

Are Jews justified feeling “Chosen”?
 Water: appropriate “Measure” for Egypt?
 Letters: Rabbis teaching idolatry?

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Weekly Parsha

Yitro

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“I am Hashem your Lord that brought you out from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.”
 (Shemot 20:2)

This is the first statement of the Aseret HaDibrot – the Decalogue. It presents the most fundamental premise of the Torah. There is a G-d. Maimonides understands this

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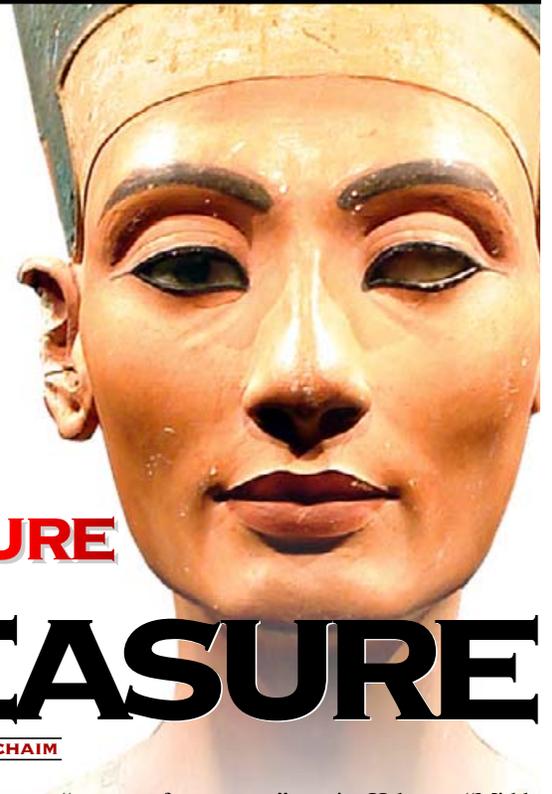
the Chosen

Before receiving the Torah God tells Moses to tell the Jews: **“And now, if you surely listen to My voice, and you guard My covenant, then you will be to Me a treasure over all peoples, for Mine is all the Earth.”** (Exod. 19:5)

Rashi comments: “You will be to Me a treasure over other nations. But do not say that you (Israel) alone are Mine, and that I have no others with you. However, what more do I have that My love for you is recognized? ‘For Mine is the entire Earth’, and they are before Me as nothing.” Rashi teaches that all nations are equal, “do not say that you (Israel) alone are Mine, and that I have no others with you.” So wherefrom is Israel’s “treasured” status? The last part of the verse answers this: “For Mine is the entire Earth, and they are before Me as nothing.” “Mine is the entire Earth,” means all peoples are equal. The Jew is treasured only by default of God’s despising the nations’ idolatry: “they are before Me as nothing” means due to their sin, the Jew is treasured by default...provided we observe God’s laws. This was an essential lesson before the Jews received the Torah. The Jew sins philosophically thinking he is better than others. For God did not create “Jew” and “Gentile”, rather, man and woman. All members of mankind share the same couple, Adam and Eve, as our progenitors. How then can the Jew think he is better?

Receiving the Torah on Sinai carried the prospect of the Jews’ haughtiness. This verse intended to correct the problem before it started. ■

God’s punitive justice, an analysis: exactly why is “measure-for-measure” a just method of punishment?



MEASURE FOR MEASURE

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

God responds to man, “measure-for-measure” or in Hebrew, “Midda K’negged Midda”. This means that if man sins with evil speech, God will respond (if the man is worthy) with a commensurate punitive measure. For example, when Miriam spoke poorly about her brother Moses, God afflicted her with leprosy. In general, leprosy is visited upon one who slanders another. The justice or “measure-for-measure” here, as that since one slanders in order to destroy another so as to lift their own reputation and self-image, the proper response is that which isolates the person from the accolades of others and lowers them to reality: leprosy and isolation are therefore appropriate. Ego is the culprit, so degradation to one’s image is the proper response, and leprosy accomplishes this. God’s justice is one in which He attempts to correct a person’s or a nation’s flaws, by addressing those very flaws: God will first inform the person where in their actions or thoughts lies their corruption, so the person might correct what was previously overlooked, or ignored. God also first visits the sinner with lighter measures, before resorting to more drastic ones. This is witnessed in God’s deliverance of leprosy to the home first, then to one’s clothing, and then finally if the person ignores the first two warnings, his body is afflicted.

