



Judaism is based on proof and not blind faith.  
What proof have we for pre-Sinaitic prophecy,  
which also refutes the other religions'  
claims to prophecy?

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Dedicated to Scriptural and Rabbinic Verification  
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Volume IV, No. 32...May 20, 2005

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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)

Our parasha discusses the laws of Shemitah. The Shemitah year

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# A Matter of Life and Death

RABBI REUVEN MANN

Written by student

On occasion, I have the pleasure to spend time learning with Rabbi Reuven Mann in Plainview NY, and enjoy his many classes throughout Shabbos. This past Shabbos he spoke on some important Torah themes.

Rabbi Mann commenced by considering the Torah's view of death: "Lave chacham b'vais avale", "The heart of a wise man is in the house of mourning". What is the wisdom referred to here? Maimonides too says that when faced with the choice between a wedding and a house of mourning, one should go to the house of mourning. Additionally, King Solomon states that it is better to go to a house of mourning than to a party. When Jacob was about to die, he prepared his children. He was no fraught with terror or any fear of death, but was collected, reviewed

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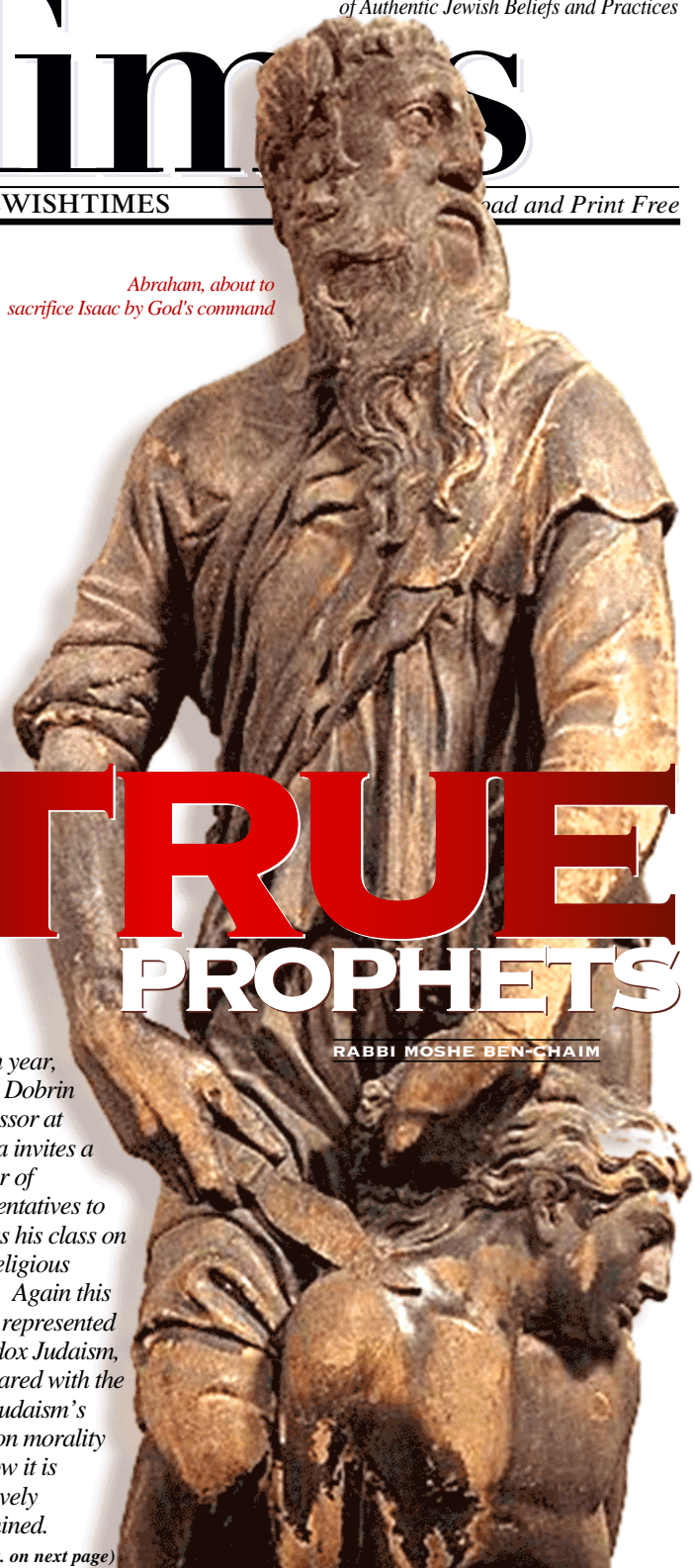
Abraham, about to  
sacrifice Isaac by God's command

# TRUE PROPHETS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Each year, Arthur Dobrin - professor at Hofstra invites a number of representatives to address his class on their religious beliefs. Again this year, I represented Orthodox Judaism, and shared with the class Judaism's views on morality and how it is objectively determined.

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*Colleen Eren is the adjunct professor, with whom I discussed other issue. I asked that she remain in touch if other questions arose. She wrote me last night, and I wish to share our discussion with our readers, with her permission:*

**Colleen:** Greetings again, Rabbi Ben Chaim. I was deeply concerned by the statements made by some of our Christian speakers, namely the Pentecostals, Baptists, African Methodist Episcopal–if the Christian right continues to grow in political power, I think all those of us who are non-Christian might do best to seek exile. [I will quote a few speakers]:

**Baptist:** “Jews, Hindus, Muslims, atheists–they’re all going straight to hell.”

**African Methodist Episcopal:** “I am the way - the truth and the life–this means that only those who believe in Jesus will be saved by God.”

“How do you know this?” I asked him.  
“This is what faith tells me.”

**Pentecostal:** “We have the ability to speak with the tongue of the Holy Spirit, to prophesize.”

**Colleen:** So Rabbi, they speak with the voice of God now. What a terrifying delusion.

Anyway, here are two long-delayed questions that I hope you won’t mind answering or at least thinking about. I greatly appreciate your offer to respond to my questions.

Question 1: Abraham preceded Moses chronologically. In the Bible, we learn that God “spoke” to Abraham, for instance when he instructed Abraham to kill Isaac. There was no one there to witness this divine interaction. Yet, you hold this to be truth, and not mere faith. I understand how you take Moses’ interaction with God to be literal truth because of the millions of witnesses and historical phenomena that followed this event that corroborate the telling. But how does “reason” tell you that the Abrahamic revelations are also true?

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Colleen, I am equally alarmed. If this is how far religions have gone, we are all best to heed your warning. Amazing, the Baptist claims we are doomed to hell, but offers no grounds for his claim. I wonder why he feels his words will convince a single person. The Methodist Episcopal feel that “faith” is to determine reality. The question he cannot escape is why HIS faith determines reality any better than another religionist. And the Pentecostal claims he is a prophet. He must also allow others to share that

claim, thereby placing him in an unanswerable contradiction: for if HE claims [via “prophecy”] that his religion is proper, and another person claims the HE is the real prophet, why should the Pentecostal deny prophecy to any other religionist? And since he cannot deny him prophecy – as they are on equal footing with no proof – then they both must accept each other’s religion. It is clear: no religion except Judaism is based on proof and intelligence, as we witness in these speakers. Now let me address your question.

