

A Guide for the Jewish Undecided
A Philosopher Makes the Case
for Orthodox Judaism





Samuel Lebens

**A GUIDE FOR
THE JEWISH UNDECIDED**

*A philosopher makes the case
for Orthodox Judaism*

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A Guide for the Jewish Undecided
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*This edition of A Guide for the Jewish Undecided
is dedicated in honor of the memory of*

Lisa Lerman

לעילוי נשמת

מרים בת מיכל שמואל ע"ה

*an exceptional woman
whose devotion to family, community, and Hashem
was an inspiration to all who were privileged to know her.*

The Lerman and Silverman families



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Foreword

The infamous nineteenth-century thinker and critic of religion Friedrich Nietzsche once noted that he was not an atheist as a result of rational argument, but “from instinct.” As he tells us, “I am too inquisitive, too questionable, too exuberant to stand for any gross answer. God is a gross answer, an indelicacy against us thinkers – at bottom merely a gross prohibition for us: you shall not think!”¹ The study of philosophy necessitates thinking hard about things. This is not an occupational hazard for a philosopher. It *is* the occupation. Subjecting one’s views, and those proffered by others, to critical analysis is our bread and butter, such that a philosopher, it has been said, is someone who has a problem for every solution. The injunction “do not think!” does not a philosopher make.

Jews have long thought philosophically about their religion. But trends in philosophy over the last century or so have at times pushed that thinking into a particular corner of the philosophical world. Sometime in the 1990s, a philosophy department with which I was involved held a meeting at which candidates for prospective undergraduate admission were being reviewed. As the discussion of one (ultimately successful) candidate came to a close, a colleague noted that a young woman who had been admitted believed in God, prompting another member of the

1. *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1969), II, sec. 1.

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department to retort, “Well, we’ll soon knock that out of her.” To quote a contemporary Jewish thinker, “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.” Suffice to say that philosophy, in particular the form of analytic philosophy that held sway in that department and through much of the Anglo-American academy in the twentieth century, was not an environment in which religious believers could expect the warmest of welcomes.

Definitions of analytic philosophy are at best “rough and ready,” occasionally even approaching caricature. It is often characterized in terms of its commitment to clear argumentation and precise distinctions formulated in plain (if at times quite technical) language, modeling itself on the natural sciences. For a long time God, for all His omnipotence, had a hard time getting a look-in. As the anecdote above testifies, among analytic philosophers, taking faith seriously could not be taken for granted. If anything, not taking faith seriously seemed to be the default position. No doubt partly in reaction to this, much Jewish philosophy of the past hundred years took the “scenic” continental route, which focuses more on “the human condition” than on formulating logically precise arguments or necessary and sufficient conditions in an attempt to define key concepts. Thus, whatever their philosophical insights might otherwise be, you would be hard pressed to find an argument formulated in terms that would be acceptable to analytic philosophers in the work of Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Levinas, or even Joseph Soloveitchik.

Which is where Samuel Lebens comes in. In this book, we find someone who takes both his faith and analytic philosophy seriously. Lebens presents us here with a real gift of a book that will enable its readers to navigate their way through that faith – Judaism – using the sort of rigorous philosophical analysis that held sway in the very departments that were once keen to eliminate God from their corridors (if you’ll pardon the corporeal metaphor). And through his penetrating analysis, we learn all manner of important truths about the rationality of religious faith, and that of Orthodox Judaism in particular, while also learning a lot about ourselves as human beings. They are lessons that should be of interest to anyone who takes faith seriously, even those who do not include themselves among the faithful.

Some readers may contend that there is nothing new here. Surely this is simply another iteration of the selfsame question regarding how the religiously committed are to deal with philosophy that has troubled Jewish thinkers for centuries. Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* begins with more or less the same issue, promising to guide the reader through his or her perplexities. And without committing the anachronism of categorizing Maimonides as an analytic philosopher, he was most certainly interested in arguments and their conformity or otherwise with Aristotelian logic.

But there is a sense in which, at least philosophically speaking, it was easier for Maimonides. He lived during a period in which all roads led to the same conceptual Rome (or better, Athens) – where philosophy, like mathematics, was thought to lead us down the rational high road to a set of conclusions that would be accepted by all comers insofar as they were thinking rationally. This book, however, has been written in a different philosophical world.

