



Belief or knowledge: Which one should guide religion? Discussed in this weeks issue

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Weekly Parsha

Behar

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And Hashem spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai saying: Speak to Bnai Yisrael and say to them, “when you come to the land that I am giving to you, you should rest the land. It is a Sabbath to Hashem.” (VaYikra 25:1-2)

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Man's Curses: Do They Work?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

To address this topic, two sections in Talmud must be studied independently. I will list each section, analyze them on their own content, and list the issues. Then I will present a summary at the end with the ideas and solutions derived from both sections of Talmud.

Sanhedrin 90a

"Rabbi Samuel son of Nachmani stated, 'All G-d's traits operate measure for measure', as it is stated, (Malachim II:7) 'Elisha said, hear G-d's word, at this time tomorrow a seah (measurement) of fine flour will be sold for a shekel (minimal amount of money) and two seahs of barley for a shekel in the gates of Samaria.' (At that moment the Jews lacked food). The king's captain upon whose arm he was leaning answered the man of G-d, 'Even if G-d would make the storages of heaven open up, could this happen?' Elisha then answered, 'You will see this with your eyes, but you will not eat from it.' And it is written, 'And it was to him so, that the people trampled him in the gates and he (the captain who doubted Elisha) died.'"

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The Torah Personality

A NON-BELIEVER

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Joseph Campbell the famous mythologist tells of a meeting he once had with a priest while on vacation. The priest, recognizing the famous professor, asked Campbell if he believed in G-d, to which Campbell replied, "no." "Well, would you believe in Him if I could prove Him to you?" asked the priest. "Yes," replied Campbell, "but then how would I have faith?" The priest conceded defeat.

This anecdote typifies the idea of Christian faith. The virtue of faith is only possible where the mind does not convince us that something is so. Indeed, some have gone so far as to say that the ideal of Christian faith is to believe in something the mind dictates as absurd. As Tertullian said, "credo quia absurdum," (I believe that which is absurd). Siren Kierkegaard went even further and said that the very absurdity if the Christian claim makes it worthy of belief. This type of thinking has its source in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 1& 2.

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There is nothing mysterious about why religion demands belief. Religion is not a result of knowledge and investigation. It is basically man's projections of an inner world onto what we call the real world. Such a system by definition demands belief. Its very existence is dependent on the denial of a weltanschauung that bases itself on reasoning alone. Such a system would spell doomsday for the religion. Other modes of cognition must be sanctified so that the religion may survive. These modes are dubbed "spiritual."

In order to protect itself further, religion maintains that these modes of cognition are superior to reason. The challenge of religion then becomes to rely exclusively on the "spiritual" type thinking. This becomes the mark of virtue, so much so that if one were to know something by reason there would be no religious challenge and hence no virtue. This was Campbell's response to the priest.

What does Torah have to say about this? Torah teaches the exact opposite of what all man-made religions teach. We usually characterize religious people as believers because they accept as true things which cannot be proven through reason. We call non-religious individuals non-believers because they demand proof for their convictions and therefore reject religious notions. In the eyes of the Torah both the religious and non-religious people are believers while the Torah personality is not a believer. Sound strange? Let us examine the matter more closely.

The Christian idea of faith leads to insoluble problems when we approach Torah. If having faith is the highest level of religiosity then Moses, the greatest figure in the Torah would be the least religious. Since he knew G-d via direct prophecy, "face to face," there would be no need for him to have any faith. He would thus be devoid of the most important religious virtue, faith. Similarly, the Patriarchs who had knowledge

of G-d via prophecy would have no need for faith. Moreover, all Israel who witnessed G-d's revelation at Sinai would have no need for faith. The Torah then is a book of the faithless. Indeed, Torah encourages faithlessness. G-d tells Moses, "Behold I will come to you in the thickness of the cloud in order that the nation shall hear when I speak with you and in you too will they believe forever, (Exodus 19:9)." G-d expects the people to believe in Him and the fact that Moses is His loyal servant only after the spectacular event at Sinai. G-d never tells Moses to tell the people to simply have faith. Moses repeats the formula at great length in Deuteronomy 4:9-15, and 32-36, 5:2-5 and 19-24. It is quite clear through all of this that the only reason the people were expected to believe in G-d and Torah was because they witnessed the event at Sinai with their own eyes, as it stated, "You have been shown so that you may know that Hashem, He is G-d..., (Ibid. 4:35), "Face to face, G-d spoke to you, (Ibid. 5:4)", "You have seen that from the heavens I have spoken to you, (Exodus 20:19)." There is not one word in G-d's Torah that suggests that we suspend our critical faculty and indulge in what Christians call faith.

The Torah actually cautions against such a practice. In Deuteronomy 13, the Torah warns us not to follow any prophet who deviates from any of the teachings of the Torah even if his predictions of signs and wonders come true. Predictions, signs and wonders evoke the mysterious element in man's nature. The false prophet is a test (13:4) to see if man will remain faithful to the evidence of Sinai or follow the mysterious, the emotional and the faith type of thinking. We are never to be impressed by soothsayers, miracle workers, faith healers or other mystical performers. Throughout the Five Books of Moses and the prophets we find respect only for knowledge, wisdom, and

understanding. The message of the Torah is a clear one: If we are to perfect ourselves we are to pursue knowledge not any other modes of cognition. G-d's universe and G-d's Torah are based on knowledge. (See especially the first three chapters of Proverbs).

Only those who think of themselves as scholars but have never mastered the method of Torah analysis, and often times do not even know Hebrew, proclaim otherwise. Nahum M. Sarna in his book Understanding Genesis, states:

"The quality of faith associated with Abraham at the covenant ceremony shows itself once again in this situation. Answering the doubts of his servant, the Patriarch is absolutely sure that the mission will be successfully accomplished. "The Lord, the G-d of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, who promised me under oath, saying 'I will give this land to your offspring' - He will send his angel before you and you will get a wife for my son from there, (Genesis 24:7)." Nahum M. Sarna, Understanding Genesis, (Schocken Books) 171.