The very same proof we use to validate Moses, we use in connection with all events recorded in the Torah, including the prophecies of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The millions of witnesses, who saw the miracles at Mount Sinai, received the Torah at that event from He who performed these miracles. By definition, God is the very source of creation, i.e., “reality”. This means He defines all that is real and true. He communicated Biblical information to man – His creation – the only Earthly being to which He granted intelligence. It is clear: God desires man to use this intelligence – God desires we apprehend His communicated word as truth. Now, in this Torah – the Bible – is contained accounts throughout the history of the Jews, including Abraham’s many prophecies. We thereby arrive at the conclusion that God desires man to recognize Abraham’s prophecies as truths. The entire Bible – the Torah – is thereby validated, as it was given to Moses miraculously in front of millions of witnesses. No other religion lays claim to proof, and therefore, they base their beliefs on blind faith, not proof. Judaism remains the only religion based on proof.

Additionally, Abraham communicated his prophecies to Isaac, who himself also prophesied. Isaac communicated his prophecies to his son Jacob, who also prophesied. Jacob transmitted this to his twelve sons, the Twelve Tribes, and they, to their numerous offspring, all of whom are recorded by name. There is an unbroken chain of transmission. This chain is then validated by the transmission of those who stood on Sinai, as they passed down the Torah’s record of this lineage, with no dispute. Had this lineage been falsified, and these people at Sinai disagreed as to who their true forefathers were, they would not have passed it down, and we would not be in possession of this Torah today.

**Colleen:** Question 2: Do you deny the existence of Jesus as a historical figure? If not, why is it not possible that Jesus could have been, as the Muslims deem him, a prophet? Jesus himself never said he was the Messiah or divinity. Prophecy does not mean, that one is possessed by God, but merely that one is exhorting others to come back to God. Once again, Rabbi, thank you for your offer of answers.

Best wishes, Colleen

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Yes, Jesus existed. But he was no prophet; not as you define “prophet”, nor as I define “prophet”. As you define prophet as one exhorting man to follow God, Jesus did not do this, as he deviated from God’s words. Thus, he did not exhort man to follow God, but his own fantasies. According to my definition of “prophet” – as one with whom God spoke – Jesus’ deviations from God’s Torah clearly expose him as violating God’s word, someone with whom God would never endorse, with whom God would not appoint to receive prophecy.

Proof of prophecy is only via an event witnessed by masses, and this does not exist in connection with any other religion – Jesus included. Stories fabricated about Jesus were not scripted until decades after his demise. Had true miracles occurred in front of 5000 people as they claim, these 5000 people would have transmitted such an event, in an unbroken chain. But the fact that we see absolute silence at the time of these supposed miracles clearly exposes the stories as lies.

Jesus is surrounded by lies, attractive lies, so this religion amassed many followers. But followers mean nothing. Hitler too had followers for the same reason; the public is attracted to stories which elevate their self worth: Hitler made the Germans feel superior. Stories in the New Testament too make one feel elevated, for by agreeing to these stories, one is forgiven and loved by a man, by Jesus. We learn that it is not impossible to attract masses to “believe” something. But you cannot attract masses to claim they witnessed an “event” unless they did. None of the stories surrounding Jesus contain any proof, so they are all dismissed, as we would dismiss any unsubstantiated story. What these stories do offer is emotional appeal.

On this point, I wish to elaborate. Are we to follow only a god, which we feel recognizes and protects us, or, Who is truly real? This does not mean that the true God doesn’t recognize us and respond; the Creator of eyes and ears certainly recognizes their functions, and Himself, “sees and hears” in His own way.

What I mean is that these stories about Jesus were designed to cater to an instinctual and infantile need. Ancient idols were primarily figured as humans or animals to afford man the sense that these gods “see” or “hear” man, catering to the infantile need for protection and security. The Golden Calf also catered to this infantile human need that its fabricators be recognized.

Jesus is just another permutation of this idolatrous way of life. Jesus too satisfies this very need. Christians could not advance their intellectual capabilities and approach God as He is: an unknowable being. Their need for some tangible god to “see” them and care for them was never abandoned. They projected their infantile

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## Other Religions

state as dependent infants onto their adult realities, and fabricated a man-god who would replace their parental love and care. Instead of maturing intellectually, Christians and other religionists remained steeped in the infant stages of life. This is how the New Testament was commenced: by following fantasies of security, not by recording actual events.

Man has in innate need to feel that as he recognizes others, so too, God recognizes him. But man receives no response from God during prayer or when he calls out – as we define response. We are ignorant of how and when God intervenes. But this does not mean He does not. The very fact that we possess a soul should teach us that God desires each of us to engage this in approaching Him. And by definition, this means our approach must be intelligent – not a duplication of Christianity's infantile search for a man-god, but a true Judaic search to relate to the unknowable God who is in no manner similar to man, His created clods of dirt.

When man feels God does not respond, he invents new gods, upon whom he can project his infantile understanding of how caregivers interact with us: they recognize us, they look at us and talk to us. This is all too absent in our relationship with God. "We cannot have this" many people think, but never utter such words. This is from where idolatry sprung forth: man sought his "father and mother" in idolatry.

However, honesty demands that we don't flee from ourselves, but that we embrace whatever and all thoughts and misconception we may have. For only through admission of our faults, can we revamp our outlook and finally embrace truth, and be rid of conflict when our fantasy life fails to find support in reality. If we truly wish to discover what God wants from man, we must base our search on truth and proof, not on blind faith.

It is only he who searches for reality, who will find it.

**Colleen:** I only have one challenge to one of the statements you made, and this is that I believe prophecy's measuring stick should not be based on masses witnessing an event that might be perceived by all as a prophetically paranormal. For example, the high level of skill of some magicians might be capable of convincing crowds of people that, say, a building has disappeared or some such. Or, perhaps, chance might intervene to grant legitimacy to a "prophet's" claims. (I.e. the prophet luckily "conjures" a storm or some such, in front of many people, a storm which is merely a rarity of nature that coincides with his predictions). What do you think?

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Colleen, in all cases where we can explain away a phenomenon as "naturally caused" or coincidence, in any way, then the

performer lacks any claim to prophecy...to working on behalf of God. Egypt possessed many magicians, but as the Rabbis exposed, they used slight of hand. Magic is non-existent.

For this reason God orchestrated His Revelation on Mount Sinai in front of millions. He desired that there exist an indisputable proof of His intervention with man. Thereby, all other religions claiming prophecy or designation by God, but do not possess absolute proof such as Sinai, are exposed as frauds, and are false prophets, the punishment of whom is death. This severity is because these frauds mislead man as to what is truly God's words...they cause droves of innocents to lose their lives to fallacy. ▣

## Noachides & Lashon Hara

**Kent:** Are guarding one's words and evil speech incumbent on the Ben Noach, or is it specific to Jews alone?

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Kent, they are not obligatory as part of the 7 Noachide laws, but they will perfect a Noachide just as a Jew, and he is wise to be pure of heart, and avoid any destructive behavior.

Be mindful: the 7 Noachide laws are the "minimum" required activities to justify one's existence. This means that by not fulfilling these 7, one does not retain his or her right to life in God's eyes. Thus, additionally practiced laws will perfect a Noachide, over and above what is required, just as with a Jew. We are all of the same exact human design; we all come from Adam, and the commonly heard notion that Jews have a "Jewish soul" is baseless, and resides in man's arrogance, not in reality. Thus, the laws will perfect us all identically. The 7 Noachide laws are the minimum, and not a "limit". By all means a Noachide desirous of perfection should keep the other laws. The only laws a Noachide may not observe (unless he/she converts) are Sabbath and Holidays. I am of the opinion that Tefillin too must not be kept by Noachides for the following reasoning.