When I began as a lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at King's College London, I was, for a time, the only Jewish member of the department. I was surrounded by colleagues who were deeply intelligent and whom I considered my friends. And yet, to my mind, some of them, given their religious commitments, believed some utterly bizarre things. Similarly, they would look at me; I certainly hope they thought that I was intelligent, and I certainly hope they thought of me as a friend. But one thing they certainly did think about this practicing Jew was – he does some utterly bizarre things. What does a philosopher do when confronted with this phenomenon? On the one hand, it would be supremely arrogant on my part, not to mention empirically problematic, to claim that everyone but I was incapable of following an argument to its conclusion; to think that I had somehow reasoned my way to the truth of Judaism while they had all failed to do so and thus arrived at their mistaken conceptions of reality. If that were the case, then presumably, if they were only thinking aright, they would share all of my religious beliefs. This would imply that all non-Jews are incapable of following logical arguments (and obviously one can reverse the roles here and all the above points would stand). Yet, on the other hand, I was pretty sure that I had good reason for my religious commitments, and for rejecting theirs.

Samuel Lebens has written a work that exists in today's world rather than the medieval world, in which disputations to demonstrate to all comers the absolute truth of the majority religion were a feature (and Moses Mendelssohn would still face similar if somewhat less fraught challenges five hundred or so years later). For Lebens tells us in his Preface that it is entirely possible for two people to "have both done the best job that it was possible to do, given their different starting points... their different pairs of eyes." Consequently, while we "recognize that when two thinkers disagree they cannot both be right... we can still agree that both thinkers may be equally rational." It is the attempt to argue for the rationality of his Jewish faith commitments using the tools of analytic philosophy in the full glare of this truth that marks out this book as a significant contribution to contemporary Jewish thought.

But what is it that starts two apparently rational yet religiously opposed philosophers on their respective journeys? What are these different "starting points"? The answer to that question is often taken to generate a further challenge to the rationality of religious belief via the so-called "problem of contingency." For is not my (and for that matter Samuel's) conviction that Judaism is true, simply a contingent matter that can be explained by our upbringing? Had I been born to my next-door neighbors, I may have thought that Hinduism was the correct religious path. If that is indeed the case, though, what does it imply about the rationality of my Jewish beliefs? Is my belief in their apparent rationality a mere accident of birth?

It turns out that there are good responses to this particular challenge and that my belief that things "could have been different" need not shake my religious convictions. Consider: had I lived next door with my Hindu neighbors, my address would also have been different, and just as I would now believe religious propositions contrary to those I currently hold, I would maintain a belief regarding my childhood address other than the one I currently do. But is my knowledge of my actual childhood address shaken simply because "things could have been otherwise"? I would hope that readers will concur that this hypothetical ought not undermine my knowledge of my actual childhood address. But if you agree to that, then why should my religious convictions be any more

subject to doubt given the very same “undermining condition” – that matters might have been other than they were?

Of course, the religious skeptic has a response to this defense (a defense which, incidentally, was first put forward by Alvin Plantinga, who will figure prominently in the book you are about to read). For our skeptic will argue that the reason my belief in my address is not undermined is that it was formed rationally. In contrast, so the argument goes, religious beliefs are not formed rationally. That is why my “address” belief can stand up to an alternative history in a way that my religious beliefs cannot.

As it happens, there is likely some truth in this distinction. The fact that I am committed to Judaism is not a result of having had its truth rationally demonstrated to me. While it may be different elsewhere, in London, parents (or my parents at least) did not sit me down at the age of four and explain: “Daniel” – though in the interest of truth, since that is what is at issue here, they actually would have used a far more embarrassing if affectionate nickname – “God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived; here is the ontological argument for the existence of God; and that is why we keep kosher.”

If you have picked up this book, you will hopefully recognize that this is not even a poor caricature of a valid argument, but you hopefully get the idea. For, assuming my experience was not unique, I would hazard that very few people arrive at their religious convictions through having been presented with a set of philosophical arguments.

So, to return to the issue at hand, is it the case that the “problem of contingency” ought to undermine my belief in the rationality of my religion in a way that it should not shake my belief in my childhood address? Thankfully, once again, the answer is no. Any number of our beliefs may have been initially acquired in a less than rational fashion. But to criticize a belief on account of its origins is to commit what philosophers call the genetic fallacy. If I tell you Pythagoras’ theorem, and you ask me how I come to know this, I may tell you that I had a dream in which a man in a flaming pie told me that for all right-angled triangles, the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides. You would, justifiably, wonder about the truth of my assertion about triangles. But of course, once you have rationally

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reflected upon it, you will find that it is true. What matters, it turns out, is less how our beliefs were acquired, and more the extent to which they are subsequently subjected to (and can survive) serious rational scrutiny.