Sarna then compares these words of Abraham with the words he used previously at the covenant of the parts, Genesis 15:2 and 15:8 stating:

"At the outset of his career his very first words to G-d were expressions of doubt about each of the two elements of the divine promise - posterity and land. "O Lord G-d, what can you give seeing that I die childless..., (Genesis 15:2)," he had said despairingly of the former; and, "O Lord G-d, how (sic) shall I know that I am to possess it?" (Ibid. 15:8) was his response to the latter. Now he evokes both posterity and land, serenely confident that G-d's promises will work themselves out in

history. Abram, the doubter has become Abraham, the man of absolute faith." (ibid)

Sarna's claim that Abraham was "absolutely sure that the mission will be successfully accomplished" is patently false. Had Sarna simply read the very next verse he would have realized this. Genesis 24:8 states, "And if the woman be not willing to follow thee then thou shalt be clear from this my oath." It is clear from 24:8 that Abraham was not sure at all that G-d would fulfill his mission. Sarna made a mistake in his translation verse 7. In Hebrew the future tense often signifies a hope or desire. The correct translation for the Hebrew word yishlach in this instance is not "will" send but "shall" send meaning should send. The same is true of Genesis 49:10. The translation should read "The scepter shall not depart from Judah," meaning *should not depart*, not *will not depart*. People in Israel often say Hashem yaazor, meaning (I hope that) G-d shall help, not G-d will help. Abraham was not a man of naive religious faith who assumed that G-d will do as he wishes. He knew full well that neither he nor any other human being has knowledge of G-d's will. He thus prepared his servant for both eventualities.

Being raised in a Christian environment, Sarna equated faith with religious virtue, he then proceeded to project this notion onto the Torah. He committed the error of a bad historian. He took something from his existing environment and projected it onto the past. Sarna's idea that Abraham doubted G-d at the covenant of Genesis 15 is not only wrong, it is stupid. How can one speak to G-d, know that He is creator of heaven and earth and yet not think He can give him a son or give a certain land to a certain people? He is, however, consistent. He demonstrates as much understanding of Genesis 15 as he does of Genesis 24. (Genesis 15 contains a very profound

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(Torah Personality continued from previous page)

concept which I cannot expound upon here). Unfortunately, due to the fact that most people are ignorant, men like Sarna can masquerade as scholars when they don't even know the most basic and fundamental principles of Torah. One must be extremely cautious about one's authorities these days.

It should be pointed out that the word *emunah* translated as belief or faith does not connote in Hebrew what these terms mean in English. The word *emunah* means verification of a truth from an external source, (see Genesis 42:20 and Exodus 14:31). It does not mean blind religious faith.

The Torah personality is guided by the *tzellem elokim*, the divine element in man's soul. All Torah authorities interpret that term as the rational element in man's soul. He bases his life on his knowledge of Torah and the demonstration at Sinai. (For an understanding of how the demonstration at Sinai is relevant today you may send for a special paper I have written on the subject: info@ybt.org). His belief in G-d is based on knowledge not shallow faith. As Maimonides states in the very beginning of his work, "the foundation of foundations and the pillar of all knowledge is to know that G-d exists." One must search assiduously for the knowledge of G-d's existence through the study of Torah.

The Torah personality is an individual committed to a way of life based on knowledge. For decisions in religious matters he studies the Talmud. He uses only intellect in interpreting its words. No Talmudic authority has ever based a ruling on feeling or religious emotion. Only logic and reason are admissible in this endeavor. What is contrary to logic is false.

But what of modern man is he a believer or a non-believer? Every person must have some philosophy of life. Every person strives for happiness and acts in a way he thinks is good. Modern man is ruled by one notion -



success. He is convinced that fame, fortune and satisfaction of his desire for romantic love will bring him happiness. But does modern man know this to be true? Can he prove this? Indeed if we were guided merely by what we observe of others' lives it would be patently clear that such is not the case. Again and again people find to their dismay that those people who have what they dream of are in the depths of misery and despair. But modern man does not change his course. He persists in believing that in his case it would be different. He is a believer. He believes his emotions. Torah teaches us not to trust our emotions, to reason about what is truly good for man and to understand the nature of our emotions and instinctual life. Only through knowledge can we have a good and happy life. The Torah personality is a total non-believer in the benefits most people ascribe to wealth, fame or romantic love. Maimonides states that the true Torah personality does not get excited by a sudden increase in his possessions or renown nor does he

get depressed by a decrease in his wealth or popularity. He rides an "even keel" through life having the true good, Torah knowledge before his mind's eye always and everything else in proper perspective. His emotional life is tempered by knowledge. He is very critical in his judgments and goes through a lengthy analysis of himself and Torah before making any decisions.

Thus, based on our original definition of a believer as he who accepts conclusions uncritically and a non-believer as he who is guided by his mind we must conclude that the Torah personality is a non-believer while modern non-religious man is a believer par excellence.

Modern religious man who subscribes to the man-made religions, attempts to escape the human dilemma by creating in his mind a world based on simplistic infantile notions which have no support from reality. If only I could believe these things life would be great, he thinks. Belief becomes his great challenge. For the Torah personality perfection is

the challenge. But even witnessing the event at Sinai does not give man perfection as is clear from the Torah narrative. Knowledge of G-d's existence through Sinai is only the beginning. Perfection involves the study and understanding of Torah ideas. We must gain knowledge of what is good and what is evil. We must understand our every emotion. We must recognize the difference between our instinctual nature and our divine element. We must exercise careful judgment in our deeds to make certain that we are not being guided in our lives by our basic emotion. Like a great general, the Torah personality assesses his own strengths and weaknesses, knows when to move into battle and when to avoid certain situations. He knows when and when not to satisfy his instinctual nature. His every move is determined by knowledge. He knows that even the most righteous occasionally fail. He is always ready to reanalyze and reevaluate his past deeds. He learns from his errors and thereby rises to even greater heights. His is not an infantile simplistic challenge of faith, but the challenge of challenges - the challenge of human perfection. He is armed with a great work, the work that gives man true insight into the greatness and the frailties of human nature. He is constantly engaged in the delights of this insightful work, the great joy its knowledge brings, as well as the unique existence it forges for him. The Torah personality is never bored. He is interested in all of G-d's knowledge, from the most obscure minutiae of Halachic detail to the latest advance in scientific knowledge. In all this he sees G-d's infinite wisdom. He is best described as the prophet describes him, "And let us know, let us run (eagerly strive) to know G-d, (Hosea 6:3)." Ibn Ezra states on this verse, "We should eagerly strive to know G-d because this is the foundation of all knowledge and because of this alone man was created." ■

(Man's Curses continued from page 1)

(The Talmud continues) "But perhaps it is Elisha's curse which caused this captain's death (not G-d meting out measure for measure), in accordance with Rabbi Judah's quote from Rav, "A curse of a wise sage even for naught comes true".