"And all the peoples will see that God's name is called upon you and they will fear you." (Deut. 28:10) Now, had a Ben Noach been allowed to wear Tefillin, this verse would make no sense. For why should a Ben Noach see a Jew wearing that which he too wears? Hence, in my mind it follows that a Ben Noach must not wear Tefillin. What is the reason and justice behind this law? Let us review a few verses.

## Noachide

Just as Sabbath is referred to as a "sign" (Exod. 31:17) so too is Tefillin, "and tie them as a sign on your hand". (Deut. 6:8) On the Sabbath and holidays, the reason why the Ben Noach is not permitted to observe, is not so much for him, but for the Jew. By Noachides continuing to labor on the Sabbath, the Jew stands out in his day of rest. This "contrast" highlights the Jew as the one who is mimicking God's act of rest, precisely for the goal of publicizing God's name in the world. This publication also includes our education of mankind in God's Torah. In order that those who know the Torah remain those who teach the Torah, they must retain their status as the sole Torah educators. This ensures that future generations will also benefit from the undiluted Torah system. But if a Ben Noach who is not as well versed in Torah rests on the Sabbath, he leads others to believe that he too possesses adequate knowledge of Torah, so as to act as a Torah authority. Of course, any Ben Noach who is so moved may convert, and become a leader on equal footing as one born Jewish, as many of our teachers have been.

Now, just as Sabbath is a sign, as it highlights the Jew's special status, Tefillin too are viewed as a testament to God's designation that the Jew teach the world: "And all the peoples will see that God's name is called upon you and they will fear you." For this reason, the Tefillin contain central Torah sections, as this refers to the purpose of Tefillin: to designate the wearer as closely related to Torah. Additionally, these sections are arranged in order, but from whose vantage point? The onlooker. Thus, when one looks at the Jew wearing Tefillin, he knows the Torah sections contained are ordered from Genesis to Deuteronomy for the purpose of the onlooker to recognize. The onlooker – the Noachide – realizes the Jew as possessing the Torah. Thus, the Torah remains intact; as those who study it most, are both viewed as its teachers, and remain its teachers.

Since we are on the subject, I will mention an idea on Tefillin I heard from a wise Rabbi. He asked why the Tefillin contain central texts of the Torah, but these texts are never meant to be read, as they are permanently sealed inside the Tefillin. He said this teaches that the ideas of the Torah worn by us are to be integral to our natures. These texts are not to be read, as they are to refer to man's best state, where he too contains the Torah's principles, as if an integral part of his very being. The Torah's ideas are not to remain as "things we follow", but rather, "as part of our very nature", just like Tefillin. The purpose of Tefillin is not to read their contained texts, but to follow the lesson of instilling our very selves with these ideas, until we become one with the Torah's truths. They are no longer ideas alien to us, but we are so convinced of these ideas, and value them so, that they are to us as part of our very beings. ▣

each of his sons' merits and flaws, addressing them with much wisdom. King David also mirrored this approach to death, as he too just before dying, counseled his son Solomon. We learn that in the future, we will no longer recite the "Dayan haEmess", or "True Judge" blessing. We will no longer view death with morbidity or evil. Rather, upon hearing news of someone's death, we will recite "Hatove v'Hamative", "One who is good and does good". With this in mind, we question why contact with the dead prohibited for priests.

What is the great lesson of death? We notice that people have a difficult time dealing with this subject: they joke about death, although prohibited by, "Lo-age l'rash charaf Asahu", "One who mocks the poor [the dead] disgraces his Maker." This is because death is a great blow to one's narcissism. People are distorted, and are striving for immortality. People chase wealth, even if they are millionaires. If they would live to be 1000, then, perhaps, a millionaire may be justified to continue working into his eighties. But this is not the case. What propels such behavior is the fantasy of immortality.

We just completed the Torah portion of Emor. In it, we learn of the Priests' prohibition of becoming ritually defiled (tamay) through contact with the dead. As this prohibition does not apply to the other tribes of Israel, we wonder what we may derive from such a law. Clearly, a connection between death and the Priests is thereby evidenced. But what is this connection?

The Priest has a significant role in Judaism. He is the one who services in the Temple, which includes sacrifices of animals and produce offerings. Some of these sacrifices serve the purpose of repentance, such as the Chatas offering. What do repentance, animal sacrifice and produce offerings share in common? What do these phenomena reflect on Temple worship? And what is the connection to the Priest and his prohibition to come in contact with the dead?

One more item mentioned by Rabbi Mann in connection with death, is that the Torah obscures Olam Haba, the afterlife. No mention is made of this reality. Why must this be?

Rabbi Mann offered an interesting observation. He expressed that the Temple has a focus: it is "life". Meaning, the goal of the Temple is to teach man the correct ideas for life here on Earth. And the rewards of the good life are also in terms of this world. The Shema states, "And I will give you rain for your land in its time." When we experience a bountiful crop, we bring our best produce to the Temple. When we are wealthy, we give our wealth to God's purposes; such as Temple, the poor, and other mitzvos. Jacob too gave back to God a tenth of the wealth that God granted him. The remainder Jacob used to live properly. Wealth is good; the Torah does not

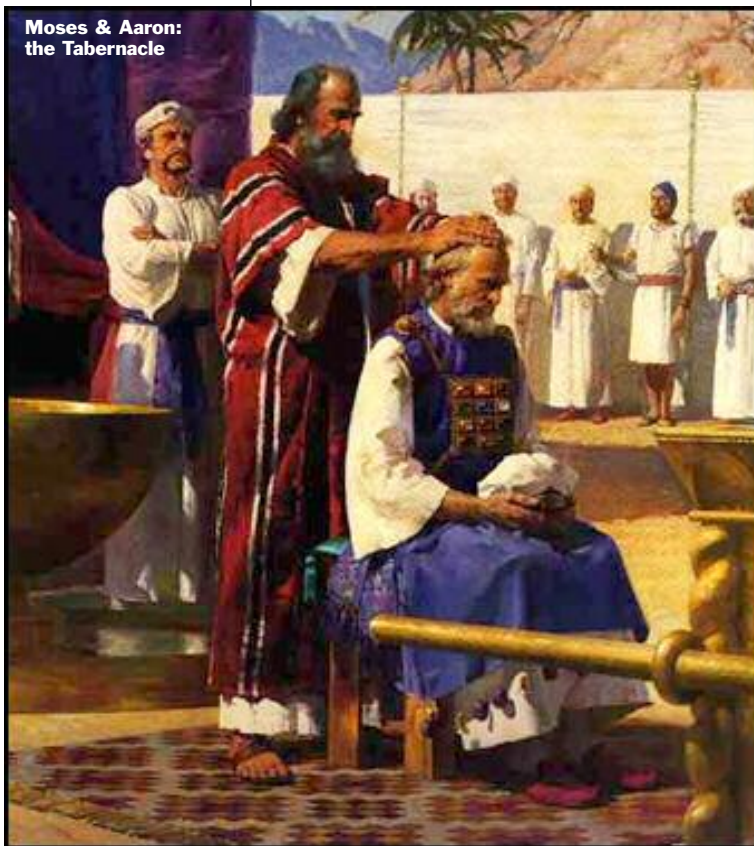
frown on he who is wealthy. For with wealth, he procures all necessities to follow God. The true servant of God also avoids fantasies carried by wealth. It is our relationship to money, which may be corrupt, not the money itself. Charity helps to place man in the proper focus. Jacob gave a tenth to God to emphasize from Whom he received his wealth. He wished to show thanks for the good he experienced in this life. Temple sacrifice duplicates Jacob's act of giving to God, and these sacrifices also include repentance. This teaches that we are to be concerned with living the proper life, removed from sin. So we bring our sin offerings to God in the Temple. We bring them to the Priest.

