



What was the purpose of 10 Commandments inscribed on tablets of sapphire, if those very commands were also received in the Torah scroll?

Read, "The Tablets, Torah and Sinai" for an answer

Are we to believe, or "prove" G-d's existence? Is there proof? Read "Torah from Sinai".

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Dedicated to Scriptural and Rabbinic Verification of Authentic Jewish Beliefs and Practices

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## Yitro

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"And Hashem said to him, "Descend and then ascend – you and Ahron with you. And the Kohanim and the nation should not violate the boundary lest He send destruction among them." (Shemot 19:24)

Hashem's influence descends upon

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## The Tablets TORAH and SINAI

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Certain facts or events, basic to our beliefs, are sometimes so quickly embraced, that our questions are overlooked, or not even detected. Children often ask us about our accepted foundations. Their questions are undiluted by social pressures, so they see the large holes in our beliefs, and not being repressed, they verbalize them. We hear their questions - from the mouths of babes - and wonder why we never realized such problems. Of course, our ignorance is the source of these problems. But if we didn't ponder the questions that children ask - and certainly if we have no answers - we are missing some basic principles of Judaism.

Such is the case with Sinai. Recently, I was reviewing Deuteronomy 10:1, where God instructed Moses to quarry a new set of stones for God's engraving of the second set of Ten Commandments. (God wrote the Ten Commandments on both sets, but God quarried only set #1, Moses was commanded to quarry set #2.)

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## TORAH from Sinai

[ Reprint ]

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

### Introduction

Judaism, as seen through the eyes of the scholars of the Talmud, has its own unique religious orientation. While basing itself on a cataclysmic event - revelation, it does not look to miracles as the source of its intimate relationship with God. God's revelation at Sinai was a one-time occurrence never to be repeated. This is expressed in Deuteronomy 5:19, "a great voice which was not heard again."(1) In the mind of the Talmudic scholar God continuously reveals himself not through miracles but through the wisdom of his laws. (2) These laws manifest themselves in Torah - the written and the oral law - and in nature.

The Psalmist expresses this view most clearly. He speaks freely of the wonders of nature and the awe-inspiring universe as in Psalm 8:4, "When I

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look at the heavens, the work of Your fingers; the moon and stars which you have established". Psalm 104, dedicated to the wonders of nature, climaxes with the exclamation, "How many are Your works, O Lord! You have made them all with wisdom." Regarding the sheer intellectual joy one derives from studying Torah, he states, "The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul, the testimony of the Lord is trustworthy, making wise the simple person. The precepts of the Lord are upright, rejoicing the heart, the commandment of the Lord is lucid, enlightening the eye. The statutes of the Torah are true; they are all in total harmony. They are more to be desired than gold, even fine gold, and they are sweeter than honey and the honeycomb."

When speaking of man's search for God the Psalmist states, "The Lord, from heaven, looked down upon the children of man, to see if there were any man of understanding searching for God (14:2)." Man discovers God only through understanding. Accordingly, the righteous are depicted as being constantly involved in this process of searching for and discovering God. "But only in the Torah of the Lord is his desire, and in His Torah he mediates day and night" (Psalms 1:2). Maimonides sharply criticizes those who consider themselves religious and search for God through the miraculous. "Say to a person who believes himself to be of the wise men of Israel that the Almighty sends His angel to enter the womb of a woman and to form there the foetus [sic], he will be satisfied with the account; he will believe it and even find in it a description of the greatness of God's might and wisdom; although he believes that the angel consists of burning fire and is as big as a third part of the Universe, yet he considers it possible as a divine miracle. But tell him that God gave the seed a formative power which produces and shapes the limbs and he will turn away because he cannot comprehend the true greatness and power of bringing into existence forces active in a thing that cannot be perceived by the senses." (3)

While Judaism is based on a supernatural event, it is not oriented toward the supernatural. The essence of Judaism is not realized through religious fervor over the miraculous but through an appreciation of God's wisdom as revealed both in Torah and the natural world. A miracle, being a breach of God's law, does not contribute to this appreciation. This distinction is crucial since it gives Judaism its metaphysical uniqueness.

## I

The foundation of our faith is the belief that God revealed himself to the people of Israel a little over three thousand years ago. The revelation consisted of certain visual and audible phenomena. The elements of fire, clouds, smoke pillars, and the sound of the shofar were present. God produced an audible voice of immense proportion that He used to speak to Moses and then to the people. The voice conveyed intelligible Laws of great philosophic and halachic import. The event left no doubt in the minds of those present that they had witnessed an act of God. The Torah describes the details of the event in two places, first in Exodus 19 and then in Deuteronomy 4, where Moses recounts the event to the people before his passing. What was the objective of the event? In both places the Torah very clearly tells us the purpose of the revelation. The statement that God made to Moses immediately before the event reads as follows:

*"I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that all the people will hear when I speak to you. They will also then believe in you forever."*  
(Exodus 19:9)

When Moses recounts the event to the people he says,

*"Teach your children and your children's children about the day you stood before God your Lord at Horeb. It was then that God said to me, 'Congregate the people for Me, and I will let them hear my words. This will teach them to be in awe of Me as long as they live on earth, and they will also teach their children.'" (Deuteronomy 4:9-10)*

God clearly intended the event to be a demonstration that would serve the present and all future generations. Nachmanides and others consider it one of the 613 commandments to teach the demonstration of the event at Sinai to every generation. We are therefore obliged to understand the nature of this demonstration and how it was to be valid for future generations. An understanding of the foundations of a system offers insight into the character and philosophical milieu of that system. Comprehension of Torah from Sinai provides the most rudimentary approaches to the entire Weltanschauung of Torah.

## II

The very concept of a proof or evidence for the occurrence of the event at Sinai presupposes certain premises. It sets the system of Torah apart from the ordinary religious creed. The true religionist is in need of no evidence for his belief. His belief stems from something deep within himself. Indeed, he even senses in the idea of evidence for his belief a mixed blessing, as it were, a kind of alien ally. He does not enjoy making recourse to reality. Judaism, on the other hand, doesn't just permit evidence; it demands it. If one were to say he believed in Torah from Sinai and does not need any evidence, he would not be in conformity with the Torah. The Torah demands that our conviction that it was given to us by God be based on the specific formula of the demonstration He created for us. Nachmanides states further that were it not for the event at Sinai we would not know that we should reject a false prophet who performs miracles and tells us to abandon any of the laws or ways of the Torah. It is written in Deuteronomy 8:2-6 that we should not follow such a prophet. But, says Nachmanides, were it not for the demonstration at Sinai we would be totally in a quandary, unable to know whether we should follow the Torah based on miracles that occurred in Egypt or follow the false prophet based on his miracles. (4) The event at Sinai resolves this dilemma. After the event at Sinai the Jew remains unimpressed even by miracles that would lead an ordinary person to conclude that the words of the false prophet are true. We shall return to this point later.

Clearly then, the basis on which one's religious convictions are built differ in the cases of the strict religionist and the man of Torah. The difference might be stated in the following manner: The religionist believes first in God and then in his mind and senses, while the man of Torah, who bases himself on evidence, accepts his mind and his senses and then proceeds to recognize God and His Torah by means of these tools. Only the man of Torah perceives God as a reality as his ideas concerning God register on the same part of his mind that all ideas concerning reality do. (5)

Let us proceed to the demonstration that took place at Sinai. We must understand not only how this event would serve as proof for those immediately witnessing it but for future generations as well, as it is stated in Deuteronomy, "and they will also teach their children." We must

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define at the outset what we mean by proof. The term proof as it is commonly used has a subjective meaning. We mean proof to the satisfaction of a given individual. As such it is subject to a wide range of definitions and criteria. There are those for whom even the world of sense perception is doubtful. In order not to get lost in the sea of epistemology let us state that the Torah accepts a framework similar to the one a scientist employs. It accepts the world of sense perception and the human mind. The events that occurred at Sinai are according to Torah valid evidence from which a rational person would conclude that a) There exists a deity, b). This deity is concerned with man, and c). This deity entrusted Moses with the task of conveying his system of laws to the people. To anyone who maintains that even if he were at Sinai he would remain unconvinced, the Torah has little to say.