(The Talmud answers) "If this were so, it should have written, 'and he was trampled and died'. Why does it add 'in the gates'? Because it was due to the matter of the gates." (i.e., the food which he denied would be in sold in the gates, thereby proving it was G-d's justice, not Elisha's curse.

A number of questions arise:

1) This last statement seems inconclusive. Why can't we say that Elisha also worked measure for measure and included the gates in his curse, that is, that the captain would die in the gates? Why does the Talmud feel convinced that since he died in the gates, it could not be due to Elisha's curse? Death alone could be due to Elisha's curse, but not the place?

2) Can man's curses actually come true?

3) What does this mean that "a wise man's curse even for naught comes true"? Does this mean that one undeserving will still be harmed by the wise man's curse? Where is the justice in this?

4) There is an inherent contradiction in the statement of Rav: "A curse of a wise sage even for naught comes true". If one is wise, does it mean that he is cursing someone undeserving? If so, the man isn't wise. And if the recipient is deserving of the curse, then it is not for naught.

Talmud Makos 11a

(Background information: Accidental killings required those murderers to be exiled to cities of refuge, and they only leave exile when the high priest dies. They wish for his death, as they can then go home. The reason for this was offered by a Rabbi. He said that as these murderers wish for the high priests death, they will hopefully come to acknowledge their sadistic or vicious drives, and then come to realize this tendency was the cause for another person to die at their hands. Had they not possessed such negligence for life, they would have taken care to never have placed another in harms way. It is this negligence of human life which caused the death of those accidentally killed.)

"Mothers of the priests used to clothe and feed those exiled who accidentally killed. These mothers hoped that since they extended kindness to those exiled, they in return would not pray for these mother's priests (sons) to die. The reasoning (why the priests didn't die)

is because the exiled murderers didn't pray for his death. Had they prayed, the priests would die."

(The Talmud continues) "But how can this be (that their prayers effectuate his death), isn't it written (Proverbs 21:2) 'as a bird moves suddenly and as a swallow flies off, so also does the curse for naught come back to him (who cursed)'. Meaning, not only doesn't the curse come about, but it also comes back to the utterer." (So those exiled who pray - or curse - for the death of the high priest, such curses should not take hold. But yet it says they did. This is the question.)

(The Talmud answers) "The priests are at fault, ...as they should have prayed that accidental killings be averted by G-d." Since the priests were lax and didn't pray for this, the killings did occur, and the priests are at fault.

(The Talmud continues) "Another answer given why the mothers tended to those exiled was to induce them to pray for the lives of their sons the priests. Had those exiled prayed, the priests would live, but if they didn't pray, the priests would die."

Curses are only actualized by G-d alone, as man has no ability to alter nature. I believe both answers are really one. We can explain the Talmud's statements in the following light: "The reasoning (why the priests didn't die) is because the exiled murderers didn't pray for his death. Had they prayed, the priests would die." This means that if those exiled prayed for his death, this shows the priest was not an upright individual. The cursing of the priest in reality has no effect. Rather, it is an indication of the level of the priest to whom G-d will mete out justice accordingly, regardless of the exiled people's curse. "Another answer given why the mothers tended to those exiled was to induce them to pray for the lives of their sons the priests. Had those exiled prayed, the priests would live, but if they didn't pray, they would die." This teaches that the actions of those exiled again indicates the level of he priest. By praying for the priests to live, it is representative of the perfection of the priest, that even those exiled attest to his greatness. G-d all along knows the level of the priests and spares his life. We see that the Talmud does not credit man with the ability to curse, as in both cases, the exiled peoples must call to G-d (prayer) for their wish.

(The Talmud continues)"A curse of a wise sage even for naught comes true. From where do we learn this? From Achitophel. When King David desired to lay the foundations of

the Temple, the waters of the deep threatened to encompass the Earth killing mankind. David desired to know whether he was allowed to write G-d's name on a shard, and cast it into the oceans to stop the waters. David said, "If anyone knows the answer and keeps silent, he should die by strangulation". Achitophel thought to himself an a priori argument (kal v'chomer), "If for the sake of a married couple, G-d's name may be erased, (referring to the Sotah) so certainly for the entire world G-d's name may be erased". Achitophel then told David it was permissible to write G-d's name on the shard cast it into the ocean, knowing the water would erase G-d's name. David did so, and it stopped the waters". Nonetheless, Achitophel later on died from hanging himself. Apparently King David's curse still took effect.

(The Talmud continues) "A curse of a wise sage even made on condition comes true. From where do we learn this? From Eli who said to Samuel "so should happen to you (referring to having improper sons) if you conceal this matter from me. Even though Samuel told Eli the matter, nonetheless, it says, 'his sons did not go in his path'".

It is important to note that in Eli's case, the words "don't conceal" are used. Perhaps teaching us that Eli's cursing was well founded. He experienced resistance from Samuel before resorting to cursing. The reason David's case is called "for naught" is because there was not yet any resistance to King David which required his curse of death to one who held back the answer. In Eli's case however, he had already approached Samuel and Samuel resisted telling Eli about the matter. Therefore, Eli said "do not conceal it from me". Being faced with opposition from Samuel, Eli used a threat which was not for naught, as the circumstance required a more forceful approach. In King David's case, there was no circumstance warranting such a threat yet. It may have been King David's own urgency which prompted the use of a curse. For this reason alone we call King David's case "for naught" (no circumstance) but Eli's case is not for naught, as the situation required curse.

Ramban and Ritvah concur that regarding David's curse, Achitophel delayed somewhat, which grieved King David, and was therefore at fault. We must say that G-d will punish regardless of David's curse. One who sins, G-d will punish - one who acts righteously, G-d rewards.