The Priest is the one who worships in the Temple. To highlight this point that Temple focuses on life, he is restricted from contact with the dead, unless they are one of his close relatives. Of course if there is a body with no one to bury it, then even the High Priest – normally prohibited from contact even with close relatives – must take responsibility and bury the dead.

Our existence in this world is to be our focus, unlike other religions that are focused on the afterlife. In doing so, the other religions miss this life, and pass up the one opportunity God granted us to study His marvels, and come to appreciate His wisdom and Torah. The truth is, if one learns and observes the Torah's commands, but for the objective of receiving the next world, he is not truly deserving, as he did not follow the commands or study...as an ends in themselves. He imagines something "else" awaits him in the afterlife.

What is the correct approach through which we truly value Torah and mitzvos and are granted eternal life? It is when one learns Torah because he is intrigued by the subject matter, then he learns properly, and then he will enjoy the afterlife. But the afterlife is not another thing divorced from wisdom; rather, it is wisdom on the highest plane. So, if wisdom is not something that we have learned to love here, what is one anticipating with regards to the afterlife, the

Moses & Aaron:  
the Tabernacle



purpose of which is a greater wisdom, and knowledge of God? If one learns, never reaching the level of learning for itself, "Torah Lishma", then his learning suffers, and his life has not served its purpose. We cannot calculate who retains what measure of the afterlife. However, what the wise and perfected men and women enjoy here, they will enjoy to a much greater degree in the next world, but we must come to "enjoy" our learning – our focus must be on this life. Therefore, the Torah obscures the afterlife, although a very real phenomenon.

In order that man achieves his goal, that he truly values Torah and mitzvos for themselves as is God's will, God designed the Torah to focus man on this life, so we may use it to obtain a true appreciation for the Creator, the One who made this life. The priest, who worships in the Temple, displays the character of the Temple's focus – this life – through the prohibition to come in contact with the dead. Aaron was called a "Rodafe shalom", a "pursuer of peace". He was one who sought to create peace...in this life, thereby reflecting the purpose of the Temple wherein he ministered.

"Lave chacham b'vais avel", "the heart of a wise man is in the house of mourning". This teaches us that a wise man does not approach death with morbidity; he does not cater to his immortality fantasy. He views life and death as God's designs, and he embraces them equally. Both deserve an intellectual approach. ■



(Behar continued from page 1)

## Weekly Parsha

occurs in the land of Israel every seven years. The Shemitah 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 Shemitah 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 Shemitah 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. Shemitah 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 Shemitah. 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 Shemitah? 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 Shemitah 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 Shemitah year. During the Shemitah 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

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## Weekly Parsha

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 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.

## Students

## Yosef's Column

YOSEF ROTH



# Trust in God

One of the areas of halacha we discuss in Parshas Behar are the laws concerning shmita (the Sabbatical year). During the seventh year, a person is not allowed to work or harvest his land, but the fields must remain unworked for the entire seventh year. These laws are also applicable to the fiftieth year, the yovel year.

We see from this the level which a Jew has to attain in his conviction of Hashem's hashgacha. The land remains unworked in the forty ninth year and in the fiftieth year, and then it takes a year to harvest the new crop. That means that there is no new harvest for three years. How can the people survive?

Hashem promises us that if we keep the laws of shmita and yovel, there will be enough food in the forty eighth year to last for three years. Through the laws we learn that our security depends upon our relationship with Hashem. ■

*The JewishTimes is happy to announce a new column, "Yosef's Column", delivered by our young friend Yosef Roth. He invites other young students to contribute your Divrei Torah. Email your Torah to Yosef here: [yosef@mesora.org](mailto:yosef@mesora.org)*



## Letters

## Noachide

# KEDOSHIM TEHIYU: LEARNING FROM GENTILES

RABBI REUVEN MANN

*Over the past few weeks, Rabbi Mann, rabbi at Rinat Yisrael, Plainview NY, has addressed "Kedoshim Tehiyu", being sanctified. This is such an important theme. Even in areas in which the Torah places no prohibitions, we are obligated by this injunction to go further, and not to abuse the system for selfish and instinctual gratification. In line with "Kedoshim Tehiyu", are humility, righteousness, and learning from anyone. The Rabbis teach: "Who is wise? One who learns from anyone." This includes learning from righteous gentiles.*

*Unfortunately, the ignorant among us feel a Jew to be inherently superior to a gentile. This is of course against our Torah, as so many gentiles prove this as false. We all come from Adam, so we are all equal. Rabbi Mann cited one such case of where we can learn from the gentiles. This article below is an example of our derech of Torah, to learn from everyone.*

New York Post -- May 13, 2005: By ERIKA MARTINEZ

"The Bronx cop who donated her kidney so that a fellow officer could live was reunited with her pal yesterday — and got a chance to see her lifesaving gift at work.

Lisa Murphy said she never felt better than when she finally saw Vance Lloyd at his bedside and realized he had triumphed in his seven-year battle with nearly complete kidney failure.

"It's so great to see my kidney actually working [for him]," said Murphy, who underwent a 41/2-hour operation Wednesday at Westchester Medical Center in Valhalla.

Her kidney had been disconnected through small holes in her back during a laparoscopic procedure. It was removed through an incision in her belly and then transplanted into Lloyd during a six-hour operation.

Yesterday, both donor and recipient were in stable condition — and in great spirits.

"I'm a little achy, of course," said Lloyd, who served in the Marines and is now a popular youth officer.

"Mentally, I feel great. I feel really enthused

and just really good. I'm actually speechless. I really can't find words to describe it."

Murphy, 40, said she was "so thrilled to see him the way he is, it's an indescribable thing.

"I just feel so lucky to have been able to have done this for him."

Both cops, who have both worked the 4 p.m.-to-midnight shift at the 40th Precinct for seven years, have received an outpouring of support.

A complete stranger who had seen The Post's story about the pair Tuesday sent Murphy a plant with a card that read, "Read the story. You're a child of God, for you to give the gift of life."

The letter was signed, "A proud citizen."

And friends and fellow officers from the precinct have been calling Lloyd nonstop.

"It shows that the 4-0 is a family," he said. "We have a lot of rookies in the building and if they didn't know where they wanted to be, they do now."

Lloyd, 45, is expected to remain in the hospital through at least Sunday. Murphy went home yesterday afternoon.

Both Murphy and Lloyd hoped that the transplant gift — and the subsequent media coverage — would draw attention to a shortfall in transplant donations.

"This story is making some people realize that they should check the organ donation box on their drivers license," said Lloyd. "Everyone should do this, because believe it or not, there are over 200,000 people waiting for transplants."

Murphy, a 13-year NYPD vet, jumped in: "Two people at work told me they did it, so that makes me feel great."

She knew she wanted to give Lloyd her kidney shortly after he suffered a stroke in 2002 from renal failure.

It took her a year and a half to convince him. But now, he's started thinking about how he'll spend the 13 hours per week that he used to lose to dialysis.