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Weekly Parsha

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statement to be a commandment. We are commanded to accept the existence of a G-d who is the source of all reality.[1]

In Maimonides' introduction to his Mishne Torah, he provides a list of the 613 commandments. In this list, Maimonides places the commandments in the same order that they appear in his Sefer HaMitzvot. The placement of the individual mitzvot on this list does not correspond with the placement of these commandments in the Torah. Instead, Maimonides constructed a hierarchical order. Maimonides' order reflects the relationship between the various commandments. The very first commandment in Maimonides' list is the mitzvah to accept the existence of Hashem. Apparently, Maimonides regards this mitzvah as fundamental to the system of Taryag – the 613 commandments.

In contrast to Maimonides, Rabbaynu Chasdia Kreskas argues that acceptance of Hashem cannot even be defined as a mitzvah. He presents a very powerful argument. He argues that every mitzvah, by definition, must engender some obligation or result. A command to accept G-d's existence could not meet this criterion. Why? To whom is the command directed? If it is directed to a person who is already convinced, then the command engenders no new outcome. This person is already convinced! The alternative is even more absurd. This would require that the command be directed to the non-believer. But the non-believer could not take such a command seriously! Based on this argument, Rabbaynu Chasdia concludes that conviction in the existence of Hashem precedes mitzvot and cannot be counted among Taryag.[2]

How can Maimonides' position be explained? This issue provides a fundamental insight into Maimonides' understanding of Taryag Mitzvot. Apparently, Maimonides disagrees with the Rabbaynu Chasdia's basic premise. This premise is that the mitzvot can be equated to decrees. Maimonides seems to maintain Taryag must be defined in a more inclusive manner. He posits that the mitzvot are the basic blueprint for the complete person and nation. This blueprint includes the guide to achieving personal and national fulfillment as well as the basic description of the behaviors and convictions of the shalem – the complete individual.

Based on this definition of Taryag, Maimonides' position can be appreciated. The most basic ingredient to human perfection is acceptance of the Almighty, Who is the source of all other reality. No description of the shalem can be construed which does not include this fundamental conviction.

If we consider Maimonides' position carefully, an important premise emerges. The most basic and fundamental mitzvah of Taryag is not a command to perform any act. It is the description of a conviction that is fundamental to the perfection of the human being. In other words, the most fundamental element of human perfection is our conviction in the existence of Hashem.

Maimonides discusses this issue more thoroughly in his Commentary on the Mishne. He explains that in order to be regarded as adhering to the Torah, we must accept the basic convictions outlined by the Torah. Maimonides outlines thirteen principles – ikkarim – that are the fundamental convictions contained in the Torah. He explains that in order to be regarded as adhering to the Torah, one must accept all of these principles. If a person accepts these ikkarim, he is regarded as adhering to the Torah even if he is not perfect in his observance. In contrast, a person who is scrupulous in observance, but unconvinced of the truth of these thirteen principles, cannot be regarded as a Torah Jew. [3] It is clear from Maimonides' discussion of this issue that our convictions are essential to our identity as Torah Jews. Without these convictions our actions are hollow and lose their meaning and significance.

Maimonides' position differs markedly from the view that is popular today. Even many Jews who unequivocally identify themselves as Torah observant give little or none of their attention to clearly understanding these thirteen ikkarim of the Torah. Many Jews – observant and non-observant – do give some attention to the study of Torah machshava – philosophy. But this attention is generally directed to the study of mussar – ethical thought and philosophy. Maimonides' thirteen principles – which are remarkably devoid of any extensive discussion of ethical philosophy – are almost completely neglected. At most, the thirteen ikkarim are quickly recited at the close of morning prayers with little thought or understanding. The popular view is that actions are more fundamental than convictions. We can hold ourselves responsible for acting properly but we cannot be expected to establish a clear system of convictions. Nonetheless, it behooves us to occasionally break from popular practice and give some serious thought to the thirteen ikkarim that Maimonides identifies as the underpinning of Judaism.