The point of all of this is that it directs us to an important truth. By the time we are rational beings capable of making important life decisions – indeed, in order to become such beings – we have already been formed by various familial, social, and communal commitments; that ultimately human beings must begin with some form of commitment, religious or otherwise, if they are to be capable of making rational and non-arbitrary decisions about how to lead their lives at all. While those commitments may not be formed through rational argument, that does not automatically bring their rationality into question.

Faith is just one among many possible commitments that render human beings capable of making the decisions that life necessitates. For some of us, it is Jewish faith, and Judaism is notable for being a religion that seems to recognize this fact. It is a religion into which one is born with ready-made obligations, obligations that do indeed fall upon us as an accident of birth rather than by choice. Judaism appears to reflect the idea that what makes us human is that we are more than just rational calculating machines. We are people who are formed by our commitments, our pet projects and interests, and those commitments might well make certain things clear and obvious to one person while unthinkable to another. But if it is precisely the fact that we are not blank slates that lies at the root of much of human rationality, then, as Samuel Lebens not only knows but convincingly argues, while the “rational person outside of any religious community should treat the evidence of all religions equally... [a] rational person situated within a religious community, by contrast, will not treat the evidence of every religion equally.”

In this book Lebens gives us a masterful elucidation of the nature of this situated religiosity and of the rationality of commitment – and ultimately Jewish commitment. The task that he has set himself is simultaneously modest and ambitious. Modest, since despite beginning with the subject of conversion, he does not believe that he can, or ought, to be on a mission to convert. As noted, he is fully cognizant of the partial nature of human rationality, so his arguments are not intended to demonstrate the rationality of committing to Judaism for anyone but a

Jew. Yet it is ambitious since he believes that he can show his primary audience of the “Jewish undecided” that it is possible, upon deep critical reflection, to uncover the rationality not only of Judaism, but of the very form of Judaism that commits one to those practices that may bemuse one’s non-Jewish friends and colleagues. There is good reason, this book argues, for Jews to commit to their Judaism, and that having done so, it is commitment to Orthodox Judaism that makes the most rational sense.

Clearly, this rests on establishing the truth, or at least the presumptive truth, of at least two premises, first of which is the small matter of belief in God. It has often been said that Kant sounded the death knell for arguments for the existence of God. A glance through the pages of contemporary philosophy of religion journals soon puts the lie to that. Can one, however, convincingly argue for the existence of God? The choice of words here is not accidental. It might be that one cannot prove the existence of God – as Lebens concedes. But does that mean we cannot argue that one might have very good reason to believe in God’s existence? It will not be a spoiler to reveal that Lebens thinks that he can provide us with such reasons, and while some may find the arguments for God’s existence less convincing, the presentation of the case in part II is a genuine tour de force. Moreover, he merely seeks to render belief in God at least as plausible as atheism – a belief which it would be hard to deny Lebens establishes via a wonderful (and ultimately very serious) pastiche of Pascal’s wager, that subsequently takes in the analysis of two dozen arguments, that lead us from the nature of propositions, through philosophy of mathematics, to arguments from religious experience, and finally to the problem of evil (including a non-technical account of a fascinating and quite technical theodicy he first presented in a 2017 paper with Tyron Goldschmidt). But Lebens manages to explain the complex ideas and arguments involved in all of this clearly and concisely, wearing his considerable learning lightly, though without diluting it (not something that all good philosophers are able to do).

The second key question is whether the revelation at Mount Sinai on which Judaism is founded actually happened. This is an issue of historical truth, and as such, not the sort of thing that pure armchair reasoning is able to demonstrate. But it is also, of course, a belief shared by many religious believers, Jewish and Christian alike. Whether that

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mass support can be used to show that it is a rational belief has been a focus of Jewish philosophers since the Middle Ages, with Saadya Gaon and Yehudah Halevi the most prominent advocates of this argument from religious experience. In this book you will learn how applying the refinements that analytic philosophers can bring to bear produces a more sophisticated variant of the original argument.