"She gave me back my life," said the father of four, who has been married to his high-school sweetheart for 25 years. "I know myself, and I know I'll be even stronger now." ■

# Rebuking Others: A Noachide Obligation?

**Reader:** Hello Rabbi. I hope all is well. I recognize how important it is for a Jew to rebuke his fellow Jew. What is the obligation, if any, of a Ben Noach in regards to correction? If a gentile gently rebukes his neighbor with only good intentions, and it falls under the 7 Laws (which just about any would) ... is this not teaching Torah? If correction of one's fellow is an obligation, or even simply permitted for gentiles, is it limited to other gentiles only?

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** I discussed your question with Rabbi Reuven Man who reminded me of a similar conversation we had last year. He said that all which deals with perfection applies equally to a Ben Noach, as to a Jew. Rebuking others is something you should do. It is teaching Torah, and you may teach Torah as well. What is prohibited is to engage in Torah study, which is not for any application, but to simply theorize. In this case, Rabbi Mann felt that this is where the prohibition exists. To retain the Jew as the Torah source, Torah study is limited to him. This is for the well being of all people, Ben Noach and Jew. Retaining the Jew as the sole Torah authority keeps the identity of Torah intact, as only those who diligently study it, will proliferate it. Torah will continue on taught by those with the greatest understanding.

**Reader:** If a Ben Noach attends a class given by a Rabbi, to what degree is the gentile allowed to give his thoughts on a subject? Does that change when the gentile is alone with the Rabbi as opposed to with a group?

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** You may engage in study freely in all venues.

**Reader:** If the gentile gives a thought not his own and gives credit to a Rabbi for the thought, would it be permitted?"

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Certainly.

**Reader:** If a Ben Noach notices a Jewish man setting a bad example... is the Ben Noah to mind his own business? Or approach the man if the violation is clear, and the gentile's intentions are good?

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Certainly you may rebuke the Jew. ■

## INTELLECTUAL HONESTY



# DIFFERING WITH TANYA

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

**Reader:** Reader: Dear Rabbi Moshe-Ben Chaim,

I have been following your discourse against the Tanya. The Ramban - a distinguished Kabbalist - warned against the study of Kabbala. He maintained that to the eye of a person untrained in Kabbala, some principles would appear heretical, and indeed are heretical, as the reader understands them. Specifically, he warned that study of Kabbala would lead to violations of the unity of G-d. I do not believe that you are a Kabbalist, or that you have studied it under the tutelage of a master kabbalist as demanded by the Ramban. Would it not be more appropriate to state that "the views of Tanya as understood by the average and even learned reader are heresy", rather than stating that the Tanya is objectively making a heretical statement? It would seem reasonable and more palatable to propose that that Jews obey the instructions of the Ramban and humbly refrain from studying works based on Kabbala that lead to heretical views.

Does not disseminating the truth demand that we act in a manner that will be accepted by the people whenever possible? Have you located any Jewish authority that specifically calls the Tanya's statements you refer to heresy? When heresy is being taught, it is the responsibility of Torah leaders to warn against it. Presumably, this is why you have spoken out in the paper. There is no doubt that the principle of the Tanya

as taught in many yeshivas and as understood by many, is heretical.

I commend you for making this point clear and question only the rejection of stating that we do not know what the Tanya may have meant as the Ramban indicated should be our approach to the Kabbala. I want to thank you for the incredibly valuable Torah we are privileged to read weekly and urge that you frame the ideas in a manner that will keep your readers onboard.

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** A Rabbi once taught that when studying Zohar or true Kabbala, one must use the same approach as is used in Talmud: the ideas must make sense. Either something makes sense, or it doesn't. If we do not see reason in something, we do not say, "it is reasonable, but I don't know it". That would be a lie. But, perhaps in some other cases we are ignorant of an idea. Well, in such a case, we say, "I don't know what so and so means." But when someone sees an error, and it is clear to his mind, nothing demands that he feigns a false humility, and simultaneously give credit to the author, if undeserved by the text. Honesty must be embraced.

Unfortunately today, many Jewish educators have decided to teach Kabbala, or what they think is Kabbala, before they or their students have mastered Chumash and Talmud. These teachers recite statements, which are incoherent, but the audience feels they are

(continued on next page)



## Letters

crossing into “spiritual” or “mystical” realms, they feel they are privy to what others don’t know, they feel special. So they “ooh” and “ah” their lecturer or Rabbi. It is satisfying to one’s ego to feel he or she is delving into these areas...even when they don’t have a clue as to what they just heard. Some people go so far as to say about a Kabbalist’s class, “You don’t know what he means, but he is right.” Astounding that such words are uttered. If one does not understand someone else’s words, it is ludicrous to make any evaluation. Certainly, one cannot comment he is right. For if “You can’t know what he means”...perhaps he is wrong.

Having said that let me add that I appreciate your patient and reasonable approach to this heated topic. Many others have written in seething about how I could say that something found in Tanya is heresy, even though I repeatedly cite Rambam as supporting my claim. Unfortunately, these others never came forth with “reasoning”, so their words were unsubstantiated and of no value. It troubled them more that their venerated book was under scrutiny, than the fact that they had no reason for their complaints. They sought to defend a personality, instead of honestly facing an issue with objective reasoning; what is demanded from a student of Torah, a student of reality.

First off, this is not a matter of Kabbala: the quote is taken from the book of Job. I do not agree with your position, that it is the “readers’ understanding” (and not Tanya itself) which is heretical. As another Rabbi expressed just today, “If we are honest about how man communicates, the Tanya’s words themselves cannot be understood in any other way.” Let us review exactly what is found in Tanya:

*“The second, uniquely Jewish soul is truly part of G-d above.”*

*“A part of G-d above” is a quotation from Scripture (Job, 31:2). The Alter Rebbe adds the word “truly” to stress the literal meaning of these words. For, as is known, some verses employ hyperbolic language. For example, the verse describing “great and fortified cities reaching into the heavens” is clearly meant to be taken figuratively, not literally. In order that we should not interpret the phrase “a part of G-d above” in a similar manner, the Alter Rebbe adds the word “truly”, thus emphasizing that the Jewish soul is quite literally a part of G-d above.” (Lessons In Tanya, published by “Kehot” [mainstream Lubavitcher Press] with a “Preface” by the Rebbe.)*

Read those words again: “the Alter Rebbe adds the word ‘truly’, thus emphasizing that the Jewish soul is quite literally a part of G-d above.” This quote clearly displays the author’s desire that his words are NOT to be taken metaphorically, but quite literally. Having said that, we respond that such literal understanding of a “part of G-d is absolute heresy. There is no room to maneuver here.

It is dishonest to reinterpret words, of which we clearly know their meaning with 100% accuracy. All people – including the author of this Taniac portion – understand the word “truly”. To suggest the author did not mean “truly” when he writes “truly” is not being honest. To suggest that “truly” is not to be understood as I understand it, equates to saying that when the Tanya says the word “God” it may really means “man”. Now, just as no one would accept that error as the author’s intent, one must be consistently honest and agree that when the author writes “truly”, he means “truly”.

Let me be clear: I never imputed heresy to a specific man; rather, I referred to Tanya’s “words” as heretical. I called this specific part of Tanya heresy. I do not know who wrote these words. Many corruptions and forgeries have been discovered in Jewish texts, so we do not know who wrote, “the Jewish soul is quite literally a part of G-d above”. But this statement as is, conforms to that which Maimonides refers to as heresy. Had the author of these words desired to communicate that this is metaphoric; he misleads the reader by writing “truly”. Authors know how to express themselves.