This now brings us back to our original questions, and we are now better equipped to answer them:

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(Man's Curses continued from previous page)

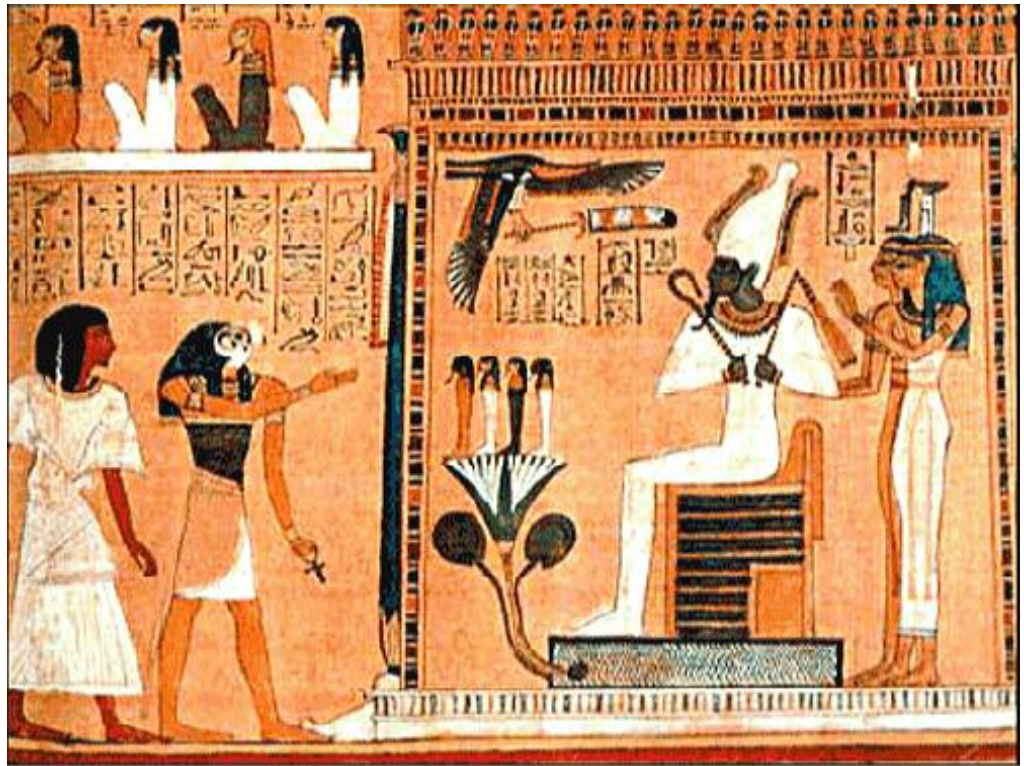
When a person curses, he has no powers. His curse merely indicates his perception of another person's level of corruption. This corrupt person will be punished by G-d regardless of his curse. Why then did King David and others curse, if they do not effectuate any changes in the universe? Perhaps the did so to indicate to others their corruption. Viz., anyone who would not assist King David in saving the world, such a person is worthy of death. And perhaps choking to death fits the crime, as this would be the case of someone who drowned if David couldn't avert the present disaster.

We asked earlier, "How can a wise man curse for naught?" We now understand the term "cursing for naught" not as one who curses someone else undeserving, but as cursing without a circumstance warranting a curse. This does not mean it is wrong to curse, or that the recipient was innocent. Achitophel was guilty. Had he been innocent, the Rabbis in the Talmud would not have aligned David's curse with Achitophel's death. G-d never punishes without sin. Judaism is about absolute justice, as Talmud Sabbath states (55a) "there is no death without sin, and (there are) no punishments without transgression". Accordingly, if one is innocent, another person's curse is meaningless.

In the cases recorded so far, we find that the recipients of the curses were in fact negligent. This is why men such as King David, Eli, and those in exile cursed others - they all deserved the curse. Also, a wise man never curses another who is innocent and without flaw. This would be unjust. We also concluded that regardless of man's curse, righteous people are protected by G-d and wicked people are punished. Man's utterances play no role in the meting out of reward and punishment. That is G-d exclusive domain, as is written in Ezekiel 18, and in Deut. 24:16: "Fathers are not killed for the children's sins, and children are not killed for their father's sins, each man in his own sin will they be killed." Man's curse is irrelevant.

If man did in fact have the ability to curse another person, this would mean that man has more power than G-d. It would also suggest that the world does not run by strict justice, as a foolish man may curse a wise sage, and the sage would be unjustly ruined. However, this is not the case as G-d runs the world in accordance with justice, and alone, while man is powerless.

Perhaps this is the meaning of the Talmud when it says that Elisha couldn't have decreed where the captain would die. We asked at the outset, "Why can't we say that Elisha also worked measure for measure and included the gates in his curse, that is, that the captain would



The Egyptians believed that if something was committed to writing, it could repeatedly be "made to happen" by means of magic

die in the gates? Why does the Talmud feel convinced that since he died in the gates, it could not be due to Elisha's curse? I would suggest that the Talmud is hinting that man - Elisha - may know that a person is guilty, but he does not know how to implement exact justice befitting the crime. Only G-d is aware of all nuances in a person's flawed nature, to the extent that only G-d can mete out exact, measure for measure justice. Elisha is only man, and as such, greatly lacks in his

knowledge of another beings' perfection or corruption.

We are left with two peripheral questions:

1) How does the curse come back to the one who cursed as stated (Proverbs 21:2) "As a bird moves suddenly and as a swallow flies off, so also does the curse for naught come back to him (who cursed)"

2) What is the metaphor of the case with King David and the shard which settled the ocean? □

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Behar/Bechukotai

RABBI BERNARD FOX

Our parasha discusses the laws of Shemithah. The Shemithah year occurs in the land of Israel every seven years. The Shemithah is a Sabbatical Year. The land cannot be worked. The produce that is produced without cultivation is shared by everyone.

The first passage of the parasha explains that the laws of Shemithah were given to Moshe at Sinai. The commentaries are concerned with this comment. Why does the Torah specify that this mitzvah was given at Sinai? The midrash discusses this issue. The midrash explains that the Torah is using Shemithah as an example. The Torah states that this mitzvah was given at Sinai in its entirety. We are to extrapolate from this example. Just as this mitzvah is derived from Sinai, so too all other mitzvot were revealed at Sinai. In other words, the Torah is teaching us that all mitzvot were revealed at Sinai. This revelation encompassed both the general principles of the commandment and its details.[1]

The comments of the midrash are somewhat enigmatic. The midrash seems to assume that one would presume that the mitzvot are not completely from Sinai. Our passage is designed to correct this misimpression. The commentaries ask the obvious question. Why would we assume that the mitzvot are not derived, in their entirety, from Sinai?