The problems do not end there, of course. There is much more to Jewish philosophical theology than the existence of God and the revelation at Sinai. Moses Mendelssohn appears to have been troubled by the question of why a benevolent God would choose to reveal His law to one particular, and even at the time numerically insignificant, nation. And what of some of the more troubling laws that were revealed? Lebens deals with these questions and more as he brings his book to a close. What shines through is an idea that has always been close to my heart – the centrality, and more importantly rationality, of communal belonging, together with the cognitive effects that such apparently non-cognitive attachments can have.

The journey upon which you are about to embark takes in everyone from Rav Asi and Rabbi Akiva to Albo to Alvin (Plantinga, that is), from the biblical Ruth to the decidedly unbiblical Bertrand Russell. It is a journey that can only enrich and educate, regardless of whether you end up accepting all of the conclusions reached. As Samuel Lebens informs us toward the end of the book, the Jewish journey is not yet complete. What I can promise is that what follows will serve to take its readers a good few steps further on down the road.

Daniel Rynhold
Dean and Professor of Jewish Philosophy
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Preface

Every human being looks upon the world from their own unique perspective.

Every person who forms beliefs wants their beliefs to reflect the truth.

I'm convinced that there is such a *thing* as truth, that there is such a thing as objective reality. A post-truth world is simply a world without reason; it is a world that has abandoned the ideal of rationality.

A world where all people have their own truths is a world where nobody has truth. And yet, I recognize that no two people look at the world the same way, from exactly the same perspective.

There seems to be a tension here between the demands of objective rationality (according to which there is a way that the world actually is), and the undeniable reality of subjectivity.

The only way out of this tension, that I can see, is to make the following compromise: We must recognize that when two thinkers disagree, they cannot both be right. The objective facts will render one of their opinions true and the other one false, or they will render both of their views false. There *are* objective facts out there beyond our minds, and those facts decide what is true and what is false. We don't. But we can still agree that both thinkers may be equally rational, even if one – or both – of them must be wrong about the facts.

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To aspire toward rationality is to try to give a certain sort of order to your own beliefs. You have lots of data coming at you the whole time: the things you see, the things you hear, the things you smell, etc. You have memories. You have strong intuitions, hunches about how things are, feelings. Rationality calls upon you to impose some sort of order upon this mass of data. To do so, you have to try to come up with something like a *theory of the world*.

You want your theory to explain all of the data. For example, why does that bright yellow disk seem to rise up in our visual field each morning? We theorize to make sense of this phenomenon. First, we theorized that the yellow disk is actually a ball of fire that orbits the earth. But we've got to make sure that all of our various theories are in harmony with one another. And we've got to make sure that our theories account for as much of the data as possible. Over time, it became harder and harder to account for all of the data, as we kept on stargazing, with the assumption that the earth is at the center. It became too hard, under that assumption, to keep track of the erratic movements of the heavenly bodies. Accordingly, we revised our beliefs and ended up with a more elegant theory – the sun is at the center of our system.

What are we looking for in our theories? We want them to explain as much of the data as we can. We want them to be simple and elegant. We want them to be coherent. We want them to be consistent with one another.

But we also want our theories, where possible – and to the extent that it's possible – to preserve our most heartfelt hunches. That's okay. Often, we'll have to abandon our hunches and intuitions – the data simply won't allow us to hold on to them. The world isn't flat, however much it might seem to be that way. But it's still rational to try to save as many of our hunches as possible. We *could* all be brains in a vat, tied into the Matrix by blood-sucking aliens. That's a theory that could account for lots of data. So, why not accept it? Well, it undermines too many of our most central intuitions.

With this picture of rationality in hand, it becomes clear: two people can arrive at very different theories of the world. We know that they can't both be right. But they could be equally rational.¹ They could

1. To use philosophical jargon, I draw from both internalism and externalism. I'm an

both have done the best job that it was possible to do, given their different starting points, their different lives, their different hunches, and their different pairs of eyes.

I am a believing, Orthodox Jew. I cannot prove to anyone that the objective facts about the heavens and the earth agree with my beliefs. But I think that I can show you how it is rational for me to adopt the lifestyle and the views that I adopt. Moreover, I think that I can show you that it is rational for anyone else, so long as they are starting from a sufficiently similar situation. For that reason, I've written this guide. It doesn't claim to prove anything. But I sincerely believe that it can lead a certain cross-section of society – the Jewish undecided – toward a pretty Orthodox form of Judaism.