We always seek to judge others favorably. But we do not judge favorably if it means we deny truth. Let us not deny what is written. A Rabbi once discussed Ramban’s ‘apparent’ accusation of Abraham’s descent to Egypt during the famine: “Rav Moshe Feinstein z”l said regarding this Ramban, that we must disregard it. Even though this specific commentary is found in books baring Ramban’s authorship, Ramban did not write it. Rav Moshe Feinstein did not accept that Abraham was to blame for living in accord with reason: Abraham possessed no food, so he traveled to Egypt to obtain his essential needs. It may very well be that a religious zealot included – in Ramban’s name – his own subjective, religious wishes.” This is what the Rabbi quoted from Rav Moshe Feinstein z”l.

Regardless of who wrote these words in Tanya, their clear understanding is not in line with Torah fundamentals: God is not similar to His creation, which includes the phenomenon

of division. Hence, “parts” cannot be ascribed to God. Nothing we apprehend can be ascribed to God. God says no analogy may be made to Him: “To what shall your equate Me that I should be similar?” (Isaiah, 40:25) God clearly denies man the ability to create any analogy to Him. “For man cannot know Me while alive” (Exod. 33:21) expresses man’s limits in understanding God. This was addressed to Moses. And if Moses cannot know anything about God, those of much lesser knowledge are wrong to suggest positive and heretical descriptions, of He, who cannot be known.

As Torah educators, we must disseminate truth, without compromising its message, regardless of how many may be disturbed by what they read. The objective that “Torah be accepted by the people whenever possible” as you write, must come second to the Torah’s message. Therefore, we do not compromise the message so “more people may be reached”, for in this case, we may reach more, but with a lie. It is crucial that truth be taught – if only to a single person – in place of teaching falsehoods to the many. And when someone sees the truth so clear to his mind, he need not gain endorsements.

Thank you again for sharing your thoughts with me,

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim ■

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## Job



# Internet Dialogue: *the* Book of Job

**Christine:** Another question regarding what Job's wife said has come up that about 700 people on the Herman Melville list are discussing regarding the book of Job. My Tanach says she tells Job to "blaspheme" God and die in chapter 2. Another member is claiming a book written on errors in translation says this passage has been mistranslated, that it should be "bless" God and die. If you could shed some light on this it would be helpful to a lot of people. Thank you, Christine

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** The Rabbis taught that the word "bless" here indicates the opposite. But since God is the recipient of this curse, the Torah veers away from making such a statement to teach how far from reality one is who curses his Maker. The Torah doesn't even want to utter the phrase

"curse God."

Additionally, the context makes no sense if he is to truly bless God, and then die. Why would blessing God be evil and cause his death? Job himself says right after this verse, "shall we take the good and not the bad?" Meaning, this is bad that has come upon him, so a blessing makes no sense as his wife suggested. He is rebuking her for suggesting a wrong response. He is telling her, "although in pain, shall I curse God and not accept even the evil in life?" It is clear that "bless" means curse in this case.

**Gordon:** I like Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim's argumentation and tend to think that on this one, the Protestants have got it right: "bless" stands for "curse." The Catholics were detoured by an

excess of philology and a defect of good sense. I think the meaning of Job's wife's remark may be something like: "So, what are you going to do? Curse God, then die?!" With her irony, she is helping him along the right path. Thanks, Tamar.

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Gordon, Job's wife was not being sarcastic, but really meant for him to be done with his torturous pain by literally cursing God, and then dying by God's hands. This is proved by Job's response, "Shall we take the good and not the bad?" Meaning, he was thereby critiquing his wife for her suggestion that he abandon the bad in life by talking the easy way out and bringing his sudden death by cursing God.

**Phil:** As many others have already pointed out, the book of Job seems to have had a strong impact on Melville. My own sense is that the character of Job served as a model for Ahab. They both have undergone physical and psychological trauma, they have a strong sense of indignation and outrage, they have been warned by pious bystanders about how they should behave, and they pursue their course according to their own internal compass, rather than external advice.

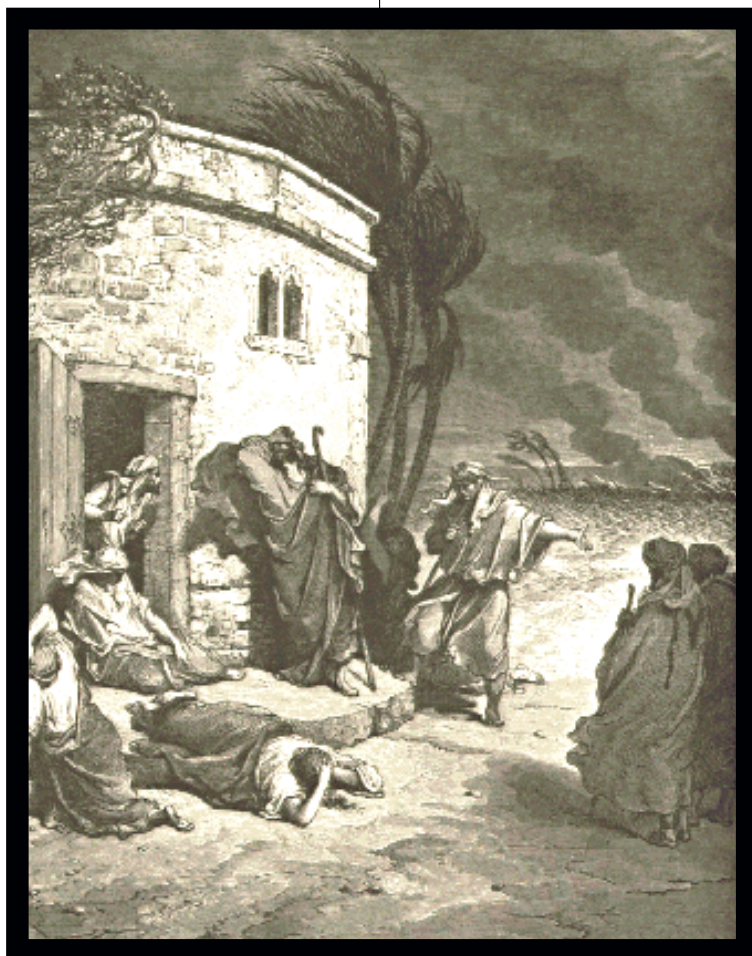
**Tamar:** Ahab cursed God and died, losing everything. Job did not curse God, lived and had his losses replaced. Job was, ahem, a camel who went through the proverbial eye of the needle so to speak....a rich man who had a strong and trusting relationship with God. And the Lord even gave Job twice as much as he had before, when he prayed versus cursed. Job maintained his integrity. Ahab did not. Ahab made a covenant with Satan. Satan is openly portrayed in the Book of Job as a corrupter of men. Ahab went for the bait while Job resisted Satan's attacks upon him and his family.

I note that in chapter one that Job was concerned for his children, that they might have "sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." He offered burnt offer rings for them "continually" lest this be the case. I further note that the concept of "cursing God" is focused on repeatedly in chapter one. Satan challenged God that he could get Job to curse God to his face two different times, first when his possessions and ten children were taken from him without cause and secondly when he touched Job himself with sore boils from head to foot.