As explained above, Maimonides lists as the first mitzvah of the Torah acceptance of the existence of Hashem. Maimonides also lists this conviction as the first of the thirteen fundamental principles of the Torah. Of course, we need to

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Weekly Parsha



define what we mean by Hashem. Maimonides explains that when we use the term Hashem or G-d we are required to understand that He is the cause of all that exists. In other words, all that exists is sustained by His will. In contrast, His existence is self-sustained and does not require any external cause.[4]

This principle is often confused with the Torah's assertion that Hashem created the universe. However, these two concepts are not interchangeable. Maimonides' first principle does not deal with the origins of the universe. It deals with the dependence of the universe upon Hashem's ongoing will. This is an important issue. The ancient philosophers – for example, Aristotle – were willing to acknowledge that the universe's existence is dependant upon G-d. However, they denied that He created the universe. They posited that the universe and

G-d share eternity. These philosophers maintained that although the existence of the universe is dependent on G-d, it is not created. Instead it is an emanation. It can be compared to the shadow of a wall. The existence of the wall causes the shadow. But the wall does not perform an act of creation in order to bring the shadow into existence. Instead, the shadow is a result of the existence of the wall. Similarly, these philosophers asserted that the universe is a result of G-d's existence but it not a creation of G-d.

It appears that Maimonides first principle does not contradict this perspective. It does not deal with the issue of creation. It merely asserts that the universe's ongoing existence is dependent upon Hashem.

“For in six days Hashem created the heavens, the earth, the seas and all that are contained in them. And He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, Hashem blessed the Shabbat and sanctified it.” (Shemot 20:11)

Rav Yosef Albo criticizes Maimonides on this issue. He contends that Maimonides neglected to include within his thirteen principles the Torah principle that Hashem created the universe.[5]

We observe Shabbat every week. The above pasuk explains that Shabbat is designed to commemorate creation. It seems obvious that the attention the Torah gives to creation indicates that this is a fundamental element of the Torah. The Torah's emphasis on creation seems to support Rav Albo's criticism of Maimonides.

However, a careful study of Maimonides' thirteen principles indicates that they do include the assertion that Hashem created the universe. Maimonides' fourth principle is that Hashem is eternal and that no other existence is eternal. Maimonides elaborates on this principle and explicitly states that this principle includes a negation of the Aristotelian position. In other words, according to Maimonides' formulation of this principle, it includes the assertion that Hashem created the universe and it is not eternal.

It is amazing that Rav Albo criticizes Maimonides for neglecting to include within his thirteen ikkarim the Torah's assertion that Hashem created the universe. This is simply not accurate. As we have explained, Maimonides explicitly includes this assertion within his fourth principle! How can we explain Rav Albo's apparent error?

Appreciating Rav Albo's criticism requires a

more thorough understanding of Maimonides' formulation of his thirteen principles. In order to reach this understanding, it is helpful to begin with a related question.

Maimonides' second principle is that Hashem is a unity. What is the meaning of the term “unity?” Maimonides explains that Hashem is not subject to division in any sense. This means that we can not view Hashem as having parts or even characteristics. We cannot view Hashem as possessing compassion or mercy. Such a view means that Hashem has attributes. The assignment of attributes to Hashem is inconsistent with the Torah's assertion that Hashem is one. It is true that the Torah does refer to Divine attributes. However, Maimonides explains that when the Torah refers to Hashem's mercy or other attributes it is resorting to an allegory and is not to be understood in a literal sense.[6]

Maimonides' third principle is that Hashem is not material and cannot be described as possessing any of the qualities or characteristics associated with material objects. It would seem that this third principle is superfluous. It is an obvious extension of the second principle. Hashem is a unity. This precludes conceiving of Him as material. All material objects have characteristics – for example dimension and size. It is quite impossible to conceive of a material object devoid of all characteristics. Similarly, Maimonides' fourth principle is that Hashem is eternal. This principle also seems to be an extension of the second principle. The reasoning behind this argument is somewhat abstract and is beyond the scope of this discussion. But the observation is nonetheless noteworthy. It indicates that the thirteen ikkarim are not independent of one another. They are interrelated and in some cases latter principles are easily derived from earlier principles.

