



RABBI YITZCHOK FELDMAN

SILICON VALLEY RABBI

Rabbi Yitzchok Feldman grew up in Evanston, IL, and attended its public schools. He spent two years at Trinity College in Hartford, CT, in its Guided Studies Program in the Humanities, then two years as an English major at Yale. Between those two schools, he spent three months in a yeshiva in Jerusalem. He returned to Jerusalem after college and spent 10 years learning in various yeshivas. He has been the rabbi of Congregation Emek Beracha in Palo Alto, CA, since 1995.

On One Foot

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The first elevator pitch for God seems to be a well-known story from the ancient world. *"Teach me all you know,"* a potential convert asked the Sages, *"while I am standing on one foot."* One teacher rejected the challenge out of hand but another accepted it. In the ancient world, elevator rides were short. That teacher boiled it down to a few words: *"What to you is hateful, don't do to anyone else. The rest is commentary – go and learn."*

Most people think that brevity is the point of the exchange. But there's another approach. A person on one foot is not just someone who cannot balance for long. It is also a person ascending, reaching. It is someone asking, *"Can you teach me how to climb spiritually?"*

People choose belief systems based on many factors, but the most elemental issue is the will to believe. That is the source of one's aspirations – to be decent, to be of service, to be spiritually transformative. A potential convert is at the very beginning of the journey. But candidates show up because they sense that there is a path of ascension.

Proofs of God's existence in a mathematical sense are a fool's errand. Those who think they have found them are sometimes dangerous. Equations govern many things in the universe but not the human world full of free choice. The search for proof arises out of an encounter with honest skepticism, an understandable phase. But the skeptic must ultimately decide.

Not just skeptics but everyone needs to decide: Do they want to pursue the world beyond equations? If not, the search never begins. If so, it begins simply: Don't do anything that is hateful. This is phrased in the negative because the first rule is not to deteriorate. Duly warned, one can begin the journey into the positive, into that which is creative and purposeful. That journey must be informed by learning.

I came upon the world of spiritual learning as an adult, or, more accurately, when I was no longer an uninformed child. I had read some of the Great Books and was aware that libraries held more. I knew that the ancients weren't silly but I was indifferent to religion. I met someone who told me that anyone alive today is a product of thousands of years of spiritual living stretching back to the ancient world when people were always aware of the Divine. Someone in your family, he said, decided not to adhere to that system for whatever reason. You have inherited the consequences of that choice. He or she decided on the basis of some knowledge; you, on the other hand, are ignorant. At least put yourself in the position of the person who made an informed choice. Go and learn what you don't know.

Go and learn, indeed. And from there, I learned that one can choose to try to ascend. We will stumble, we might deteriorate, but we can choose to resume the climb.