Between the writing of this book and its publication, my teacher, mentor, and inspiration, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, passed away. I hope this book would have met with his approval. It is built upon one of his key insights: that a person cannot think in a cultural vacuum. The idea that a person can live, and think, and express themselves in such a vacuum was, to Rabbi Sacks, “as inconceivable as an art without conventions” – since even a radical artist needs to have conventions to bend, or against which to rebel – “or a thought without a language in which it can be expressed.”² Cultural moorings are essential for a meaningful life, and once a person is moored in the Jewish community, I shall argue, the decision to commit to one's Judaism can be overwhelmingly rational.

I hope that the Jewish undecided, and any other interested reader, will give the arguments within this book a fair and patient hearing, and that God will bless the work of our hands.

externalist about epistemic warrant. This means that it is the way our beliefs are tied up to the external world that makes them warranted or unwarranted. But I'm an internalist about rational justification. We can't *access* the external world from a neutral standpoint. So, the best that we can do, to be rational and reasonable, is to make sure that our belief systems are internally coherent and consistent. For a similar mix of internalism and externalism, see Foley (2004).

(Works listed in an abbreviated form in the footnotes are identified in the bibliography at the end of this book with their full titles and publication details.)

2. Sacks (1991), p. 44.

לעילוי נשמת
יהודית בת אברהם לבנס

In honor of

Edith Edna Lebens

of blessed memory

“Do not urge me to leave you,
to turn back and not follow you.
For wherever you go, I will go;
wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.
Thus and more may the Lord do to me
if anything but death parts me from you.”
(Ruth 1:16–17)

“The Lord shall recompense your work,
and your reward shall be complete from the Lord,
the God of Israel, under whose wings
you have come to take refuge.”
(Ruth 2:12)

Acknowledgments

Most of the content of this book is new, but some of it rehearses various arguments that I've put forward elsewhere. Chapter 9 is borrowed from my article on religious experience in the volume *Theism and Atheism: Opposing Arguments in Philosophy*.¹

The argument of chapter 10 (section “The Free Will Theodicy and the Divine Proofreader Theory”), was first advanced in a paper that I coauthored with Tyron Goldschmidt, “The Promise of a New Past” in *Philosophers' Imprint*.²

Part III and portions of part IV of this book rehearse a major chunk of chapter 7, and chapter 9, from my more technical book *The Principles of Judaism*.³

Having been developed originally for this book, a version of the argument of chapters 3–6 appeared in the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*,⁴ under the title “Pascal, Pascalberg, and Friends,” and new material written for part IV of this book went on to form the

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1. Graham Oppy and Joseph W. Koterski, eds. (Macmillan Reference USA, 2019), pp. 135–45.
 2. www.philosophersimprint.org, 17 (18), pp. 1–25.
 3. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.
 4. Vol. 87, issue 1 (2020), pp. 109–130.

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basis of my paper “Defining Religion” published in *Oxford Studies for Philosophy of Religion*.⁵

Thank you to Macmillan Reference, Tyron Goldschmidt, Oxford University Press, and the publishers of the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* for allowing that material to appear here, in its slightly altered form.

This book was written very quickly – I wrote an entire first draft during the winter of 2018 (which seems like a lifetime ago). I’m so grateful to my family for allowing me to occupy the very single-minded space that such an intense writing project demanded. I’m also grateful to my colleagues in the philosophy department at the University of Haifa, who have been tremendously supportive to me both professionally and personally. I couldn’t wish for a better working environment. In particular, this book benefited from conversations with my colleagues: Michael Antony, Arnon Keren, Iddo Landau, Ariel Meirav, Saul Smilansky, and Daniel Statman.

Special thanks to Terence Cuneo, Allan Hazlett, Simon Hewitt, Dan Howard-Snyder, Hud Hudson, Anne Jeffrey, Jon Kvanvig, and Michael Scott – all of whom had conversations with me that directly impacted upon the content of this book (even though some of those conversations were long ago). Extra special thanks to Helen De Cruz, Tyron Goldschmidt, and Ben Winton Fromson, who read over passages of this work in progress (and in Ben’s case, an entire draft) and were generous with their comments and feedback. I know that my subsequent efforts will not have satisfied all of their concerns, but I found their comments to be tremendously insightful and encouraging. And thanks, as always, to Dean Zimmerman for making so much possible for me.