This suggests a question. What are these principles? We would have assumed that they are similar to a postulate system. In a postulate system, each element is independent of the others. Postulates are basic building blocks. One cannot be derived from another. It is easy to understand the role of postulates in a postulate system. They are the fundamental principles. All other elements of the system are derived from the postulates but the postulates cannot be derived from one another. The postulates are the foundation. The remaining elements of the system are derived and built upon this foundation. But Maimonides' thirteen principles are not independent of one another. In fact, they are interrelated. If one principle can be derived from another, on what basis is a principle defined as fundamental?

The implication of this question is that Maimonides' thirteen ikkarim are not a system of postulates. Instead, they are Maimonides' outline of the basic theological framework of the Torah.

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They describe a structure of concepts. These concepts are interrelated. But in their totality they depict the basic outline of the Torah's theology. They are a basic sketch of the Torah's outlook. They are an abstract of the elements that compose the Torah's perspective. They can be compared to an architect's preliminary drawing of a structure. The architect begins with an outline that includes the basic elements of the structure. These elements give the structure its form and function. Later the architect adds additional detail to his drawing. But the basic form emerges from the preliminary drawing. It contains all of the elements that give the structure its basic form and function. Similarly, Maimonides' principles are such an outline. The basic form and structure of the Torah's outlook is contained in this outline. The Torah adds much more detail. But the fundamental structure is contained in these thirteen principles.

Now, Rav Albo's question can be appreciated. As Maimonides notes, the Torah's assertion that the universe is created can be derived from the fourth principle. But this does not mean that this assertion should not be treated as a separate principle. Rav Albo argues that certainly creation is a fundamental element of the Torah's outlook. It deserves to be treated as such and enumerated as a separate principle. It is not adequate to include creation within another principle!

What is the basis of this dispute between Maimonides and Rav Albo? This is a difficult question to answer. However, it is possible to present an approach or hypothesis. Rav Albo maintains that creation is a fundamental proposition of the Torah. According to Rav Albo, the Torah directs us to regard the word as a creation of Hashem and not as coexistent with Him. We must recognize that the universe that we know is not eternal and is a result of an act of creation. Our relationship with and understanding of the universe must be predicated on this acknowledgment.

In contrast, a survey of Maimonides' thirteen principles reveals that they deal primarily with our relationship with and understanding of Hashem. It seems that according to Maimonides, the essence of the Torah is the perspective it provides on Hashem and our relationship with Him. A fundamental element of this understanding and relationship is that we are required to appreciate Hashem's uniqueness. He is eternal. In His eternity, He is unique. Nothing else partakes of eternity.

Maimonides' understanding of the role of creation in Torah thought is predicated on his contention that our understanding of and relationship with Hashem is the most fundamental element of the Torah. The Torah's assertion that the universe is created is important because this

assertion confirms Hashem's uniqueness. If we fail to accept creation, we do not appreciate the uniqueness of Hashem's existence and His central role in all other existence. Without creation, we cannot regard Hashem as the most fundamental reality and the most central element of all reality.

Based on this perspective, Maimonides does not enumerate creation as an independent principle. Instead, he includes it in his fourth principle. We are required to acknowledge that Hashem is eternal. Hashem's eternal existence is unique. Nothing else partakes of this eternity. Therefore, we must accept that the universe is created and not eternal. ■

- [1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh 1
 [2] Rabbaynu Chasdai Kreskas, Ohr Hashem, Introduction (HaTza'ah).
 [3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Commentary on the Mishne, Mesechet Sanhedrin 10:1.
 [4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Commentary on the Mishne, Mesechet Sanhedrin 10:1.
 [5] Rav Yosef Albo, Sefer Halkkarim, volume 1, chapter 1.
 [6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 1:9.

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Weekly Parsha

Another example cited in Megilla 12b, is Achashverosh's queen Vashti. She was killed for refusing to appear in the nude before the king. This was in response for her sin of stripping the Jewish women and forcing them to work on the Sabbath. Vashti, and others who hear of Vashti's fate, are afforded the opportunity to again witness God's justice.