The commentaries offer a variety of answers. Nachmanides explains that the manner in which the Torah discusses some mitzvot could potentially lead to a misunderstanding. The Torah does not always deal with a mitzvah in a single comprehensive discussion. Sometimes, the discussion of the mitzvah will be dispersed to different locations in the Torah. Shemithah is an example of this approach. The mitzvah is first encountered in Parshat Mishpatim.[2] Our parasha continues this discussion. Furthermore, there is an important relationship between the two discussions. The passages in Parshat Mishpatim outline the general concept of Shemithah. Our parasha provides the details. Nachmanides explains that the casual reader could easily misinterpret this presentation. The reader might assume that only the general outline of the mitzvah was revealed at Sinai. This outline is the discussion in Parshat Mishpatim. However, this reader might incorrectly assume that the details, discussed in our parasha, were filled-in by Moshe. In order to dispel this misconception, the Torah explains that even the details, discussed in this week's parasha are from Sinai. This example serves as a model for understanding the Torah's treatment of other mitzvot. In all cases in which the

discussion of the mitzvah is dispersed in the Torah, the entire mitzvah with all of its details is from Sinai.[3]

Gershonides offers an alternative answer to the original problem. Why is it necessary for the Torah to specify the origin of the mitzvah of Shemithah? Gershonides maintains that, in general, the origin of the mitzvot is clear. The mitzvot are derived from Sinai. Sinai is the source of the general outline and the details. There is no need for the Torah to reiterate this point. However, at the opening of our parasha, there is a specific basis for confusion. He explains that the cause for this confusion is found at the end of the previous parasha – Parshat Emor. There, the Torah relates an account of a person that blasphemed that name of Hashem. The nation did not know the punishment for this crime. The people appealed to Moshe. Moshe could not respond. He turned to Hashem. The Almighty instructed Moshe that the blasphemer should be stoned. In this case, Moshe was confronted with an issue that he could not resolve based on the revelation at Sinai. A further prophecy was needed. Moshe received this prophecy in the wilderness. The reader might assume other mitzvot were also revealed in the wilderness and not at Sinai. Our parasha resolves this issue. The parasha begins with the declaration that Shemithah was revealed at Sinai. Sinai is the source for the Torah. The punishment of the blasphemer represents an unusual and relatively isolated exception to this rule.[4]

“And you shall count for yourself seven Sabbatical years, seven years seven times. And the period of the seven sabbatical cycles shall be forty-nine years.” (VaYikra 25:8)

In the Land of Israel the years are divided into cycles of seven years. The seventh year of each cycle is the Shemithah year. During the Shemithah year the land is not worked. Seven of these cycles include forty-nine years. The fiftieth year is the Yovel – Jubilee year. During Yovel the land may not be farmed. In addition, the land is redistributed. Land returns to the descendants of the individuals who originally inherited the Land of Israel. Another law of the Yovel is that all Jewish slaves are freed.

Sefer HaChinuch discusses the moral lessons learned from the Yovel year. He explains that Yovel reinforces a fundamental idea. Hashem is the master of the land. We may purchase the land for a period of time but our ownership is limited. With the arrival of the Yovel, we must recognize that the

Almighty is the legitimate owner. He has the right to restrict our use of the land and to require its redistribution.[5]

It is quite understandable, according to the reasoning of Sefer HaChinuch, that Yovel is associated with the number seven. It follows a series of seven cycles of seven years. The universe was created in seven days. The Yovel reminds us of Hashem's role as Creator. This is the foundation of Hashem's ownership. He created the universe. He has the authority to distribute the land according to His will.

There is another aspect of the Yovel phenomenon. Modern society accepts the responsibility to provide for its less fortunate members. However, the task often seems overwhelming. Poverty tends to be inter-generational. Eventually, poverty can become ingrained within the structure of the family. New generations, raised in poverty, lack hope, skills and motivation. These important characteristics are replaced by profound hopelessness.

The only solution to this problem is to prevent poverty from becoming culturally ingrained within the family. Relief must be provided before an underclass mentality can develop. The mitzvot of Yovel provide a method of preventing inter-generational poverty. Every generation receives a fresh start. The land is redistributed. Everyone receives a portion.

From this perspective, it is fitting that all Jewish slaves are freed at Yovel. This too assures that the disadvantaged receive a fresh start. The Jewish slave has fallen to a level of abject poverty. With Yovel, he and his children can begin a new life as free individuals upon their own land.

This entire system is more radical than any system in today's world. It reflects the level of responsibility we bear for the welfare of those in need.

“Do not take from him advance interest or accrued interest. And you should fear your Lord. And you brother shall live with you.” (VaYikra 25:36)

The Torah prohibits us from charging a fellow Jew interest. Various explanations are provided by the commentaries for this prohibition.

One of the terms used by the Torah for interest is neshech. Rashi explains the reason for the prohibition based upon this term. Neshech literally means “the bite of an animal”. It is often used to refer to bite of a poisonous snake or serpent. Rashi explains that interest is similar to such a bite. The snake only makes a small puncture in the skin of its victim. Yet, this tiny wound causes tremendous damage. The entire body swells. If not treated, death may follow.

Interest is similarly deceptive. The percentage interest may seem small. But if the borrower cannot

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promptly repay the loan, the interest begins to compound. With time, the interest charge can even exceed the principal amount of the loan.[6]

It would seem that Rashi maintains that the charging of interest is an unfair business practice. The borrower, in need of the funds, can easily underestimate the impact of the interest expense. To protect the borrower, from his own folly, the Torah forbids interest-bearing loans.

Maimonides treats the issue from a different perspective. In his Mishne Torah he includes the various prohibitions regarding interest in the section dealing with loans. This section begins with a statement concerning the basic mitzvah of lending money. Maimonides explains that it is a mitzvah to lend funds to the poor. The section continues with the description of various mitzvot and laws protecting the borrower.[7] Apparently, these laws are designed to protect the poor person who needs a loan from oppression.

