

*When I discuss these topics with people, I often notice two interesting phenomena. First, when I ask people what they think is supposed to happen when the Mashiach comes, I usually get a collection of vague and undeveloped answers: usually, someone mentions a shofar blowing, something about an old man riding a white donkey, everyone flying to Israel on wings of eagles, and many such things. I can identify the sources of some of these ideas in biblical verses or rabbinic descriptions. Others are misunderstandings, but I know where they come from. And yet other things people often say don’t seem to be based on any genuine Torah sources that I’m aware of. But the one thing that most of the comments have in common is that they add up to a fantasy, a fairy-tale-like story.*

*The second thing I have noticed is that most people, including a large percentage of the religious Jews I know, don’t seem to really believe the Mashiach is going to come – at least not at any point in the foreseeable future. They may pay lip service to the idea, but once you press them on the matter, it becomes clear that they don’t really think it’s going to happen, at least not in their lifetimes. In fact, many people have told me that of all the 13 principles, these last two are the hardest ones to accept.*

*I find this very troubling for a number of reasons – most importantly because, as I hope is clear by now, this is the culmination of the Torah’s story! Bringing about the messianic era is the entire reason that the Torah was given! It’s the goal and purpose of all Jewish and human history! And if people don’t even believe it’s ever going to happen, if they aren’t “waiting for his coming every day”, then how are we supposed to bring it about?*

*I also think, though, that this issue is connected to the earlier phenomenon I mentioned – the fact that when most Orthodox Jews speak about the Mashiach, they don’t really understand what the term means or what our sources say on the matter. As we discussed earlier in unit #6, from a certain perspective this principle should be the easiest to accept nowadays, since many of the prophecies seem to have already come true!*

*So, in this final essay in the series, we’ll give an extraordinarily brief overview of the ideas of Mashiach and resurrection, and explain exactly why this topic should be so important to us.*

The topic of *Mashiach* and the messianic era is far too complex for a single essay. Indeed, one can fill many bookshelves with all the source material, and the analyses and interpretations that have been developed around this topic. For now, we shall need to suffice with a very brief synopsis.

Even more than in most other areas of *halakha* and Jewish thought, there is an enormous amount of dispute regarding the *Mashiach* and the messianic era. In fact, Rambam writes (*Hilkhot Melakhim Umilkhamot* 12:2) that “no person will know how [these things] will be until they happen…. Therefore there is much debate about this matter…. But in any case, neither the precise sequence of what will happen [when the Messiah comes] nor the details of those events are an essential principle of religion.”

One fundamental disagreement is about the nature of the messianic era. Some authorities (see, for example, Radak on Isaiah 11:6 and Ramban on Bereishit 2:9 and Devarim 30:6) believe that the messianic era will be distinguished from contemporary reality by fundamental changes in the laws of nature, and/or of human nature. Others, though (led by the Rambam; see *Hilkhot Melakhim Umilkhamot* 12:1) insist that although human society will progress historically to reach a stage of perfection, there will be no such fundamental changes.

A related disagreement has to do with how the messiah is expected to arrive. There are some authorities who believe that the transformation from the current reality to the world of redemption will occur supernaturally, and quite possibly, instantaneously. It seems that this view was held by some Talmudic sages, as well as some medieval and later authorities (for one example, see Rashi and Tosafot on *Sukkah* 41a, s.v. “*i nami”*). However, other Talmudic sages and medieval authorities (again, led by Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim Umilkhamot* 11:3) insist that the process will be completely natural, and brought about through human effort. It necessarily follows that according to this approach, the transformation and redemption cannot possibly be instantaneous; it must happen in stages. (These disagreements are highly relevant to several contemporary disputes, most significantly in relation to Zionism and the State of Israel, but this discussion is beyond the scope of this short article).

Other debates involve the relationship between the coming of the messiah (Rambam’s 12th principle) and the resurrection of the dead (the 13th and final principle). While a somewhat common misconception equates or conflates the two events, most Jewish sources are clear about the idea that these are two separate events that are expected to happen at different times, perhaps separated even by centuries. This distinction is particularly important for those, like Rambam, who insist that the messianic era does not involve supernatural miracles or changes to the laws of nature. When it comes to the later stage of resurrection, even they must acknowledge that at this later stage, the world will change beyond recognition.

Beyond this, it’s also not clear what’s supposed to happen after the dead return to life. Most authorities (such as Ramban – NEED SOURCE) view this as the end of history and the final goal of creation; after this, we will live eternally in the World to Come, which they understand as a physical existence, albeit completely unlike the world as we know it today. However, the Rambam has a different opinion here as well – in his view, all the dead will be resurrected and will live for a long time but will then die again at the end of these second lifetimes. After that, all physical existence will come to an end, and our future eternal life will be only in the spiritual world (NEED SOURCE FROM MOREH NEVUKHIM).

With all this disagreement, we can probably agree with Rambam’s comment, cited above, that “no person will know how [these things] will be until they happen”. But therefore, we need to ask what this concept is supposed to mean to us, and why it is even relevant to speak about.

In response, it’s important to realize that (as Rambam also says; *Hilkhot Melakhim Umilkhamot* 11:1, 12:2), there are certain basic aspects of the messianic era that are clear from the prophecies and accepted by all. These include the return of the people of Israel from exile to the land of Israel, the rebuilding of the Temple, the end of war, universal recognition of the one true God, and the peaceful coexistence of all humans. Even without knowing the details, such a world certainly seems worth striving for!

More than that, though, based on everything we’ve discussed in these essays, it should now be clear that the coming of the Mashiach is not some distant, abstract concept. It’s the culmination, and the entire purpose, of the Torah’s story. The hope that this vision provided kept our people alive and brought us through the most excruciatingly difficult moments of our exile, and it can also give meaning and purpose to each of us as individuals.

Which means we’ve now come full circle. In the opening video, I asked why people live as Orthodox Jews. For me, the answer is “to bring redemption to myself and to the world.” This isn’t a slogan; it’s a consequence of the idea that the Torah by which I try to live is the constitution of the Kingdom of Priests and the vehicle for spreading Avraham’s message to all of humanity.