We also learn from the Rabbis, that if one let's the abuses of another person go without response, God too will be light with such a person, and God will not take him to task, as He will do with others. What is the justice here? I believe this idea is that as this person does not value the abuse of another as something worthy of his response, this means that in his framework, such an act of abuse is not deemed by him as severe. This being the case, God will not deal severely with this man, when he does the same to another victim, since this man does not view the crime as a severe matter. The justice is that God will at times work within man's framework, so man feels God is just. In other words, if a person simply did not deem some infraction as severe, for good reason, God will not hold him accountable for violating that very infraction. Similarly, a Rabbi recently stated that one who sins with a sudden, impulsive passion; God does not punish him in the same measure as if committed in a premeditated manner.

In this week's Parsha Yisro, again we find this theme:

"And Yisro was gladdened for all the good which God did for Israel, that He saved them from the hand of Egypt. And Yisro said, 'Blessed is God that He saved you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh; that He saved the people from under the hand of Egypt'. Now I know that God is supreme form all other gods, for in the matter that they [Egypt] were judged." (Exod. 18:9-11)

This last verse is a bit enigmatic, but Onkelos the proselyte explains: "Now I know that God is supreme and there is no other god than He; for in the thing which Egypt contemplated to judge Israel, they were judged." This means that as the Egyptians killed the Jewish infants via drowning, Egypt was drowned in return. The question is this: where in this "measure-for-measure" did Yisro find validation for God's superiority over other gods?

I do not know if there was one matter, which won over Yisro's praises for God to the exclusion of all imposters. For in God's measure-for-measure system, we learn many of God's praiseworthy traits: this implies God's knowledge of man's (Egypt's) actions viz., drowning infants; it teaches God's laws of justice, that He punishes man; it teaches that God controls the universe, as He

suspends natural laws; it teaches that God wants the good for man, and steers him towards it through punishments; and measure-for-measure teaches that God interacts with man. Perhaps in this last trait – that God interacts with man – did Yisro find wherein God deviates from all other gods: He is the only God that interacts, while all others are inanimate stone idols and woodcarvings.

Looking even closer at Onkelos' words, he says, "for in the thing which Egypt contemplated to judge Israel, they were judged." It appears that "judging" is an issue. Perhaps Yisro also saw this unique phenomenon: typically in his era, man projected the fallacy that lifeless idols governed and judged man. However, this was never corroborated by reality. Now, upon seeing that God returned upon Egypt their very judgment on the Jews of drowning them, Yisro was faced with the

fact that not only can't idols judge, nor does man, but it is God alone. Lifeless idols do nothing, and even animated man may make plans...but God destroys idols, He overrides man's plans (Egypt's judgment to drown infants) and He drowns them. This incident of the Red Sea exposed all other would-be judges (idols and Egypt) as imposters. God alone judges man.

In the capacity of "judge God demonstrates that nothing compares to Him. For although Egypt was so supreme as Yisro saw, yet, their attempt to drown Israel backfired: they were punished by a Power that exposed Egypt as truly powerless. Yisro saw that the fabricated authority assumed by various peoples and cultures, are so tenuous. This contrast of Egypt's relative power, to God's ultimate power and justice, evoked a reverence to God in Yisro. ■

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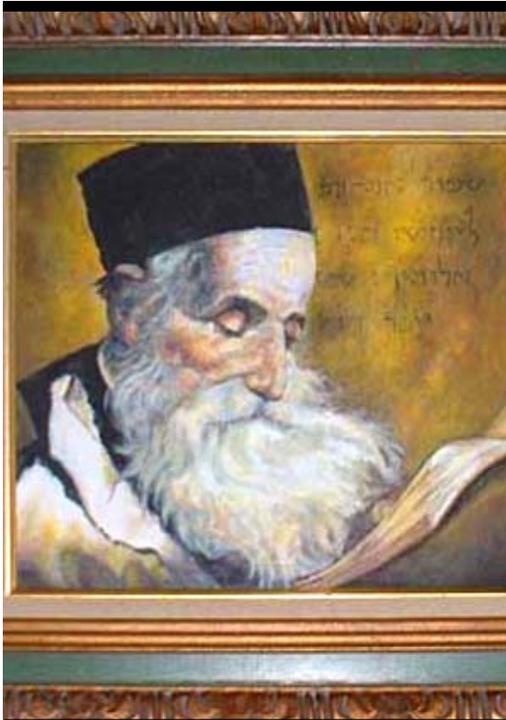
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Pirkei Avos - Ethics

the HOME

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Written by student



Chapter 1, Mishna 4: “Yose the son of Yoezer, the man of Tzeraida said: Your house should be a place of gathering for wise men, follow in the dust of their feet, and drink with thirst their words.”