The Torah addresses itself to a rational mind. It must be remembered that every epistemological system that is defensible from a logical standpoint is not necessarily rational. Rationality demands more than logical consistency; it requires clear intellectual intuition. One may argue, for instance, that we possess no real knowledge of the atom. One might contend that all electrons and protons conspired to act in a certain way when they were being observed. It may be difficult to disprove such a hypothesis, but it is easy to see that it does not appeal innately to the human mind. (6) Our intuitive intellect rejects it. (7)

### III

Let us now proceed to the question of how the events at Sinai, which occurred over three thousand years ago, were to serve as evidence for all succeeding generations. We may begin by asking what kind of event, if any, could possibly be performed that would qualify as evidence long after such an event has transpired? What criteria could we set forth that would satisfy such a requirement? Let us analyze how we as human beings gain knowledge. What methods are available to us? It would seem that there are two methods we use to obtain knowledge. The first is by direct observation. This course seems simple enough and for our purpose requires little analysis. Very little of our knowledge, however, is obtained through direct observation. We would know little or nothing of world history if we limited ourselves

to direct observation. Even in science little or no progress could be made if one were limited to direct observation. We could not rely on textbooks or information given to us by others. Instead, each scientific observer would have to perform or witness all experimental evidence of the past firsthand. Knowledge in our personal lives would be equally restricted. When we place ourselves on the operating table for surgery we have very little firsthand knowledge about our physical condition or even whether the practitioner is indeed a physician. We put our very lives on the line with almost no firsthand, directly observed evidence.

Why do we do this? Are there any criteria we use that can rationally justify our actions? Here we come to the second class of knowledge available to us - secondhand knowledge. Secondhand knowledge seems to us quite reasonable provided certain criteria are met. When secondhand knowledge comes to our attention we are immediately faced with the question: Is this piece of information true or false? We cannot directly know whether or not it is true since we have not witnessed it directly; we can, however, know if it is true by way of inference. If we can remove all causes of falsehood we can infer that it is true. How can we remove all causes of falsehood? The rationale is simple. If the information that others convey to us is false, it is so for one of two reasons. Either the informer is ignorant and mistaken in what he tells us, or his statement is a fabrication. If we can rule out these two possibilities, there remains no cause for the information to be false. We then consider it to be true.

How can we eliminate these two possibilities? For the first one, ignorance, we only need to determine whether the individual conveying the information to us is intellectually capable of apprehending it. We deal here with a direct relationship. If the information is simple we may trust an average person. If it is complex or profound we would only trust someone capable of understanding such matters. The more complex the matter, the more qualified a person is required to be; the more simple the matter, the less qualified an individual needs to be. If an ordinary person would tell us it was raining we would be inclined on the basis of the first consideration to believe him. If he would tell us about complex weather patterns we would doubt his information. If, however, an eminent meteorologist would describe such patterns to us, we would believe

him. The day President Kennedy was assassinated word spread almost instantly that he was shot. This report remained accurate although it passed through many hands. The details about how or where he was shot were confused. The shooting was a simple item of news capable of being communicated properly even by many simple people. The details of how and where were too complex for ordinary people to transmit properly.

Sometimes our criteria are fulfilled in concert with each other. We may believe a lay person's testimony that another individual is a well-qualified physician and then take the physician's advice. In another case we may accept a lay person's assertion that a text is the work of notable scientists. We would then proceed to accept as true ideas stated in this text even though they seem strange to us. We would not accept these very same ideas from the original simple person. Our acceptance of the information found in textbooks is always based on this process.

Now we come to the consideration of fabrication. Here again we operate through inference. We may rule out fabrication when we trust the individual or think he has no motive to lie. If we do not know the individual we work with a second criterion. We accept the information if many people convey it, and we doubt it when its source is only one individual. The rationale is based on the assumption that one individual may have a motive to lie, but it is unlikely that a group of people would have a collective motivation to lie. If we met someone who told us that the 8:30 train to Montreal derailed we might at first be doubtful, but if several passengers gave us the same report we would accept it. We deem it unreasonable to assume a universal conspiracy. Our acceptance of the authorship of books by those named on the covers is based on this assumption. The moment we hear information our minds automatically turn to these two factors. We ask ourselves if the informant is capable of apprehending the information he is conveying and if there is any reason to assume fabrication. If we can answer in the affirmative to the first question and in the negative to the second question, we accept the information as true.

These are the criteria which guide our lives. They determine the choices we make in both our most trivial and most serious decisions. With this modus operandi we conclude that so and so is a highly qualified physician. If we suspect his integrity or his capabilities we consult a second

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physician or even a third. If all of them agree we would submit to even a serious operation on the grounds that a universal conspiracy is absurd.

Our acceptance of all historical data is based on the previous considerations. We are satisfied with the verisimilitude of certain historical events and unsatisfied with others depending on whether or not our criteria for reliability have been met. We are quite sure of simple well known facts. For example, no one would dispute the claim that World War I occurred. Again, we are quite certain that George Washington existed, but we are not so sure of what size shoe Washington wore. A simple fact readily observable by many individuals we accept as true. Details we doubt. For these and for complex information we require qualified individuals. By ruling out fabrication we accept their communications as true. Because of our system we often arrive at gray areas when our criteria have not been adequately fulfilled. To the degree that they are not satisfied we are infused with doubt.

We are now in a position to determine what event could be performed that would retain its validity for future generations. Since future generations cannot observe the event directly, it would have to be an event that rules out in its process of communication the causes of doubt due to the ignorance of the communicators and due to fabrication. A simple event grasped easily by the senses that occurs before a mass of people who later attest to its occurrence would fulfill the requirements. Such an event would have all the credibility of the most accepted historical fact. If we doubt either a simple event attested to by masses of people or a complex event attested to by qualified individuals, we would ipso facto have to doubt almost all the knowledge we have acquired in all the sciences, all the humanities, and in all the different disciplines existing today. Moreover we would have to desist from consulting with physicians, dentists, lawyers, mechanics, plumbers, electricians, or specialists in any field who work from an accepted body of knowledge.

The event at Sinai fulfills the above requirements. The events witnessed as described were of a simple perceptual nature so that ordinary people could apprehend them. The event at Sinai was structured with the same built-in ingredients that cause us to accept any historical fact or any kind of secondhand knowledge. Moses himself points this out (Deuteronomy 4:9-13,32-36). Moses notes that those events that transpired before the entire nation were clearly perceived. He states,

*"You are the ones who have been shown, so that you will know that God is the Supreme Being and there is none besides Him. From the heavens, He let you hear His voice admonishing you, and on earth He showed you His great fire, so that you heard His words from the fire."*

Someone may ask how we know that these events were as described in the Torah, clearly visible, and that they transpired before the entire nation. Perhaps this itself is a fabrication? The answer to this question is obvious. We accept a simple fact attested to by numerous observers because we consider mass conspiracy absurd. For the very same reason no public event can be fabricated, for we would have to assume a mass conspiracy of silence with regard to the occurrence of that event. If someone were to tell us that an atomic bomb was detonated over New York City fifty years ago, we would not accept it as true because we would assume that we would have certainly heard about it, had it actually occurred. The very factors which compel us to accept as true an account of an event of public proportion safeguards us against fabrication of such an event. (8) Were this not so all of history could have been fabricated. Had the event at Sinai not actually occurred anyone fabricating it at any point in time would have met with the stiff refutation of the people, "had a mass event of that proportion ever occurred we surely would have heard of it." Fabrication of an event of public proportion is not within the realm of credibility.

History corroborates this point. In spite of the strong religious instinct in man, no modern religion in over two thousand years has been able to base itself on public revelation. A modern religion demands some kind of verifiable occurrence in order to be accepted. For this reason the two major Western religions, Christianity and Islam, make recourse to the revelation at Sinai. Were it not for this need and the impossibility of manufacturing such evidence, they certainly would not have based their religions on another religion's revelation.

#### IV

We now face one question. One may argue that we are to accept Torah much as one would accept any major historical event, and we may put our

lives on the line based on no stronger evidence, but doesn't religion demand a certitude of a different nature? Here we are not looking for certitude based on some formula which we are forced to employ in our daily lives but certitude which gives us conviction of an absolute and ultimate nature.