Maimonides inclusion of the prohibitions against interest in this section seems to reflect upon his understanding of these restrictions. We are obligated to help the less fortunate. One of the means by which we can accomplish this task is by providing loans. However, we must always remember that the loan is an act of kindness. As such, it is inappropriate to charge interest.

It should be noted that the prohibition against interest is not designed to disrupt commerce. It is completely permitted for a person to earn a return on capital. Capital may be used to purchase an ownership interest in a business endeavor. The partner providing the capital has a right to a share of the profits. In this manner capital can earn a return. The interest prohibition only regulates loans.

[1] Midrash Torat Kohanim, Parshat BeHar, parsha 1.

[2] Sefer Shemot 23:10-12.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra 25:1.

[4] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1997), p 365.

[5] Rav Ahron HaLeyve, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 330.

[6] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 22:24.

[7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Introduction to Hilchot Malveh VeLoveh.

“If you follow My laws and are careful to keep My commandments, I will provide you with rain at the proper time, so that the land will bear its crops and the trees of the field will provide fruit.” (VaYikra 26:3-4)

The Torah promises us that our observance of the commandments will be rewarded in this world. The Almighty will sustain us and provide us with material well-being.

This pasuk is representative of many such assurances throughout the Torah. These assurances seem to contradict the famous dictum of our Sages. The Sages teach that there is no reward for the performance of the mitzvot in this life.[1] Clearly, the Torah indicates that we will receive material reward for observing the laws of the Torah!

Maimonides deals extensively with this issue in his Mishne Torah. He explains that the Sages did not intend to deny that the Almighty provides for us in response to our observance of commandments. The Sages recognized that the Torah unequivocally asserts that we will be blessed or punished in this world as a consequence of our actions. Instead, the Sages wished to teach us that the benefits we receive in this world are not the ultimate reward for the performance of the mitzvot. The true reward is the eternal existence of the soul in Olam HaBah. Similarly, the ultimate punishment is not suffering in this material world. The ultimate consequence of evil is forfeiture of the eternal existence of the soul after death.

Maimonides poses a question on this thesis. If the ultimate reward is eternal spiritual existence – the survival of ones' sacred soul after death, why does the Torah promise material rewards?

Maimonides explains that the Almighty assists us in achieving our aims. If we pursue a spiritual existence, Hashem will help us achieve this goal. He will remove the distractions that deter us from achieving our objective. He will assist us in meeting our material needs. We will be able to devote more of our time and energy to spiritual development.

Similarly, one who is immersed in a material existence will be frustrated by Hashem. The material pleasures have seduced this individual. These pleasures will be taken away. Maimonides further explains that in submerging oneself in the material world, a person chooses the passing physical existence over the eternal spiritual existence. Through denying this person the blessings of material success, the individual will be forced to concentrate on the necessities of physical

existence. This individual will be deprived of the opportunity to develop spiritually. The individual is condemned to the consequences of his or her decision. The opportunity to develop spiritually has been abandoned and lost.[2]

Nonetheless, every person has the opportunity to repent. Through reasserting ones' desire to develop spiritually, the individual can reclaim the Almighty's blessings. Hashem will help the repentant person achieve ones' spiritual aims.[3]

“And I will destroy your idols and your sun gods. I will let your corpses rot on the remains of your idols. I will grow tired of you.” (VaYikra 26:30)

The parasha describes the curses that the nation will experience if it abandons the Torah. The Torah deals with the extreme case. It describes the terrible curses that will befall Bnai Yisrael if they adopt the heathen practices and pagan worship of the surrounding nations. Our pasuk is included in the account of these curses. It is obvious that our passage is difficult to understand. The passage foretells the destruction of the pagan idols worshipped by the people. This is not a curse! Why is this included among the curses for abandoning the Torah?

Chizkuni acknowledges that this passage is not part of the curse. The pasuk describes the destruction of idolatry! However, he does not explain the actual intent of the pasuk and the reason for its inclusion within the narrative of the curses.[4]

Gershonides responds to this issue. He also begins with the premise that the destruction of idols is not a curse. He explains that the passage is making two points. First, the Torah is telling Bnai Yisrael that ultimately the nation's association with idolatry will end. Ideally, this will occur because the nation will heed the warnings provided by Hashem. However, if the fascination with idolatry does not end through repentance, it will be forcibly terminated. Mighty enemies will invade the land. These armies will destroy the idols and pagan temples cherished by the nation. The message is that the nation will abandon idolatry. However, Bnai Yisrael must make a choice. The people can repent and voluntarily reject their idols. The alternative is invasion and the destruction of these idols and temples through the devastation of the land.

Second, the pasuk describes the death of the idol worshippers in the presence of the very idols they adulated. What is the message in this terrible image?

The Torah describes a graduated series of punishments. Abandonment of the Torah and adoption of idolatrous practices will result in consequences that progress in severity. Hopefully, early in the process, the nation will realize that its

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sufferings are a chastisement for its iniquity. However, it is possible that the nation will attribute its suffering to the vagaries of nature and continue to turn to idolatry as a source of rescue and protection. The Torah forewarns that this reaction can only result in a single outcome. The idolaters that refuse to recognize the authenticity of the Almighty's rebuke will be destroyed in the presence of the very idols they relied upon. This will demonstrate the falsity and impotence of these idols.[5]

“And I will remember, on their behalf, the covenant I made with the original ancestors whom I brought forth from the land of Egypt before the eyes of the nations to be a Lord to them. I am Hashem.” (VaYikra 26:45)

Parshat Bechukotai discusses the rewards that Bnai Yisrael will receive through observance of the Torah. The Parasha also discusses the consequences of ignoring the commandments. These consequences include exile and suffering. This section ends with a promise from the Almighty. Hashem will never forget His children. Even if Bnai Yisrael is exiled to a strange land, Hashem will not abandon His people. Eventually redemption will come. The people will be brought back to the Holy Land. This promise ends with the phrase, “I am Hashem.”

Sforno comments on this closing phrase that Hashem does not change. The suffering of Bnai Yisrael is not caused by an alteration of the Creator's ways. Instead, we endure affliction as a result of our own degeneration. With our repentance, the Meshiach will come. Then G-d's design will be fulfilled.[6]

Sforno is responding to a very basic issue. How can Hashem allow His chosen people to endure tragic suffering and exile? Does this suffering represent abandonment by Hashem of His nation? Sforno responds that the Creator's essence and will are constant. However, our attitudes and behaviors change. Our iniquity requires a response and consequence. Our suffering is not a result of abandonment. It is an expression of Divine chastisement.

