

The Unbelievable Truth

36 Arguments for the Existence of God A work of Fiction
By Rebecca Goldstein Atlantic Books £12.99

Cass Seltzer stands on a narrow bridge. Gazing out at the river that has frozen into sublime ice sculptures, he experiences a moment of transcendence. Such moments are an occupational hazard for Cass, as, much to his surprise, he's become celebrated as an atheist "with a soul", launched into the spotlight after the runaway success of his book, *The Varieties of Religious Illusion*. Key to his success has been the appendix, an atheists' crib-sheet that runs through 36 possible arguments that seek to prove the existence of God, disproving them one by one.

Rebecca Goldstein's novel has the same appendix, which ranges from "The argument for answered prayers" to "The Intolerability of Insignificance," and "Argument for the Survival of the Jews." Her novel also consists of 36 chapters, each of which is presented as an "Argument" that stands in opposition to the rational arguments of the appendix, setting up a Talmudic dialectic for the reader, so that we are caught up in Cass' struggle between faith and doubt. The number 36 is deliberately chosen, reputed to be the number of hidden righteous through whom, and by whom, the world is sustained.

Cass has an unusual background for his profession. His mother is a renegade from an imagined Hasidic sect, the Valdeners, who can trace their lineage back to the Baal Shem Tov. In a return visit to the community in isolated New Valden, Cass and his effervescent girlfriend, Roz, discover an extraordinary personality; the Rebbe's son, Azarya. Azarya is a six year old maths prodigy of startling profundity and conceptual reach, who sees numbers in Kabbalistic terms. His name means both God's helper, and with God's help. Azarya's ultimate dilemma, whether to leave the community and contribute to the future of mathematics, or become the new Rebbe for his beloved Hasidim, forms the beating heart of the book and the background to Cass' struggle with faith and doubt.

Goldstein's own life mirrors this tension. Brought up in a narrowly Orthodox home in New York, she is both a novelist and philosopher, recipient of a MacArthur 'genius' award, a Guggenheim Fellow, and member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She is currently a Research Associate in the Department of Psychology at Harvard. She alternates between award winning novels and non-fiction, most recently on Spinoza, whose spirit animates this novel. Since penning her first novel, *The Mind-Body Problem*, twenty years ago, she has revelled in the potential of fiction to illuminate pressing philosophical questions.

The narrative weaves deftly between Cass' present and his past as a student under the formidable Jonas Klapper, Extreme Professor of Faith, Literature and

Values. This satirical portrait of Harold Bloom recalls Saul Bellow's portrayal of Alan Bloom in *Ravelstein*. Klapper is an extraordinary creation, an egotist of monstrous proportions, who becomes fascinated with the Valdener for his own reasons, and tasks Cass with exploring the mystical significance of Kugel, both potato and lukshen, for his doctoral thesis. Goldstein creates many laugh out loud moments of sparkling wit, and the vividness of her female characters is a particular strength. Cass has always had a problem with women. He deifies whichever partner he happens to be with, at a high personal cost. His previous partner, the French feminist poet Pascale, savagely dumped him, and has been replaced by Lucinda, the 'goddess of game theory,' an equally fierce and competitive intellectual. Now Roz, his college girlfriend, has returned from field research in the rain forest, committed to the Immortality project, seeking to defeat death.

The fate of Azarya and the Valdener, Klepper, Roz and Cass, are artfully interwoven as Cass heads for a showdown at Harvard with a Nobel Prize-winning economist to debate God's existence. Playfully exposing both the self-deceptions of her characters, and the irrational basis of their most cherished rationalisations, Goldstein's glorious novel celebrates the perils, pitfalls and profound joys of a life of the mind and spirit.

Ariel Kahn is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Roehampton University
Rebecca Goldstein is appearing at Jewish Book Week at 7.30 on the 6th of March
in discussion with her partner, Stephen Pinker.