To answer this question we must proceed with an examination of the tenets involved in the institution of Torah from Sinai, to which the rest of this paper is dedicated. Maimonides states that the nation of Israel did not believe in Moses because of the miracles he performed. (9) Moses performed these miracles out of simple necessity. They needed to escape from Egypt, so he split the sea, they needed food, so he brought forth manna. The only reason the people believed in Moses and hence God and Torah was because of the event at Sinai where they heard a voice that God produced speaking to Moses and instructing him to teach the people. But we may ask, weren't the miracles in Egypt enough to convince the people of Moses' authenticity? Didn't they follow him out of Egypt based on what they observed of God's miracles? And doesn't the Torah itself state at the splitting of the sea (Exodus 14:31),

*"The Israelites saw the great power that God had unleashed against Egypt, and the people were in awe of God. They believed in God and his servant Moses."*

But Maimonides is thoroughly supported by the Bible itself since after this very statement, after the splitting of the sea, God says to Moses (Exodus 19:9),

*"I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that all the people will hear when I speak to you. They will then also believe in you forever."*

It is clear, as Maimonides concludes, that there was something lacking in the previous belief for if it were complete the very motive for the Revelation, as stated clearly in the Torah, would be lacking.

A belief instilled by miracles, even miracles of cataclysmic proportion forecasted in advance and occurring exactly when needed is lacking according to Maimonides. They do not effectuate total human conviction. It is, in the words of Maimonides, "a belief which has after it contemplation and afterthought." It may cause one to act on it because of the profound improbability

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of coincidence but it is not intellectually satisfying. The mind keeps returning to the event and continues to ponder it. God wished Torah to be founded on evidence that totally satisfies the human mind -Tzelem Elokim -which He created. He wished Judaism to be based on a sound foundation of knowledge which would satisfy man's intellect completely. Miracles may point to something. We may be convinced that coincidence is improbable but such conclusions are haunted by afterthoughts. When the voice produced by God was heard from the heavens there was no further need for afterthought. It was a matter of direct evidence. Only then could it be said that the people knew there is a God and that Moses was His trusted servant. The requirements for knowledge were complete.

Maimonides concludes, "Hence it follows that every prophet that arises after Moses our teacher, we do not believe in him because of the sign he gives so that we might say we will pay heed to whatever he says, but rather because of the commandment that Moses gave in the Torah and stated, 'if he gives you a sign you shall pay heed to him,' just as he commanded us to adjudicate on the basis of the testimony of two witnesses even though we don't know in an absolute sense if they testified truthfully or falsely. So too is it a commandment to listen to this prophet even though we don't know if the sign is true. Therefore if a prophet arose and performed great wonders and sought to repudiate the prophecy of our teacher Moses we do not pay heed to him. To what is this similar? To two witnesses who testified to someone about something he saw with his own eyes denying it was as he saw it; he doesn't listen to them but knows for certain that they are false witnesses. Therefore the Torah states that if the sign or wonder comes to pass do not pay heed to the words of this prophet because this (person) came to you with a sign and wonder to repudiate that which you saw with your own eyes and since we do not believe in signs but only in the commandments that Moses gave how can we accept by way of a sign this (person) who came to repudiate the prophecy of Moses that we saw and heard." (10) The Jew is thus tied completely and exclusively to the event at Sinai which was formulated to totally satisfy the human mind. (11)

This explains the main idea of the chapter of the false prophet given by the Torah in Deuteronomy 13:2-6,

*"If there arise among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder of which he spoke to you comes to pass, and he says, 'Let us go after other gods which you have not known and let us serve them.'"*

Do not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. God your lord is testing you to see if you are truly able to love God your Lord with all your heart and all your soul.

What is this test? The test is to see if your love (12) of God is based on true knowledge which He has taught you to follow and embrace or if you are to fall prey to the unsound primitive emotions of the moment that well up from the instinctual source of man's nature. The faith of the Jew can never be shaken by dreamers or miracle workers. We pay no attention to them. Based on the rationally satisfying demonstration of Sinai we remain faithful to God through His wisdom and knowledge. (13) Our creed is that of His eternal and infinite law. When we perfect ourselves in this manner we can say that we truly love God with all our hearts and with all our soul. We then serve God through the highest part of our nature, the Divine element He placed in our soul.

### V

We have so far dealt with the actuality of the event at Sinai and with the nature of this event. We must now concern ourselves with the purpose of this event. When the Jews received the Torah at Sinai they uttered two words, naaseh v'nishma, we will do and we will hear, the latter meaning we will learn, understand, and comprehend. The commitment was not just one of action or performance but was one of pursuit of knowledge of the Torah. Rabbi Jonah of Gerundi asks, (14) how can one do if he doesn't understand? A performance of a rational person requires as a prerequisite knowledge of that performance. Rabbi Jonah answers: The event at Sinai served as a verification of the truth of Torah. The Torah set up a system of scholarship to which its ideas are entrusted. "We will do" means we will accept the authority of the scholars of Torah concerning proper religious performance until we can understand ourselves by way of knowledge why these performances are correct. The commitment of naaseh is preliminary until we reach the

nishma, our own understanding. Our ultimate objective is the full understanding of this corpus of knowledge known as Torah. We gain knowledge of Torah by applying our intellects to its study and investigation. The study of Torah and the understanding of its principles is a purely rational and cognitive process. All halachic decisions are based on human reason alone.

Until rather recently the greatest minds of our people devoted themselves to Torah study. Since the tradition of our people has lost popularity, the great intellectual resources of our people have been directed to science, mathematics, psychology, and other secular areas from which eminent thinkers emerged. In former years our intellectual resources produced great Torah intellects like Maimonides, Rabbeinu Tam, and Nachmanides. In modern times these same resources produced eminent secular giants like Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, and Sigmund Freud. I mention this so that the layman may have some understanding of the intellectual level of our scholars, for just as it is impossible to appreciate the intellect of an Einstein unless one has great knowledge of physics, it is impossible to appreciate the great minds of Torah unless one has attained a high level of Torah knowledge.

The greatest thinkers of science all share a common experience of profound intellectual humility. Isaac Newton said that he felt like a small boy playing by the sea while the "whole ocean of truth" rolled on before him. Albert Einstein said, "One thing I have learned in a long life: that all our science measured against reality is primitive and childlike -and yet it is the most precious thing we have." The human mind can not only ascertain what it knows; it can appreciate the extent and enormity of what it does not know. A great mind can sense the depth of that into which it is delving. In Torah one can find the same experience. The greatest Torah minds throughout the centuries have all had the realization that they are only scratching the surface of a vast and infinite body of knowledge. As the universe is to the physicist, Torah is to the Talmudist. Just as the physicist when formulating his equations can sense their crudeness against the vast reality he is attempting to penetrate, so too the Talmudist in formulating his abstractions comes in sight of the infinite world of halachic thought. As the Midrash states, "It is far greater than the earth and wider than the sea, and it increases infinitely." The reason for both experiences is the same. They

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both derive from God's infinite knowledge.

Let me elaborate further on this point. When the scientist ponders the phenomena of nature and proceeds to unravel them, he finds that with the resolution of each problem new worlds open up for him. The questions and seeming contradictions he observes in nature are gateways that guide him to greater understanding, forcing him to establish new theories which, if correct, shed light on an even wider range of phenomena. New scientific truths are discovered. The joy of success is, however, short-lived, as new problems, often of even greater immensity, emerge on the horizon of investigation. He is not dissuaded by this situation because he considers his new insight invaluable and looks forward with even greater anticipation to future gains in knowledge. The scientist is propelled by his faith that nature is not at odds with itself, that the world makes sense, and that all problems, no matter how formidable in appearance, must eventually yield to an underlying intelligible system, one that is capable of being grasped by the human mind. His faith is amply rewarded as each success brings forth new and even more amazing discoveries. He proceeds in his infinite task.

When studying man-made systems, such as United States Constitutional Law or British Common Law, this is not the case. The investigator here is not involved in an infinite pursuit. He either reaches the end of his investigation or he comes upon problems that do not lend themselves to further analysis; they are attributable to the shortcomings of the designers of the system. The man-made systems exhibit no depth beyond the intellect of their designers. Unlike science, real problems in these systems do not serve as points of departure for new theoretical insights but lead instead to dead ends.