So the whole purpose of all these series of disastrous events was for one thing....for Satan to get Job to curse God to His face. It looks to me that Satan used Mrs. Job's tongue to help get the "job" done. And especially after losing ten children in one fell swoop, it must have been a pretty tempting possibility. But he withstood the temptation. Job was a man of great faith. Ahab was a man of no faith.

(continued on next page)





**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Keep in mind; “Satan” here refers to Job’s corrupt, underlying philosophy. There is no creature called Satan. It is God’s method of describing Job’s own deficient views. God depicts Job’s opinions as “Satan”. Job felt, as long as life is good, he would follow God. Thus, if he lacked some of his good in life, he would not follow God. Job’s evil counsel is referred to as “Satan”.

God afflicts Job based on his own lack of knowledge and perfection, although he did not sin in action. Thus, we learn that God may allow tragedy to affect someone who is not perfect. But once Job heard Elihu’s words, and God’s words, he learned new truths and perfected himself. This is why he received his good life again, in greater measure than before, for now, he was good in greater measure.

**Jake:** I’m not exactly sure of the specifics, but there seems to be a debate on “The Adversary” in Job. Is he the same as Satan? I think many Christians would say that it is. I don’t know the specifics of the Jewish beliefs, Rabbi... but from what I understand you do not believe in Satan as an actual being, so of course Job would be less of a battle between good and

evil and more of a test of humanity. Many people I have seen (including myself) see a very disturbing picture painted in Job, mostly through the image of Satan. Why would God take up a bet with Satan? Why would he ruin a poor innocent man’s life just to prove himself more powerful than Satan?

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Job was subject to his tragedies only until he corrected his deficient knowledge, and even this correction, was by God’s graciousness. Maimonides points to the omission of the appellations “intelligent” and “wise” in reference to Job. Although upright, he lacked wisdom. It behooves us to review Maimonides clues to the book of Job:

*“...listen to the following useful instruction given by our Sages, who in truth deserve the title of “wise men” - it makes clear that which appears doubtful, and reveals that which has been hidden, and discloses most of the mysteries of the Law. They said in the Talmud as follows: “R. Simeon, son of Lakish, says, “The adversary (Satan) evil inclination (yezer ha-ra’), and the angel of death, are one*

*and the same being.” Here we find all that has been mentioned by us in such a dear manner that no intelligent person will be in doubt about it. It has thus been shown to you that one and the same thing is designated by these three different terms, and that actions ascribed to these three are in reality the actions of one and the same agent. Again, the ancient doctors of the Talmud said, “The adversary goes about and misleads, then he goes up and accuses, obtains permission, and takes the soul.” (Guide for the Perplexed, Book III, Chap. XXII)*

The entire “so to speak” discussion between God and Satan must be understood as a metaphor. We see above that Maimonides clarifies Satan to be man’s evil inclination. Which man are we discussing here? It is Job; Satan here refers to Job’s instincts. When the Satan says, “put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face” this refers to Job’s sense of justice, i.e., Job ultimately felt obligated to God as long as he possessed his health. His children and wealth were taken from him at first; yet, he did not rebel until his was stricken with boils. (Maimonides highlights this point) Only then did Job curse the day he was born. And it was this corruption that God euphemistically says, “should smite him”. This means that Job’s incorrect philosophy (Satan) was the reason why he was smitten. It is worthwhile to read all of Maimonides words in this chapter.

Job sought to find answers, and exposed the false philosophies of his three friends, Bildad, Tzofar and Elifaz. God later validated his arguments defending God’s justice, but Job required additional wisdom. Elihu and God eventually penetrated his mind, and with Job’s recognition of new ideas, he was worthy of God’s intervention, and was restored to even greater stature.

Jake, What you thought was God’s “bet with Satan”, was in fact a conversation which never took place: God’s “address to Satan”, was really, God verbalizing for us from where came Job’s tragedies; it was from his false views. One, who is ignorant, as Maimonides teaches earlier in his Guide, removes him from God, and is subject to what might befall him through nature, or man. Interesting is that these two causes – nature and man – were responsible for Job’s tragedies. And what you thought was God destroying some “poor innocent man’s life”, was in fact, God perfecting someone who possessed false ideas.

There is much more to be said about these opening chapters of Job. ■

# GOD? <sup>“Experiencing”</sup>

**Reader:** A prophet is someone whom God, through direct communication to the prophet, has appointed to deliver a message to his fellow men. Accordingly, a prophet will require some demonstration that objectively supports his claim that he is a prophet, in order for his fellow men to have a reason to believe him.

A “believer” is someone who has determined God exists through subjective experience. He does not claim to have a direct message from God. If he wants to convince other people that God exists so that they’ll see it the same way he does, he does so by asking them to investigate their own experiences honestly and consider that their experiences may point to God. I am not aware of any prohibition in the Torah for someone who is not a prophet to do this. I don’t understand why you think my position of respecting a person’s right to claim personal belief based on personal experience, and allowing for the possibility that it is genuine, leads to requiring others to be convinced by that person’s belief. Do you believe that subjective experience in general is meaningless unless it can be objectively demonstrated to others?

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** I too know of no “prohibition” to consider an experience as pointing to God. But the question here is whether an event displays undeniable proof of God.

Regarding the statement you make, “convincing other people that God exists”, I say that personal ‘opinions’ matter none. Someone may “feel” he has witnessed God’s actions in his life, but with no evidence of miracles, he may also view a given event as “nature”. What you describe is called “interpretation”. And based on the subjective nature of interpretations, combined with God’s wish that He may be proven without doubt, God did not allow man to remain in doubt. Therefore, He created the event of Revelation at Sinai. This is the means through which God desires we approach him: proof, and not one of belief or interpretation. God granted man the apparatus – the intellect – with which we can determine that

something is 100% truth. He desires we use this apparatus in the most important of all areas: our belief in Him. He does not wish man to be unsure of Him, so He also does not wish that we rely on subjective experience, interpreted as we wish. This is not man functioning with his intellect, but with his faith. This is not Judaism.

**Reader:** Imagine a person who has exceptional hearing walking through a disaster site looking for survivors. He hears some breathing and movement beneath the rubble. No one else hears it. Do you think he should abandon his mission because he has no way of objectively demonstrating he is actually sensing the presence of a survivor? No Judaism I know even remotely suggests such a view. I understand that recognition of subjective criteria for determining reality invites proliferation of phonies. But denying such criteria causes the breakdown of trust in personal experience, which to my mind is a much more disastrous problem.

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Your example of a person hearing someone’s cries is a real phenomenon. And one who hears, sees or senses anything must be convinced of his sensations. He must act on what his senses tell him is fact. But you err when you compare this, to proofs of God. You just shifted from discussing when an ‘individual’ should “believe his senses”, to a discussion of when ‘masses’ may obtain “proof of an event.” The criteria for both are not similar. For one to determine what he just perceived, he relies on his senses...that is all. However, for there to exist a proof of any historical event, one man’s word is insufficient. Based on one man’s words, masses have no proof whatsoever of his accuracy, honesty, capabilities, perception, memory and so on. There are too many areas in which we may find ignorance or fabrication. But, when masses communicate the same story, fabrication and ignorance are removed, and the story is proven as fact. Bare in mind, this does not mean any story masses repeat is true. It must be a story attended by masses of “witnesses”. But stories such as Jesus’ miracles, Mohammed’s flight, and so on,

simply repeated by masses, prove nothing. Here, we have mass “believers”, and not mass “witnesses.”