Maimonides outlines the thirteen basic principles of the Torah. He explains that one of these fundamental principles is conviction in the ultimate advent of a Messianic era.[7] Why does Maimonides consider this conviction to be a foundation of Judaism?

Based on Sforno's comments, Maimonides'

position can be understood. The concept of the Messianic era implies a Divine unchanging design regarding the affairs of the world. The Jewish people and humanity will experience periods of affliction and suffering. This does not mean that Hashem has abandoned humanity or that His will changes. Instead, we proceed upon a path to a predetermined end. This end is the coming of the Meshiach. Our decisions to do good or evil influences the pace of our adventure. Nonetheless, the Meshiach will arrive.

“These are the commandments that Hashem commanded Bnai Yisrael through Moshe at Mount Sinai.” (VaYikra 27:34)

Our Sages learn an important lesson from this passage. The Torah states that these are the mitzvot. Only Moshe was empowered to reveal the Torah through prophecy. Other prophets cannot alter the Torah through prophecy.

Maimonides discusses this restriction at length in his Mishne Torah. He explains that the Torah is permanent. It cannot be augmented or revised through prophecy. [8] He adds that prophecy cannot be used to decide legal questions. Instead, the rules of Halacha must be applied to solve any legal question. For example, there is a famous dispute between Rashi and Rabbaynu Tam regarding the sections of the Torah in the tefillin. If a prophet would claim that the Almighty revealed to him that Rashi's opinion is correct, we would reject this ruling. Furthermore, we assume that this person is a false prophet.[9]

It is interesting that Maimonides does not quote our passage. Instead, he cites various other passages. The pasuk he most often quotes is found in Sefer Devarim. That pasuk tells us that the Torah is no longer in the heavens.[10] The Sages understood the pasuk to teach that the heavens or Hashem are no longer a valid source for Halacha. Only the Sages, through the rules of Halacha, can resolve issues of law.

Lechem Mishne notes that Maimonides does not cite our passage. He explains that Maimonides will often quote the passage that best reflects the position he is discussing. He does not always refer to the passage most often cited by the Sages. In our case, Maimonides maintained that the passage he quotes – that the Torah is no longer in the heavens – better reflects his position.[11] However, Lechem Mishne does not explain the reason Maimonides preferred this passage.

Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel, in translating our passage, inserts a phrase. “These are the commandments that Hashem commanded to Moshe. It is not possible to add anything new to them.” This addition reflects the comments of our Sages on this passage. However, there is a significant difference. Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel does not say that a prophet cannot add to the Torah. Instead, he explains the Torah cannot be augmented – by anyone. It should be noted that even the Sages must adhere to this rule. All laws created by the Sages must relate to a mitzvah in the Torah.

We can now understand Maimonides' reasoning. Our passage essentially asserts that the Torah cannot be altered. The passage does not expressly deal with prophecy. Let us assume a prophet decides a legal matter on the basis of prophecy. This issue is not clearly discussed by our passage. Nonetheless, Maimonides maintains that prophecy cannot be used in this manner. In order to support this principle, Maimonides quotes the passage that the Torah is no longer in the heavens. This passage indicates that prophecy is not a valid tool in deciding Halacha. The passage includes any application of prophecy to Halacha. The prophet cannot reveal a new mitzvah. Neither can the prophet use prophecy to decide legal matters.[12] □

[1] Mesechet Kiddushin 39b.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 9:1.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 7:6-7.

[4] Rabbaynu Chizkiya ben Manoach (Chizkuni), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra, 26:30.

[5] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1997), p 389.

[6] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer VaYikra, 26:45.

[7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Commentary on the Mishne, Mesechet Sanhedrin 10:1.

[8] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 9:1.

[9] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 9:4.

[10] Sefer Devarim 30:11.

[11] Rav Avraham di Boton, Lechem Mishne, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 9:1.

[12] See Rav Tzvi Hirsch Chajes, Torat Neveim,

KNOWLEDGE *and* FALSE BELIEFS

AVRAHAM B. SHIMON

Many people today feel that there is nothing wrong with different religions and ways of life that people lead. This opinion assumes that everyone is correct and living according to truth as long as it doesn't physically harm anyone. There is no such thing as a false belief or a wrong opinion. If a person wants to worship a certain god or live an instinctual lifestyle, then he should do it. If it feels good then it must be good (again, as long as it doesn't physically harm anyone). What position does the Torah take regarding this notion? Can a person have a false belief? Are there many different ways to reach G-d? Should a person live his life according to the way he sees fit?

The Torah records the lives of many different personalities. We learn about personalities such as Jacob and Moses. Alongside them we learn about Lavan and Pharaoh. Upon study of these various personalities we see that the Torah considers some as righteous and some as evil. If the opinion of today's society is correct, how could certain people be considered evil? Weren't they living according to the way which made them feel good? Perhaps you will argue that these people harmed others. However, if we look carefully at the Torah, we see that many of them did not harm anyone. Esau, for example, was considered evil yet the Torah does not say anywhere that he actually harmed anyone. He merely desired to kill Jacob. A person is not evil by simply desiring to do something. He must act it out. How, then, could some people be considered evil if they did not cause others harm? The answer is their way of life was corrupt. They were living according to principles, which are false. The personalities that the Torah depicts as evil led their lives guided by their emotions. The greatness of their evil is that they used their minds to accomplish their emotional desires instead of using their minds as their guide in perceiving reality and letting their emotions fall in line with that reality. A person does not have to harm others to be considered evil. He becomes evil by living an instinctual lifestyle.