Let me also take this opportunity to acknowledge the fabulous staff at Maggid Books who provide a crucial service to the Jewish people, publishing beautiful books that benefit from fabulous editors and discerning production values. I am especially grateful to publisher Matthew Miller, Aryeh Grossman, Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, and the editor of this book, Ita Olesker, as well as Tomi Mager and Tali Simon. I am proud for this title to stand alongside Maggid’s many rich and important works of

5. Vol. 10 (2022), pp. 145–68.

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Jewish scholarship. I am also tremendously grateful to Professor Daniel Rynhold for his engaging, personal, and insightful foreword.

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The publication of this book was made possible through the partnership of Yeshiva University (an institution of tremendous importance to the Jewish people, whose imprint I'm proud for this book to bear), together with the generous support of the Harry and Jane Fischel Foundation (whose founder was an inspirational man, some of whose descendants I have had the pleasure to know), and the Lerman family of South Bend, Indiana (my home away from home).

This book was written in memory of my great-grandmother, Edith Lebens. She died thirty-eight years before I was born, but her conversion to Judaism continues to bear fruit in generations of proudly Jewish descendants. I thought it fitting to attach her name to this book, given that it draws its inspiration from the very concept of conversion.

It is also fitting that the Lerman family (who became tremendously dear to my family when we lived in South Bend), should have supported this book in memory of the sadly departed Lisa Lerman. The Lermans showcase what it means to be a family animated by Torah values. I can only ever remember Lisa with a shining smile upon her face, and I'm proud for my book to be associated with her name.



Part I

Ruth, the Rabbis,
and Pascal



Chapter 1

Proof and Reasons

If someone tells you that they can prove the truth of Judaism, be suspicious. I don't even think that there are watertight proofs for the existence of God. If we can't prove that God exists, then we certainly can't prove the truth of a theistic religion. On the other hand, I do think that there are good reasons – even if they fall short of being proofs – to think that God really *does* exist. Moreover, depending upon our life-experiences, I would argue that some of us have better reasons to think that God exists than do others.

Similarly, I don't have any watertight proofs that my wife, Gaby, exists. And yet I do have some very good reasons to *think* that she does, and I certainly *hope* that she does. I also have good reason to believe that you, dear reader, have (or had) a mother. Even so, I concede that you probably have better reasons than I do to believe that she exists (or existed), since she bore you.

If someone told you that they could give you reasons – even ones that fall short of being proofs – for believing in Judaism, I'd still be suspicious, because they'd be treating Judaism as if it were some well-defined thing. But what *is* Judaism?

If an *-ism* is a clearly delineated body of doctrines and beliefs, then Judaism – I shall argue – is still very much a work in progress,

even by its own lights. The Torah is still unfolding. The Jewish journey is not yet complete.

To commit to a system that's still in the process of becoming will, of course, require *some* beliefs. For example, you'll have to believe that it's a good idea to commit to it. But more than that: to commit to living one's life within a system that's still developing – to commit oneself to an open-ended process – requires faith: faith in the process, faith in the people and institutions involved in the process, and – in this *particular* process – faith in God, and faith that the process *is* the unfolding of His will on earth.

There are good reasons, I shall argue, for Jews to have just that sort of faith – the sort of faith that can make sense of commitment to Judaism. But for a Jew to commit to her Judaism is, in some sense or another, for a Jew to commit to being a Jew. What does that mean, and what does it entail?

This book will not trade in proofs. Instead, this book looks at what it means to commit to being a Jew and argues that Jews have good reasons to make that commitment. Somewhat bizarrely, for a book with these aims, I think that we should start this discussion with a deeper understanding of *conversion* to Judaism. To understand what a convert commits to when he becomes a Jew is – in large part – to understand what it means for a Jew to *be* a committed Jew, or so I shall argue.

In our daily prayers, we ask God to place our lot with the righteous converts.¹ In this book, I shall argue that Jews who were born Jewish have good reasons to emulate those Jews who were born outside of the fold. Indeed, when we emulate the convert, we embody the sort of faith that we need in order to commit to the unfolding cosmic drama that is Judaism. Therefore, before we investigate the reasons one might have for committing to a Jewish life, we need to understand more about conversion. In chapter 2, therefore, we will explore the nature and meaning of conversion in Jewish law and thought.

1. The thirteenth benediction of the *Amida* prayer, which is recited three times a day, reads: "Upon the righteous and upon the pious... and upon the righteous converts, and upon us, may Your compassion be, O Lord our God, and give a good reward to all who sincerely trust in Your name. May our lot be placed with them forever..."