Those who are familiar with the study of Torah know that the Talmudist encounters the same situation as the scientific investigator. Here difficulties do not lead to dead ends; on the contrary, with careful analysis apparent contradictions give way to new insights, opening up new highways of intellectual thought. Wider ranges of halachic phenomena become unified while new problems come to light. The process is infinite. The greatest human minds have had this experience when pondering the Talmud; indeed, the greater the mind, the greater the experience. We are dealing with a corpus of knowledge far beyond the ultimate grasp of mortal man. It is this

experience, this firsthand knowledge of Torah, that has been the most intimate source of faith for Torah scholars throughout the ages.

The ultimate conviction that Torah is the word of God derives from an intrinsic source, the knowledge of Torah itself. Of course this source of conviction is only available to the Torah scholar. But God wants us all to be scholars. This is only possible if we do the nishma, the ultimate purpose of the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

The revelation at Sinai, while carefully structured by the Creator to appeal to man's rational principle to move him only by his Tzelem Elokim, is only a prelude to the ultimate direct and personal realization of the Torah as being the work of the Almighty. The revelation at Sinai was necessary to create the naaseh which is the bridge to the nishma where anyone can gain firsthand knowledge of Torah and the truth it contains. As Rabbi Soloveitchick once said, the study of Torah is a "rendezvous with the Almighty". When we begin to comprehend the philosophy of Torah we may also begin to appreciate how the revelation at Sinai was structured by God in the only way possible to achieve the goals of the Torah -to create a religion, forever secure, by means of which man worships God through the highest element in his nature.

### Postscript

A statement of Nachmanides warrants inclusion here. Nachmanides says that we can infer the truth of the Torah from the principle that a person would not bequeath a falsehood to his children. At first sight this seems inexplicable. Idolatry could also avail itself of the same argument. We must obviously say that the principle, it may be true, must be amended to read a person would not transmit intentionally a falsehood to his children. How then does this show Judaism is true? All religious people believe their religion is true and that they are bestowing the greatest blessing on their children by conveying to them their most cherished beliefs.

The words of Nachmanides become clear when we realize that his inference is based on a certain level of Torah knowledge. Either the emotions or the intellect generates a belief. But Torah is a vast system of knowledge with concepts, postulates, and axioms. If such a system were fabricated it

would have to be done so intentionally. Nachmanides therefore states his proposition that a person does not bequeath a falsehood to his children.

For the purpose of Nachmanides' inference, one would have to attain at least a basic familiarity with Torah. The ultimate recognition of Torah as a science would of necessity require a higher degree of knowledge. Nachmanides' proof is partially intrinsic, whereas the demonstration of Torah from Sinai is totally extrinsic. There are then three levels of knowledge of Torah from Sinai: the demonstration, the intrinsic verification through knowledge, and that of Nachmanides.

### Epilogue

Torah completely satisfies the needs of the Tzelem Elokim in man's nature. Every human mind craves Torah. Man was created for it (see tractate Sanhedrin 99b). Following the example of Maimonides, who said "Listen to the truth from whomever said it (Introduction to Avos)," and his son Reb Avraham, who endorsed the study of Aristotle in the areas in which he does not disagree with Torah, (15) I take the liberty to quote Bertrand Russell: "The world has need of a philosophy or a religion which will promote life. But in order to promote life it is necessary to value something other than mere life. Life devoted only to life is animal, without any real human value, incapable of preserving men permanently from weariness and the feeling that all is vanity. If life is to be fully human it must serve some end which seems, in some sense, outside human life, some end which is impersonal and above mankind, such as God or truth or beauty. Those who best promote life do not have life for their purpose. They aim rather at what seems like a gradual incarnation, a bringing into our human existence of something eternal, something that appears to the imagination to live in a heaven remote from strife and failure and the devouring jaws of time. Contact with the eternal world -even if it be only a world of our imagining - brings a strength and a fundamental peace which cannot be wholly destroyed by the struggles and apparent failures of our temporal life." (16)

Torah makes our lives worthwhile. It gives us contact with the eternal world of God, truth, and the beauty of His ideas. Unlike Russell the

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# TORAH



## from Sinai

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

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agnostic, we do not have to satisfy ourselves with a world of "our imagining" but with the world of reality - God's creation. How fortunate we are and how meaningful are the words we recite each day, "for they [the Torah and mitzvos] are our lives and the length of our days." ■

### End Notes

1. See Rashi, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra on this verse.
2. In his description of the Torah scholar, Rav Soloveitchik states, "He does not search out transcendental, ecstatic paroxysms or frenzied experiences that whisper intonations of another world into his ears. He does not require any miracles or wonder in order to understand the Torah. He approaches the world of halacha with his mind and intellect just as cognitive man approaches the natural realm. And since he relies upon his intellect, he places his faith in it and does not suppress any of his psychic faculties in order to merge into some supernal existence. His own personal understanding can resolve the most difficult and complex problems. He pays no heed to any murmurings of [emotional] intuition or other types of mysterious presentiments." Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*. (Philadelphia: 1983, Jewish Publication Society of America) p.79.
3. Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Trans. by M. Friedlander. (London: 1951 Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd) p. 161.
4. From both Maimonides and Nachmanides who concur on this point, as well as from the plain meaning of the Bible itself with regard to the objective of Revelation, it is clear that Judaism does not give credence to the existence of an authentic inner religious voice. Were this the case, there would be no need for the demonstration at Sinai in order to discredit the false prophet (Deuteronomy 8:2-6). On the contrary, this would be the exact test spoken of, to see if one will be faithful to this inner voice. For Judaism this inner voice is no different from the subjective inner feelings all people have for their religious and other unwarranted beliefs. It stems from the primitive side of man's nature and is in fact the source of idolatry. This is clearly stated in Deuteronomy 29:17, 18:
  - Today, there must not be among you any man, woman, family or tribe, whose heart strays from God, and who goes and worships the gods of those nations. When [such a person] hears the words of this dread curse, he may rationalize and say, "I will have peace, even if I do as I see fit."
  - Why does the Torah here as in no other place present to us the rationalization of the sinner? The Torah is describing the strong sense of security these primitive inner feelings often bestow on their hosts and is warning of the tragic consequences that will follow if they are not uprooted.
  5. It is imperative that the reader examines the passages in the Torah relevant to this notion. These include Exodus 19:4, Deuteronomy 4:3,9,34,35, and 36.
  6. As a classic example, metaphysical solipsism may be logically irrefutable but is to the human mind absurd.
  7. We may even be able to discover why we reject it, let us say, due to Occam's razor, the maxim that assumptions introduced to explain a thing must be as few as possible, but our rejection is not due to a knowledge of Occam's razor but rather Occam's razor is based on our rejection. It is part of the innate rationale of our mental system. Occam's razor, a rather marvelous formula, does not rely on deductive logic. It shows that the natural world somehow conforms to our mental world. The simplest idea is the most appealing to the human mind and is usually the most correct one. The world is in conformity with the mind. In the words of Albert Einstein, "The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible."
  8. It should be understood that the mere claim that an event was a public one and its acceptance by people does not qualify the event as fulfilling our requirements; it is only if the people who accept the information are in a position to reject it that their acceptance is of value. If a person from Africa claims to people of Sardinia that a public event transpired in Africa, the acceptance by the Sardinians is no indication of reliability as they are not in a position to confirm or deny the event. It is only if the claim is made to the same people who were in a position to observe the event that acceptance is of value. Claims made by early Christians about public miracles of the Nazarene do not qualify, as the masses of Jews before whom they were supposedly performed did not attest to them. The same is true of claims made by other faiths (though, as we will see, after Sinai miracles have no credibility value).
  9. See Maimonides, Code of Law, Chapter VIII, Laws Concerning the Foundations of Torah.
  10. Ibid. Chapter VIII.
  11. This point is crucial. It contradicts popular opinion. The Jew remains at all times unimpressed by miracles. They do not form the essence of his faith, and they do not enter the mental framework of his creed. Though the most righteous prophet may perform them, they instill no belief. His credence harks back to only one source -Sinai.
  12. See the concept of love of God as described by Maimonides Code, Laws of the Foundations of Torah Chapter II 1,2, and our elaboration on this theme in "Why one should learn Torah."
  13. When visiting the Rockefeller Medical Institute, Albert Einstein met with Dr. Alexis Carrel, whose extracurricular interests were spiritualism and extrasensory perception. Observing that, Einstein was unimpressed. Carrel said, "But Doctor what would you say if you observed this phenomenon yourself?" To which Einstein replied, "I still would not believe it." (Clark, Ronald W. Einstein: The Life and Times. (New York: 1971, Avon Books) p. 642). Why would the great scientist not capitulate even to evidence? It is a matter of one's total framework. The true man of science who sees knowledge permeating the entire universe from the smallest particle to the largest galaxies will not be shaken from his view by a few paltry facts even though he may not be able to explain them. Only the ignorant are moved by such "evidence." In a similar manner miracles do not affect a man of Torah who is rooted in Sinai and God's infinite wisdom. His credo is his cogito.
  14. Rebbeinu Yonah Avos III 9.
  15. Concerning books that are proscribed, this follows the precedent of the Talmud [Sanhedrin 110b], *mili mealyesah deis baih darshinon* - those true things that are contained in them we do study.
  16. Schlipp, Paul R. *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*. (LaSalle: 1989, Open Court Publishing). p.533.