Regarding subjective events without miracles, no proof exists that God was involved. So your position that one’s personal experience may be accurate evidence of God’s intervention, without a miracle, is baseless. It is merely a “wish” that God’s hand did something. But in fact, we do not know: perhaps it was Him, perhaps it was nature.

## PART II

**Reader:** Thank you for your response. We are in agreement that when it comes to convincing someone else of God’s existence, communicating personal experience does not constitute proof. But you go further. You claim that even the person who had the experience is foolish to prefer that experience to rational argument. That is the crux of our debate.

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Incorrect. You are misinterpreting my words. This is what I wrote: “He (God) does not wish man to be unsure of Him, so He also does not wish that we rely on subjective experience, interpreted as we wish. This is not man functioning with his intellect, but with his faith.” I did not say man is foolish to prefer an experience to rational argument, but rather, that the very “experience” he assumes is God’s undeniable intervention, has never been proven as such. Without miracles, man has no proof of whether God intervened in his life, or not. But you say that man may assess an event as proof of God, a position that is unreasonable.

**Reader:** You seem to believe that anyone who believes in God without explicitly thinking through the logical steps that demonstrate rational proof of his existence is not only a fool, but is guilty of violating one of the pillars of our faith and outside the pale of Judaism.

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** I don’t see where I called this personality a fool. However, Rabbi Bachaya (author of “Duties of the Heart”) calls him negligent, punishable and fail in what we owe God:

*“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 God’s commandments and Torah, he will be punished for this and held accountable for negligence.”*

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*"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."*

God created Sinai, so there should exist a proof. However, this does not mean that Abraham's conclusions about God are false. Sinai was to address a nation, even though individuals may arrive at proof of God independently. And both – Sinai and reason – must be arrived at through intelligence.

**Reader:** Of course, this would disqualify as heretics ninety-five percent of Orthodox Jews, including my, your, and pretty much all Jews' grandmothers and great-grandmothers, as well as any Jew without formal training in logical argument who chose to accept God on trust and faith without the formal proof.

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Proof certainly surpasses faith. Do you argue this point? Again you impute to me something I never said: Where have I called these people heretics? I feel you are going to extremes unnecessarily.

**Reader:** It renders as fools and heretics countless Jewish martyrs who chose to give up their lives rather than their faith, even without formal proof of that faith, Jews we pray for every Shabbat. Throngs of yeshiva bochrim, observant baalei batim, and rabbis who devote their lives to Torah and are constantly aware of their obligation to be mekadesh shem shamayim are heretics and fools as well. Any reader of your writing should find this position disturbing, to say the least.

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** Heretics and fools? Whose writing is now more disturbing?

**Reader:** The first half of your response raises an important point as to when a conclusion is merely an interpretation and when it is squarely facing the facts. Perhaps another discussion would focus on how to tell the difference, but it seems to me that the line is not as clearly drawn as you make it.

Since yours was a "final response," I would like to conclude our discourse by calling your attention

to the issue of your style of responding to other people's ideas. I certainly enjoy a good discussion, and I feel I have grown from our give and take. I look forward to future correspondence on very important issues. I would ask that you consider giving your readers the courtesy of the benefit of the doubt. I have tried to be tolerant of your strident tone, but when you routinely disqualify your opponents' ideas as "opposing Judaism" or "condoning Jesus" - mind you these include readers who toil daily in Torah study and teaching and are fully devoted to careful service of Hashem through meticulous Halacha observance and dutiful prayer - you are not only discourteous, but you undermine your position. You certainly don't want your readers to be wondering, "Why is he reacting so emotionally? What's his problem?" I would hope that in future correspondence you would not question the kashrus of your fellow Jews and stick to the discussion at hand within an atmosphere of mutual respect.

**Moshe Ben-Chaim:** I am surprised after your false accusations that I called the ignorant Jews "heretics", that you ask ME to have respect. This is clearly a case of "Kol haposale, ha-mum bo", "All who accuse others, they themselves possess that very flaw." You seem to be projecting onto me, the very flaw you display in your writings.

It seems your studies are lacking, in that your words here indicate that you have never come across a debate in the Chumash, Rishonim, or the Talmud, where the Rabbis and Sages fiercely debated Torah issues, with no verbal restraints. Saadia Gaon called certain Jews "absurd". Other Rabbis would say, "Heaven save us from your thinking", "You share the same spit as him", Ramban said about something Maimonides wrote, "It is prohibited to listen to this man", and others said, "Even had Joshua bin Nun said it, I would not accept it."

Niceties and courtesies – as you request – our Rabbis recognized as having no place when debating Torah issues. What this means is not that they sought to insult each other, that's is prohibited. Rather, when they were studying, and their energies were peaked as passionate Torah study brings out, they had a tradition: since truth is the objective, nothing – even courtesies – were permitted to mitigate this search for truth. They felt that any restraint in speech hampered their search, and therefore, they all accepted that they might talk freely, provided it was to arrive at greater Torah knowledge. Thus, accusing someone of opposing Torah was required to make a point, so he did so. Others would say in the course of their opposition to another view, "Don't listen to this man". I know this may be surprising to you, but Torah discussions should yield some new ideas, including this one!

But there is one case that emotions are not tolerated in Torah debate: when they cloud the issue. Then, one person must inform the other that he is following an emotion, and not reason. This applies right now to you. First, you must separate your emotions from your Torah discussions. You seem to feel I am addressing YOU instead of what I am truly addressing: ISSUES. Secondly, it is irrelevant how much one is "devoted to careful service of Hashem through meticulous Halacha observance and dutiful prayer". You feel this deserves recognition when discussing Torah...but it plays no role at all. If one says something idolatrous, it is. If he says something opposing Judaism, then he opposes Judaism. One cannot teach honestly, if his answer must be curbed based on the student's devotion. Honesty demands this: a person must speak with exactitude, precision, and with ideas that are not mitigated by any consideration. Sure, some people do not want to hear when they are incorrect. In that case, one may be wasting their time engaging in dialogue with them. And if others find the passion in someone's voice more of a concern than the ideas spoken, then, they are not interested in truth. I cannot tell you how many times I witnessed my own teachers raising their voices at myself or another student, arguing fiercely, calling suggested ideas "nonsense", "infantile" etc. But these very same teachers possessed the greatest concern for these same students, taking hours, months and years, with no compensation, to lead them with their counsel. These same teachers and Rabbis possess the greatest compassion. Do look askance at a teacher's passionate and at times heated Torah debate. Rather, admire his selection of career: to educate others in Torah, many times with no pay for long periods of time, or none at all.

Talmud Yuma 23a (very top of page): "Rabbi Yochanan in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yihotzadak said, "Any Torah scholar who does not take revenge and harbor vengeful feelings like a snake, is not a scholar." Rabbi Yochanan condones the need by Torah scholars to fiercely defend Torah. The Haggadah also says to "knock the teeth out" of a wicked person. Depending on the student, the Torah scholar must respond accordingly.

Lastly, you take issue with me regarding my introduction to you in my last email; I wrote, "Here is a final response." You seem bothered that I decided to end our conversation. I felt I gave my final comments on our issue. But in fact, you should be pleased. For if I did not end my conversation with the person who wrote me just before you, I would yet be engaged in dialogue with him, never responding to you.

But it is clear, I did not keep my word, as I am writing again. ■