If, then, we accept the fact that there are certain ways of life that are evil, why did the Torah record them? Why didn't the Torah just record the lives of those which it considers righteous so that we may learn how to live according to their ideals? Why do we have to know about Lavan, Esau and Pharaoh? The answer is obvious. In order to live lives according to true principles we must understand what the false principles are. G-d wants us to study Esau's purely instinctual life, which precluded him from being a partner in the Nation of Israel. We must learn about Bilaam's great desire for fame and fortune, Lavan's deceitful ways and Haman's megalomania. We must understand that these lifestyles are based on false ideas and they are harmful to a person. If we do not gain this insight, we are bound to follow them. Many people today are no different than Esau, Lavan or Bilaam. They are steeped in lifestyles of greed and ego. Granted, the emotions that lead a person after these things are powerful and we all slip on occasion, however, G-d has given us the tools to overcome them. Through careful study of the various personalities of the Torah, both righteous and wicked, we gain deep insights as to the correct way to live. We can learn how many of our emotions are false and should not be followed just because it feels good.

Most people will acknowledge that a person living a life of greed and egotism is not living according to Torah ideals. Yet, the Torah considers idolatry as the greatest evil. We are constantly commanded not to be

involved in its practices. Throughout the ages our prophets risked their lives warning us to abandon its various forms. It involves the greatest falsehood; corrupt notions of G-d. Very often idol worshipers don't harm anyone. They simply perform their rituals, say their prayers and go home. Yet, the Torah commands us again and again to obliterate all traces of idolatry from our midst. It is the cause of our exile as it says, "And all the nations will say, 'For what reason did G-d do so to this land And they will say 'Because they forsook the covenant of G-d and they went and served the gods of others gods that they knew not and He did not apportion to them. So G-d's anger flared against the land, to bring upon it the entire curse that is written in this Book. And G-d removed them from upon their soil and He cast them to another land, as this very day' (Deuteronomy 29; 23-27)." Those who worshiped the Golden Calf didn't harm anyone, yet we see what happened to them. The Jews upon entering Israel for the first time were instructed to wipe out the seven nations that were occupying the land as it states, "You shall not allow any person to live (Deut. 20; 16)." These nations were involved in every form of idolatry. Why were they commanded to kill everyone? The Rambam comments on this verse in the Moreh Nevuchim (Part 1, Chapter 36), "The object of this commandment, as is distinctly stated, is to extirpate that false opinion, in order that other men should not be corrupted by it any more; in the words of the Torah 'that they teach you not' (Deut. 20; 18)." They did not have to physically harm anyone to deserve annihilation. The Torah is telling us if a person does not have correct ideas about G-d, he has no right to exist. He is not living in line with his purpose of existence, which is to gain true knowledge of his Creator. He does not use his mind, which is the essence of Man, to live his life. He lives purely according to his instinctual emotions. Not only has he forfeited his right to exist, he will undoubtedly corrupt others thereby causing them to forfeit their existence.

Today, we are surrounded with a variety of idolatrous ideas. Christianity, which is undoubtedly idolatry, is the most prevalent. It is based on the distorted notion that G-d can be physical, as well as the notion that we need to pray to intermediaries. The Rambam mentions this last notion, in the Moreh Nevuchim (Part 1, Chapter 36), as the foundation of idolatry, "Idolatry is founded on the idea that a particular form represents the agent between G-d and His creatures." Throughout the Torah we only see people praying directly to G-d, never to an intermediary. Eventually the intermediary becomes a god itself as the Rambam shows in the Mishneh Torah (Hil. Avodah Zara 1; 1). Hindus, Native Indians and many African tribes today have fallen to this level. They believe that certain physical objects have the power to do good and evil. Unfortunately, some of their practices have infiltrated Judaism. Many Jews walk around with objects they feel will protect them from evil. There are those that go to the graves of ancestors and pray to them so that they will take their prayers to G-d. These customs have no source in the Torah. Of course, there are many legitimate customs in Judaism which are not mentioned in the Torah. How, then, are we supposed to know which practices are idolatrous and which are not? The Torah provides the solution. It says in Deut. 18; 9, "When you come to the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you, you shall not learn to act according to the abominations of those nations." Rashi explains, "But you should learn to understand and to teach. In other words, to understand their actions, how corrupt they are, and to teach your

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children: Don't do this and that because it is the statute of the idolaters." We are obligated to learn what their practices are, understand that they are false and teach our children not to follow them. When we learn how Native Indians or African tribes wore certain clothes or charms to ward off evil spirits, and the Torah did not endorse it, we must teach our children not to do it. When we see Christians praying to icons and saints, we must tell our children it is wrong. These are not methods that bring a person close to G-d. On the contrary, they further a person from Him. The more a person involves himself in false practices, the more he removes himself from the Ultimate Source of Truth.

The Torah explicitly tells us there is only one method of reaching G-d, "See, I have placed before you today the life and the good, the death and the evil, that which I command you today, to love Hashem, your G-d, to walk in his ways, to observe His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments; then you will live But if your heart will stray and you will not listen I tell you today that you will surely be lost(Deut. 30; 15-18)." The Torah lifestyle, of knowledge, truth and good character, is the only way a person can reach G-d. Any other lifestyle will cause a person to become lost. □

“Duties of the Heart”

EXCERPTS FROM THE AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

R. Bachaya ben Josef ibn Paquda

"Our sages have said that if a person performs a mitzvah but has no intention of doing it for the sake of Heaven, he receives no reward for it."

"Whoever has the intellectual capacity to verify what he receives from tradition, and yet is prevented from doing so by his own laziness, or because he takes lightly G-d's commandments and Torah, he will be punished for this and held accountable for negligence."

"If, however, you possess intelligence and insight, and through these faculties you are capable of verifying the fundamentals of the religion and the foundations of the commandments which you have received from the sages in the name of the prophets, then it is your duty to use these faculties until you understand the subject, so that you are certain of it - both by tradition and by force of reason. If you disregard and neglect this duty, you fall short in the fulfillment of what you owe your Creator."

Devarim 17:8-10 states: "If a case should prove too difficult for you in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, between (leprous) mark and mark, or other matters of dispute in your courts,you must act in accordance with what they tell you."

Regarding this passage, Rabbi Bachya states: "the verse does not say,.....simply accept them on the authority of Torah sages,...and rely exclusively on their tradition. Rather, (Scripture) says that you should reflect on your own mind, and use your intellect in these matters. First learn them from tradition - which covers all the commandments in the Torah, their principles and details - and then examine them with your own mind, understanding, and judgment, until the truth become clear to you, and falsehood rejected, as it is written: "Understand today and reflect on it in your heart, Hashem is the G-d in the heavens above, and on the Earth below, there is no other". (Ibid, 4:39) □

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