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# Parashas Yitro

RABBI BERNARD FOX

Sinai. Boundaries are set surrounding the mountain. The people are not permitted to approach the mountain beyond these boundaries. Hashem commands Moshe to remind the people that these boundaries cannot be violated. If this injunction is ignored, they will be severely punished.

Rashi explains that Moshe was permitted to ascend to the highest point on the mountain. Ahron could accompany him during most of his ascent. The Kohanim were allowed to ascend to a lower point. The rest of the nation was forbidden from approaching Sinai.[1]

What was the meaning of the boundaries? Why were these various individuals and groups permitted to ascend to different levels of the mountain?

Maimonides, explains that we cannot achieve complete understanding of the Almighty. Our material nature limits our ability. We can never completely overcome this limit. However, we can attain some understanding of Hashem. The level of comprehension we can acquire varies. This comprehension varies directly with one's spiritual level. Moshe reached the highest possible spiritual plane. He achieved a correspondingly profound level of understanding of the Divine nature.

Maimonides seems to suggest that this concept is represented by the various boundaries. Ascending the mountain represents attaining understanding of the Almighty. Moshe could climb to the highest point on the mountain. This symbolizes the unique understanding he achieved of the Almighty. Ahron was not as spiritually perfected as Moshe. He could not attain the same profound comprehension. This is represented by the prohibition against accompanying Moshe to his destination. The Kohanim and the nation were less spiritually developed. They were assigned boundaries corresponding with their levels. Their boundaries represent the levels of understanding attainable.

Hashem warns each group against trespassing beyond its assigned border. A person must recognize personal limitation. Passing beyond one's boundary represents striving for a level of understanding beyond one's ability. This will result in disaster. The individual who overreaches will not properly understand the Divine essence. Instead, this individual will develop a flawed conception. In order to avoid false conclusion regarding Hashem, each person must respect personal limitations.[2]

**"I am Hashem your G-d that brought you out from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage." (Shemot 20:2)**

This is the first statement of the Decalogue. Hashem identifies Himself as the G-d that redeemed Bnai Yisrael from Egypt. Most authorities regard this statement as a commandment. This presents a problem. A commandment engenders some obligation. It requires us to perform some action or accept some conviction. However, this statement is merely the presentation of a fact. What does this commandment require of us?

The Sefer Mitzvot Gadol offers an interesting interpretation of this mitzvah. His explanation is based upon a careful interpretation of the passage. The pasuk is the Almighty's introduction to the revelation of the Torah. He identifies Himself. He says that He is the G-d that redeemed the nation from Egypt. The Sefer Mitzvot Gadol concludes that the mitzvah requires that we acknowledge that the G-d that revealed the Torah is the same Deity that redeemed us from Egypt.[3]

Most other authorities maintain that this mitzvah obligates us to acknowledge the existence of G-d. This interpretation of the mitzvah presents an obvious problem. What is meant by the term "G-d"? This term has different meanings to different people. In itself, it is rather vague. The term needs some clarification. Precisely, in what must we believe?

Maimonides contends that the term "G-d" refers to a Deity that is the cause of all that exists. He explains that we are obligated to acknowledge that there exists a Deity that is the cause of all other existence. This means that all that exist is a consequence of His will. Without this will nothing would exist. However, if nothing else existed, He would still exist.[4]

Rabbaynu Yehuda HaLeyve, in his Kuzari, seems to object to this definition. In order to understand his objection, some initial clarification is needed. Rav Yehuda HaLeyve does not disagree with Maimonides' assertion that the Hashem is the cause of all existence. This is one of the lessons of the Torah. However, he points out that the commandment requires that we acknowledge the existence of G-d. His objection relates to defining the term "G-d" as the cause of all existence. What is the basis of this objection?

Rabbaynu Yehuda HaLeyve contends that the

commandment does not obligate us in abstract philosophical speculation. In other words, the commandment cannot obligate us to prove through philosophical analysis the existence of G-d. Rabbaynu Yehuda HaLeyve assumes a skeptical attitude towards such speculations. The great philosophers have different understandings of G-d. Some acknowledge that He is the Creator. Others reject this conclusion. Even if the speculations were conclusive, they might exceed the ability of the common person. The "G-d" identified by the commandment must be a Deity that everyone can acknowledge, not just the great scholars.

On this basis, it seems that Rabbaynu Yehuda HaLeyve would reject Maimonides' description of the commandment. It is likely that he would argue that Maimonides defines the commandment in a manner that requires philosophical speculation. How would one prove that Hashem is the cause of all existence? This would require an analysis that may exceed the ability of the common person!

What is Rabbaynu Yehuda HaLeyve's understanding of the mitzvah? He explains that we are obligated to believe in the G-d of the forefathers that led Bnai Yisrael out of Egypt and gave the Torah. He contends that anyone can make such an affirmation. This is a G-d that was encountered through personal experience and is known to subsequent generations though an unassailable chain of tradition. In other words, this G-d is revealed in history. Anyone can accept an historical fact![5]

In order to better understand the dispute between Maimonides and Rabbaynu Yehuda HaLeyve, it is helpful to consider a few scenarios. First, imagine a person that believes in G-d that delivered Bnai Yisrael from Egypt and gave the Torah. However, this person does not understand that this G-d is the cause of all existence. According to Rabbaynu Yehuda HaLeyve, this person's convictions do not conform to the Torah. However, it cannot be said that this person does not acknowledge the existence of G-d. Maimonides would clearly disagree. He would contend that this person does not fulfill the most basic of mitzvot. He does not acknowledge the existence of G-d.

Second, consider a person that accepts the existence of a Deity that is the cause of all existence. However, this person does not know that this G-d redeemed us from Egypt and gave us the Torah. Maimonides would contend that this person's belief

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# Parashas Yitro

RABBI BERNARD FOX

system is not in conformity with the Torah. However, the primary command of acknowledging G-d has been fulfilled. Rabbaynu Yehuda HaLeyve seems to adopt the position that this person has not complied with the basic mitzvah of acknowledging G-d.

It is important to clearly understand the basis of the three positions we have described. Each position reflects a fundamentally different understanding of this commandment.

The position of the Sefer Mitzvot Gadol is the most astounding of the three positions. According to this interpretation, the commandment does not directly require an affirmation of the existence of G-d. Instead, the mitzvah requires that we acknowledge that the Deity that gave the Torah is the same G-d that redeemed us from Egypt. The commandment requires that we affirm the origins of the Torah. We must place the Torah in its proper context. We must appreciate that the Torah is a divinely revealed truth. Of course, this does imply acknowledgement of the existence of G-d. However, the commandment is formulated as an acknowledgement of the nature of the Torah. It is not inherently fashioned as an acknowledgement of G-d's existence.

Rabbaynu Yehuda HaLeyve and Maimonides disagree with this position. They argue that we are directly commanded to acknowledge the existence of G-d. However, they differ in the specifics of this obligation. Now, let us consider this dispute.

Rabbaynu Yehuda HaLeyve's position is more easily understood. We have already explained his reasons for rejecting Maimonides' approach to this mitzvah. However, it is important to appreciate the outcome of Rabbaynu Yehuda HaLeyve's formulation. Essentially, he contends that we are obligated to acknowledge G-d as He has overtly and manifestly revealed Himself. He made Himself known through the forefathers – the Avot, through the wonders He performs and through revelation at Sinai. We are obligated to acknowledge the G-d that is manifested through personal experience and known through tradition.

Maimonides requires that we acknowledge the existence of a Deity that is the cause of all that exists. What is Maimonides' reason for insisting on this somewhat abstract formulation of the mitzvah?