We previously noted the comment of Rashi that the goal here is to make the home a place of learning. We then asked what the value of this is: why not just go the ‘beis medrash’, a place of learning?

To understand the lesson of the mishna, we need only reflect on what the ‘home’ represents to a person. When people finish their day at work, they come home and want to relax so that the home becomes a place of leisure. The house thus becomes a place of security and comfort. The idea presented here is that one’s leisure should be observing how wise men partake of their activity, which is the study of Torah, being involved in knowledge of God.

Our mishna is really touching upon a more general question: how could one who finds value and comfort in the material world become attached to the world of knowledge and ideas? The mishna directs us to what one must do first: he must remove attachments to other activities that he views as essential, such as entertainment. As long as he does those things for their own sake, then they become the purpose of his existence. In its place, a person must have Torah. However, since, at the outset, one doesn’t appreciate the beauty of Torah itself, he must make his house a place for the wise man to gather so that in this manner, Torah becomes the essence of his life. In this way he may recognize the importance of Torah, though he still doesn’t have the knowledge of Torah itself yet.

After this, the mishna follows with the next step: “be in the dust of their feet”. This reflects the need to attach oneself to the wise men. In such a manner, he sees them as a great people, depletes his own ego, and feels worthless so that his only point is to serve them. Rashi on this statement comments in this vein: the purpose is to serve them, teaching that the highest recognition possible is seen in such activities where the ego is depleted. Through attaching oneself to these people, he will eventually see the ideas and their ultimate value.

This approach can also be seen in the commentary of the Rabbeinu Yonah on our

mishna. Commenting on the last phrase of the mishna, he quotes the verse from Proverbs (Chapter 27, Verse 7): “A satisfied body will despise honey, but a hungry body will find even bitter things sweet.” He explains that this verse is a parable which teaches that while for one, who is “full” from Torah so that he doesn’t desire anymore of it, he’ll despise even pearls of Torah; while for another who desires Torah, even if he hears something without understanding the reason, he’ll enjoy it because he knows it is true since his teacher said it. The man being spoken of in our mishna, according to the Rabbeinu Yonah, is clearly not someone who, on his own, can discern abstract truth and false. At this point, his recognition of truth comes through the wise men. The next step, though, must come naturally, where the individual comes to appreciate the ideas themselves.

Chapter 1, Mishna 5: “Yose the son of Yochanon the man of Jerusalem said: Your house should be open wide (for guests), you should have poor people in your home, and do not engage in lengthy talk with women. This is said with regards to one’s own wife, certainly with another man’s wife.”

Our mishna begins with the advice of having one’s home open to guests. Rashi explains that open wide means that its open all four sides for travelers to enter. He quotes the Talmudic statement with regards to Yoav, the general of King David: the verse says that he was buried in his house in the desert. The Talmud asks: was his house in the desert? Rather it means that his house was like a desert in that it was open in all four directions. Yoav himself says “Did I eat my bread alone?” implying that he constantly hosted other people in his home. Similar statements are made about how our forefather Avraham also had his house open in all four directions. The obvious question arises: why is this so valuable? Specifically, what is this distinct characteristic of having one’s home open in all directions? Isn’t it enough for one to just host other people? To be continued. ■

Letters



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from our

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Never Lost It

Reader: Hello, I have a question concerning original Hebrew texts. Were many of the Old Testament writings destroyed and were re-written at a later time? If so, then how authentic, in context, were the revised writings? I came across some information (Islamic) on the web called Muhammed.net and wanted to verify the validity of the information presented. Under introductory articles there is a link on the side bar "Muhammed in the Bible." There the information can be read. I was curious and I am not a Hebrew scholar so I came to you. Thank you for your reply.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: For two reasons, there is no question as to the validity of our current-day Hebrew Bibles (Torahs): 1) there was never a time when there were no Torahs, so there was never a loss of what Moses gave us; 2) each Torah was copied from another by law (Tal. Megilla, chap. II; Maimonides' Laws of Tefillin 1:12).