Maimonides provides an important insight into his position in his Moreh Nevuchim. He begins with the premise that the perfection of a person's soul is determined by the degree to which the person

perceives actual reality. Therefore, various mistakes have differing degrees of impact on human perfection. A misconception regarding an insignificant issue does not have a substantial impact upon human perfection. However, an error regarding a basic reality has a serious impact upon the soul's perfection.

Let us consider a simple example. Assume a person thinks that Reuven is sitting. However, really Reuven is standing. How serious is this person's misconception of reality? It is not very serious. Consequently, this error has little impact on the person's soul. Let us contrast this with a person that believes that the earth is flat or a person that sees ghosts and demons around every corner. This person's perception of reality is seriously flawed. A more basic aspect of reality is denied. The impact of such a misconception is far more serious. As a result, these misconceptions have a significant impact on the person's perfection.[6]

Let us proceed one step further in this analysis. What is the most basic aspect of reality? The answer is that all that exists is a result of G-d. He is the most fundamental aspect of the universe and all that exists. Denial of the existence of a Deity that is the cause of all reality is the greatest possible misconception! No other single error can have the same degree of negative impact upon the soul.

We can now understand Maimonides interpretation of the mitzvah to acknowledge G-d. The Torah is a blueprint. It describes the convictions and behaviors of the perfected individual. Maimonides contends that this perfection requires more than mere acknowledgement of G-d. Human perfection is achieved through acknowledging the fundamental nature of reality. We must understand that the entire reality that surrounds us is based upon the existence of G-d. He is the basis and source of all reality. □

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 19:24.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Moreh Nevuchim, volume 1, chapter 5.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe of Kotzi, Sefer Mitzvot Gadol, Mitzvat Aseh 1.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 1:1-3.

[5] Rabbaynu Yehuda HaLeyve, Kuzari, part I, sections 11-25.

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Moreh Nevuchim, volume 1, chapter 36.

## Letters

### Prostitution IN ISRAEL

*A reader wrote us regarding unpleasant findings in Israel. We felt it important to share these well founded sentiments, in hopes that those in power will correct and sanctify the Jewish people. (Published with permission)*

"I recently came back from my first trip to Israel. I was there for 3 weeks. It was exciting and heart breaking. I just read your article "God's Land without God". I couldn't agree more.

I have been practicing Judaism for 7 years though I have not converted because there is no shul in my area. But I read the Torah portions regularly and adhere to as much as I understand. Each day I am given more insight and I try to obey as much as I can.

We lost our return tickets and had to go to Tel Aviv to the Delta office and afterward ended up in a bad part of Tel Aviv. It actually was the 'red light' district. We asked about this area and found out that Israel has legalized prostitution in this area. There also have been five suicide bombings in this same area. I wonder why? I can't tell you how grieved I was to see such a horrible thing in God's holy land and using his holy language. I have many friends that have the misconception that Jews are holy people because the Torah says they are suppose to be, but once they meet some of them, they are very disappointed by what they find. It was even more grievous to find out that many orthodox men go to these prostitutes. I saw an orthodox man walking down the street. He had his tzitzit tucked into his pant pockets. If this is the case, these men are going to be taking aids home to their wives. What is going to happen when these people begin to die off leaving all there children orphans? You can't play with sexual sin and not have serious consequences, especially if you dress yourself up in certain garb to proclaim "greater religiosity".

We went to Netanya one Sat. night after Shabbat and turned down a wrong street as we walked looking for our car. We ended up in the same type of neighborhood. I was appalled by what I saw and felt as I walked down that street. How can they allow this horrible thing to happen? They looked mostly like Russians from the little bit I saw: girls hanging out in doorways. Then we saw a commercial on the TV advertising a number for women to call, to leave prostitution. We couldn't understand what was being said but the pictures described the story. If they make ads like that why don't they outlaw this all together? It can be done.

America is an immoral place, but in Israel I saw women who dressed much more indecently than anywhere in the USA, and I lived in Hollywood CA for a long time.

My prayer is that your article will be taken to heart by anyone that reads it and t'shuva will be the byword of many living in that wonderful and set apart land. It's a hard thing to be called out to be His people, but He will give His ability to those who want to truly represent Him.

Thank you for taking the time to read this."

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# The Tablets TORAH and SINAI

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The first set of tablets, you recall, Moses broke in the sight of the people. A Rabbi explained this was done so the people would not worship the stone tablets as they did the Golden Calf. A new set of tablets was then required. Subsequently, I pondered, "Why do we needed the Ten Commandments engraved on stone tablets at all? If we need commands, we can receive them orally from God, or from Moses, so why are tablets needed? Also, why was there miraculous writing on the tablets? If Moses felt the people might err by deifying the first set, why was a second set created?" I also wondered why a box was required for the second set, but not for the first?

I then started thinking more into the purpose of the tablets, "Was this the only thing Moses descended with from Sinai? Was there a Torah scroll? What about the Oral Law? What did Moses receive, and when?" I also questioned what exactly comprised the content of the Written Torah and the Oral Law. Events subsequent to Sinai, such as the Books of Numbers and Deuteronomy had not yet occurred, so it did not make sense to me that these were given at Sinai. I looked for references in the Torah and Talmud. What did Moses receive at Sinai?

I wish at this point to make it clear, that I am not questioning the veracity of our Written Torah and our Oral Law as we have it today. Our Five Books of Moses, Prophets, Writings, Mishna, Medrash, and Talmud are all authentic, and comprise authentic, Written and Oral Law. What I am

questioning, is how and what was received, by whom, and when. I am doing so, as this is part of God's design of our receipt of Torah. If He gave it over in a specific fashion, then there is much knowledge to be derived from such a transmission. Certainly, the Ten Commandments must be unique in some way, as God created separate stones revealing only these ten. What is their significance?

The answers begin to reveal themselves by studying these areas in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Exodus 19, and 24 recount the arrival of the Jews at Sinai and the events which transpired:

Exodus, 24:1-4, "1. And to Moses (God) said, ascend to God, you, Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and the seventy from the elders of Israel, and prostrate from afar. 2. And Moses alone, draw near to God, but the others, don't approach, and the people, do not ascend with him. 3. And Moses came and told over to the people all the words of God, and all the statutes, and the entire people answered as one, and they said, 'all the matters that God has said we will do.' 4. And Moses wrote all the the words of God..."

Verse 24:12 continues: "And God said to Moses, 'ascend to Me to the mountain, and remain there, and I will give you the tablets of stone, and the Torah and the Mitzvah (commands) that I have written, that you should instruct them."

"And Moses wrote all the the words of God..." teaches that prior to the giving of the tablets of stone, Moses ascended Mount Sinai, learned ideas from God, descended, taught the people what he learned, and wrote "the words of God." (This was the order of events prior to Moses' second ascension to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments.) What were these "words"? Ibn Ezra says this comprised the section of our Torah from Exod. 20:19 - 23:33. This is the end of Parshas Yisro through most of Parshas Mishpatim. This was told to the Jews before the event of Sinai where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. The Jews accepted these laws, and Moses wrote them

down. This is referred to as the "Book of the Treaty." Moses entered them into a treaty with God, that they accept God based on the section mentioned. Only afterwards was that famous, historical giving of the Ten Commandments from the fiery Mount Sinai. The Jews were offered to hear the Torah's commands.

Earlier in Exodus, 19:8, we learn of this same account, but with some more information. When Moses told the Jews the commandments verbally, prior to the reception of the tablets, the Jews said as one, "all that God said, we will do, and Moses returned the word of the people to God." Moses returned to God and told Him the Jews' favorable response. Now, Moses knew that God is aware of all man's thoughts, deeds and speech. What need was there for Moses to "return the word"? Then God responds, "Behold, I come to you in thick cloud so that the people shall hear when I speak with you, and also in you will they believe forever..." What was Moses intent on reporting the Jews' acceptance of these commands, and what was God's response? Was Moses' intent to say, "there is no need for the event of Sinai, as the people already believe in You?" I am not certain. The Rabbis offer a few explanations why Revelation at Sinai was necessary. Ibn Ezra felt there were some members of the nation who subscribed to Egypt's beliefs (inherited from the Hodus) that God does not speak with man. God therefore wished to uproot this fallacy through Revelation. Ibn Ezra then, is of the opinion that Revelation was not performed for the Jews' acceptance of God, which they already had accepted, "and the entire people answered as one, and they said, 'all the matters that God has said we will do.'"

According to Ibn Ezra, God teaches the purpose of the miracles at Sinai: "Yes, the people believe in Me, but there is yet something missing: a proof for ALL generations", as God said, "...and also in you will they believe forever." It ends up that the Sinaic event of God giving the Ten Commands from a fiery mountain

had one purpose; to stand as a proof for all generations. This is something many of us are already familiar with: Such a massively attended event at which an Intelligence related knowledge to man, from amidst flames, was and is undeniable proof of the existence of a Metaphysical Being in complete control of all creation. Sinai serves as our eternal proof of God's existence. We now learn from a closer look, that the Jews had already accepted God's commands prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments. That event was to serve as a proof of God's existence, but the Jews' agreement to those ideas was earlier.

## What exactly did God give to Moses at Sinai?

The Torah tells us God communicated many commands without writing, and He also gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Ibn Ezra says the "Torah and the Mitzvah" referred to in Exod. 24:12 is as follows: "The 'Torah' is the first and fifth commands (of the Ten) and the 'Mitzvah' refers to the other eight." This implies that all which God gave physically, was the Ten Commandments on stone. Further proof is found openly, Deuteronomy 9:10, "And it was at the end of forty days and forty nights, God gave me the two tablets of stone, tablets of the treaty." We find no mention of any other object, such as a Torah scroll, given to Moses. We therefore learn that Moses wrote the Torah, and God wrote the Ten Commandments. (Saadia Gaon views the Ten Commandments as the head categories for the remaining 603 commands.)

The Torah was written by Moses, not God, Who wrote the Ten Commandments. What was God's plan, that there should be a Divinely engraved "Ten Commandments" in stone, and that Moses would record the Torah? And we see the necessity for the Ten Commandments, as God instructed Moses to quarry new tablets subsequent to his destruction of the first set. These stones were necessary, even though they are recorded in Moses' Torah! What is so

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# The Tablets TORAH and SINAI

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



important about these stone tablets? Not only that, but additionally, the Ten Commandments were uttered by God. Why? If He gave them to us in an engraved form, we have them! Why is God's created "speech" required? Was it to awe the masses, as we see they asked Moses to intercede, as they feared for their lives at the sound of this created voice?

According to Maimonides, at Sinai, the Jews did not hear intelligible words. All they heard was an awesome sound. Maimonides explains the use of the second person singular throughout the ten Commandments - God addressed Moses alone. Why would God wish that Moses' alone find the sound intelligible, but not the people? Again, Maimonides is of the opinion that the people didn't hear intelligible words during God's "oral" transmission of the Ten Commandments. This requires an explanation, as this too is by God's will. We now come to the core issue of this article...

## Why Moses Perceived the Miracle of Sinai Differently than the People

We must take note of Maimonides' distinction between the perceptions of Moses and the Jews at Sinai. It appears to me, God desired we understand that reaching Him is only through knowledge. God teaches this by communicating with the Jews at Sinai, but as Maimonides teaches, Moses' alone understood this prophecy on his level, Aaron on a lower level, Nadav and Avihu on a

lower level, and the seventy elders still lower. The people did not understand the sound. This teaches that knowledge of God depends on one's own level. It is not something equally available to all members of mankind. God desires we excel at our learning, sharpening our minds, thinking into matters, and using reason to uncover the infinite world of ideas created by God. The fact that knowledge is an endless sea, is the driving force behind a Torah student's conviction that his or her studies will eventuate in deep, profound, and "continued" insights. This excites the Torah scholar, which each one of us has the ability to be. It's not the amount of study, but the quality of it. "Echad hamarbeh, v'echad ha'mimat, uvilvad sheh-yikavane libo laShamayim."

Sinai was orchestrated in a precise fashion. Maimonides uncovers the concept which Sinai taught: In proportion to our knowledge is our ability to see new truths. Moses was on the highest level of knowledge, and therefore understood this prophecy at Sinai to the highest level of human clarity. He then taught this knowledge to the people, but they

could not perceive it directly when it was revealed. God desired the people to require Moses' repetition. Why? This established the system of Torah as a constant reiteration of the event at Sinai! A clever method. Sinai taught us that perception of God's knowledge is proportional to our intelligence. Thus, Moses alone perceived the meaning of the sounds. You remember that earlier in this article we learned that the people were taught certain Torah commands prior to the event at Sinai. Why was this done? Perhaps it served as a basis for the following Sinaic event which God knew they would not comprehend. God wished that when Moses explained to them what he heard, that the Jews would see that it was perfectly in line with what Moses taught many days earlier. There would be no chance that the people would assume Moses was fabricating something God did not speak.

God does not wish this lesson of Sinai to vanish. This is where Moses' writing of the Torah comes in. God could have equally given Moses a Torah scroll along with the tablets, but He didn't. Why? I believe Moses'

authority - as displayed in his writing of the Torah - reiterates the Sinaic system that knowledge can only be found when sought from the wise. It is not open to everyone as the Conservatives and Reformed Jews haughtily claim. The system of authority was established at Sinai, and reiterated through Moses' writing of the Torah. Subsequent to Moses, this concept continues, as it forms part of Torah commands, "In accordance with the Torah that they teach you..." (Deut. 17:11) God commands us to adhere to the Rabbis. God wishes us to realize that knowledge can only be reached with our increased study, and our continually, refined intelligence and reason. Words alone - even in Torah - cannot contain God's wisdom. The words point to greater ideas, they are doors to larger vaults, and they, to even larger ones. Perhaps this is the idea that the Jews did not hear words. As the verse says, "a sound of words did you hear". Maimonides deduces that no words were heard, otherwise, the verse would read "words did you hear", not "a sound of words". The Jews heard sounds with no words.

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# The Tablets TORAH and SINAI

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

## A Purpose of the Tablets

We now understand why Moses taught the Jews commands before Sinai's miracles. We understand why Moses wrote the Torah - not God. We understand why God created the miraculous event at Sinai, as well as the system of transmission of knowledge. But we are left with one question. Why did God create the Ten Commandments of stone? Why was the second set alone, housed in a box?

Let us think; they were made of stone, both sets - the broken and the second set - were housed in the ark, there was miraculous writing on these tablets (Rabbeinu Yona: Ethics, 5:6), they contained the ten head categories for all the remaining 603 commands (Saadia Gaon), and they were to remain with the people always.

Why did the tablets have only ten of the 613 commands? We see elsewhere (Deut. 27:3) that the entire Torah was written three times on three sets of 12 stones, according to Ramban. Even Ibn Ezra states that all the commands were written on these stones. So why didn't the tablets given to Moses at Sinai contain all the commands?

Perhaps the answer is consistent with the purpose of Sinai: That is, that the system of knowledge of God is one of 'derivation' - all knowledge cannot be contained in writing. God gave us intelligence for the sole purpose of using it. With the tablets of only ten commands, I believe God created a permanent lesson: "All is not here", you must study continually to arrive at new ideas in My infinite sea of knowledge. So the head categories are engraved on these two stones. This teaches that very same lesson conveyed through Moses' exclusive

understanding of God's "verbal" recital of these very Ten Commands on Sinai: Knowledge is arrived at only through thinking. Knowledge is not the written word, so few words are engraved on the tablets. But since we require a starting point, God inscribed the head categories which would lead the thinker to all other commands, which may be derived from these ten. God taught us that our knowledge of Him is proportional to our intelligence. This is why Moses alone perceived the "orally" transmitted Ten Commandments. Others below him in intelligence, i.e., Aaron, his sons, and the elders, received far less.

This theory is consistent with Saadia Gaon's position that the Ten Commandments are the head categories of all remaining 603 commands. Saadia Gaon too, was teaching that God gave us the necessary "Ten Keys" which unlock greater knowledge. Saadia Gaon saw knowledge not as a reading of facts, but as it truly is: a system where our thought alone can discover new ideas, and that new knowledge, opens new doors, ad infinitum. All truth is complimentary, so the more we grasp, the more we CAN grasp.

The tablets mirror the event of God's revelation, and the nature by which man may arrive at new ideas. Just as Moses alone understood the sounds at Sinai, and all others could not readily comprehend the sounds, so too the tablets. All is not revealed, but can be uncovered through earnest investigation. Moses possessed the greatest intellect, so he was able to comprehend Sinai more than any other person. Just as Sinai taught us that refined intelligence open doors to those possessing it, via Moses' exclusive comprehension, the tablets too were a necessary lesson for future generations. They were commanded to be made of stone as stone endures throughout all generations. (Placing the second set of tablets in a box may have been to indicate that the Jews were now further removed from knowledge, in contrast to the first set. They removed themselves via the Golden Calf event.)

Why was a "miraculous" writing essential to these tablets? Perhaps this "Divine" element continually reminds

us that the Source of all knowledge is God. Only One Who created the world could create miracles within a substance, such as these miraculous letters. We recognize thereby, that Torah is knowledge of God, and given by God. These tablets are a testament to the Divine Source of Torah, and all knowledge.

We learn a lesson vital to our purpose here on Earth to learn: Learning is not absorbing facts. Learning is the act of thinking, deriving, and reasoning. "Knowledge" is not all written down, very little is. Thus, the Oral Law. Our Torah is merely the starting point. God's knowledge may only be reached through intense thought. We must strive to remove ourselves from mundane activities, distractions, and from seeking satisfaction of our emotions. We must make a serious effort to secure time, and isolate ourselves with a friend and alone, and delve into Torah study. Jacob was a "yoshave ohallim", "a tent dweller". He spent years in thought. Only through this approach will we merit greater knowledge, and see the depths of wisdom, with much enjoyment. □

## YITRO

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Upon the Jews' initial entrance into Israel, Moshe addresses his father in law as follows: (Numbers, 10:29)

(29) "Moshe said to Chovav, son of Reuale the Midianite, father in law of Moshe, 'we are traveling to the place, upon which God said I will give it to you,...Go with us and there will be done good to you, as God has spoken good for Israel. (30) Chovav said to Moshe, 'I will not go, unto my land and my birthplace I will go'. (31) Moshe said, 'please do not forsake us in as much as you know our travels in the desert, and you will be to us as eyes. (32) And when you go with us, that good which God will do unto us, He will do unto you.'

Why was Moshe addressing his father in law at this time? Did Moshe sense in Chovav some hesitation to remain with the people of Israel? What was Moshe's initial argument, and why

did he mention Chovav's role of being a navigator only in passage 31? This was not stated by Moshe in his initial argument. What does Chovav's response about "unto my land and my birthplace I will go" come to teach us? Why mention Chovav as "son of Reuale the Midianite"? We already know who he is.

From Moshe's first statement in passage 29, we understand that Moshe desired Chovav to enjoy the best life, "Go with us and there will be done good to you, as God has spoken good for Israel." Chovav responds, "I will not go, unto my land and my birthplace I will go". Moshe understands from this response that Chovav's attachment to his land and birthplace outweigh his wish to relocate to Israel, receiving the good from God. (The passage itself in describing Chovav states, "Chovav, son of Reuale the Midianite", hinting at Chovav's attachment to his father and his land.) Moshe then tries to use Chovav's own mode of operation to attract him: Chovav was a leader in Midian. He also demonstrated leadership by suggesting a system of judges in parshas Yisro (Yisro and Chovav are the same according to commentators). It appears that Moshe intended to attract Chovav to the ultimate good promised by God, by also appealing to Chovav's own motivations displayed in "unto my land and my birthplace I will go",... "and you will be to us as eyes" was Moshe's attempt to do so.

Moshe did not initially suggest that Chovav take on some leadership role by being their eyes. Moshe wanted to attract Chovav to the good life, based on the good life itself. When Moshe saw this was not attractive enough, he sought to add a motive for Chovav, so Moshe mentioned that he would be as eyes to the nation, a leadership role. But Moshe being committed to the truth, would not allow this to be the sole argument for Chovav's attachment to Israel. This is why Moshe again adds - even in his second argument - that Chovav will attain the good promised by God. To Moshe, this must always be the motive for following Judaism - it is the ultimate good. No other consideration replaces this as an argument to follow Judaism. □

# PROVING SINAI: CIRCULAR REASONING?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

**Reader:** I was intrigued by Rabbi Chait's article proving the validity of the Torah based on mass revelation. In trying to understand the proof of Rabbi Chait, I was confused on a few points. Firstly, how do we know that 600,000 people saw the event? The logic for that fact seems circular- we trust the document as a historical fact because so many people witnessed an event in it, yet the very proof in how we know so many people saw the event, is from the document itself! Is it possible that Moses claimed 600,000 people saw an event and exaggerated the number? (Not that the claim is completely false). Secondly, I am troubled by the fact that the revelation is in no way a "clear" representation of God. At best it resembles a volcano, or some sort of primitive speaker system. Is it possible that Moses was able to induce a volcano, or use echo to put on an impressive display that the people believed was God? Thirdly, (and most basically) if this is such an undeniable fact, why does most of the world not accept the revelation as fact? Thanks for your time, ES

**Mesora:** Let us define "circular reasoning": a person claiming his diploma to be authentic, and affords but one proof: his diploma. Here, the "proof" is equal to the object he attempts to prove. To validate his diploma, records must be found at the institution of his claimed attendance, or similar, external proof. By definition, when one wishes to validate anything, the validation must be external to that which one desires to validate. For example, if one tells airport security to accept his word that he is who he says he is, that would be circular as well. A passport proves an identity. The passport is external to the person, and is a valid proof.

What about history? How can we prove it? If one wishes to use the very recorded story as a proof, it would appear this too is circular reasoning. However, there is one major difference: the verification of any historical account - is in fact the account! I will explain. Provided the account is universally identical, accepted by masses, and describes intelligible phenomena, the story must be true. There is no possible means by which a universally identical history would arrive in our hands today, had these factors not been present at the time of that event at hand. Form example, one could not successfully convince others of explosions on the George Washington Bridge at rush hour, unless they actually occurred. Too many witnesses would deny a fabrication, and no one but the perpetrator would promote the fallacy. The story would never succeed, and certainly, not be recorded in history.

History is the one thing that derives its validation from its very existence, provided all mentioned factors form part of the story. This is why Sinai is not circular reasoning, and its very existence is its proof. We learn that "circular reasoning", like all other concepts,

must be defined, and when it is, all errors are removed. We thereby know that 600,000 (men above 20 – approx. 2 million total) witnesses attended Sinai.

Your second question is how do we know that it was G-d who was responsible for the event. The story records that the people heard the "sound of words" emanating from the fire. Well, what causes intelligent sounds, i.e., words? We know that on Earth, man alone speaks. But man cannot coexist in fire, let alone, speak intelligent words. Therefore, what caused these words cannot be a biological organism, as such a creature would perish, and certainly, the creature would be seen. But the story also records that "...no form did you see, only a voice."

I will quote a few sources to show how clearly the people understood this: In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses recalls that event: (4:12) "And God spoke to you from inside the fire, a voice of words did you hear, and no form did you see, only a voice", (4:16) "And be exceedingly careful regarding your souls, for you did not see any form the day God spoke to you in Horeb from inside the fire", (4:33) "Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from inside the fire, and survived, as you have?" (4:36) "From the heavens He made heard His voice to train you, and on Earth He showed you His great fire, and His words you heard from inside the fire", (5:4) "Face to face, God spoke with you on the mountain from inside the fire", (5:19) "These matters God spoke to your entire assembly on the mountain from inside the fire...", (5:21) "...and you said 'and His voice we heard from inside the fire'...", (5:23) "For who of all flesh has heard the voice of the living God speaking from inside the fire, and survived, as us?", (9:10) "And God gave to me two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and upon them, as all the words that God spoke with you on the mountain from inside the fire on the day of the assembly."

The One who created the laws governing fire, i.e., the Creator, must be responsible for this event, and he alone possesses the ability to talk from amidst flames.

Your final question was why, if so evidently true, does most of the world not accept this event. But isn't the reverse in fact what we see? Even other religions have held onto our Torah containing this event, unedited. Although they sin by adding onto G-d's words, they are bound by historical proof, and do not alter this account, or others. Their promulgation of our Torah evidences the undeniable nature of the events contained in the Torah.

Sinai, and all events in the Torah have successfully been transmitted, as they actually happened. This reality should be so amazing to our minds. We should be excited to discover what ideas the Creator of the universe desires to impart to us in the rest of His Torah! ■