Thus, today we possess the identical Torah (Bible) that Moses gave the first generation of Jews at Sinai, since there was; 1) never a breach in transmission, and 2) each reproduced Torah was written by copying another Torah, letter-for-letter. ■

Rabbinic Idolatry

Reader: I am considering posting a response to an article regarding a Rabbi's visit to a gravesite of the Ari. It is pretty simple and I do not think offensive...but I just wanted a second opinion as to whether it could contain anything offensive or incorrect. You can view the article here: http://www.aish.com/spirituality/odysseys/Peering_Through_the_Rainbow.asp

EXCERPT: "Not often do we find beings of flesh and bone who understood the languages of animals, conversed with (and even heard) angels, comprehended the most unfathomed secrets of the formation of the Universe and could accurately trace where many souls were reincarnated from. Heavy descriptions, to say the least. Now, frankly, I'm not one of those who easily connects with the dead -- no matter how saintly they may have been. I'm a "people person" as in the alive kind. Give me someone who is vertical. Let me see his essence. Let me hear his wisdom and compassion. Let me touch his soul. That's when I feel. But standing alone, at this hallowed station, I closed my eyes and imagined that I could actually speak to this guardian spirit of yesteryear. Perhaps he could somehow beseech the Above in ways that we mortals are lacking."

And my response would be: "I wonder what it would be like if we knew the location of the burial site of Moshe Our Teacher; May He Rest in Peace. As a Noachide, the rainbow reminds me to appreciate how Hashem has blessed me... my family. Hashem, Who is in control regardless of our perception. Who hears me wherever I am. Who is fully capable and more than deserving to receive our focus. Baruch Hashem... may Moshiach arrive soon!"

I am pretty confident that there is nothing offensive or in error with this post...but I thought I'd get your advice. My intent is that a reader should recognize the faulty thinking of praying at gravesites and trying to connect with the dead (may they rest in peace) or to G-d through the dead...which then brings one's focus more to the dead, than to Hashem, even though they think they are focusing on G-d. I do not want to do it in an offensive manor or in a way that has a negative effect on someone. Maybe I shouldn't post anything at all?

Shalom,

James

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: James, all is well, thank you. I agree fully with your "intent" as you wrote it, so why not write that "intent"...in place of what you said you wish to submit? Say your words quite clearly: Moses' grave was hidden for the very reason that God should retain our focus, not man, not even Moses. We should not err that while graveside, God will hear us any better. The Torah denies this in this week's Parsha Yisro (Exod. 20:21), "In every place that you mention My name, I will come to you and bless you." Thus, God hears us equally well from any location. Certainly, connecting with this dead person as this Rabbi desired, seeking that the deceased Ari plead our case before God, is a severe Torah violation found in Deuteronomy 18:10-12:

"There shall not be found among you someone passing his son or daughter through fire, or an enchanter, astrologer, one who reads omens, a sorcerer. An animal charmer, one who inquires of Ove or Yedoni, or one who consults the dead. For it is an abomination to God, anyone who does these things, and on account of these abominations, God your God, will drive you out from before Him."

You must not compromise on God's words, fearing they might be too harsh for man. Write your letter with firmness, as you have God's words on

(continued on next page)

(Letters continued from page 7)

Letters

your side. God Himself did not withhold this criticism of consulting with the dead, and God referred to such idolatrous practices as “abominations”, for which God punishes us severely, “driving us out from before Him”.

This Rabbi’s article is a crime for many reasons: 1) Rabbis should be teaching Torah, not idolatry; 2) a popular Torah website endorsed this Rabbi’s imaginations; and 3) Jews learn to follow idolatry since it is peddled in emotionally pleasing stories claiming Divine Providence, when in fact, God despises such writings and values, calling them “abominations”.

As regards the claim this Rabbi made that the Ari “understood animal language”...here too this Rabbi followed his imagination, and not reality. And if one might ask, “Didn’t King Solomon talk to the animals?”, our response is, as is always, “What did the Torah say?”

If we review the Torah in connection with this claim regarding King Solomon, it states, “and he spoke ‘on’ the animals and ‘on’ the birds, and ‘on’ the creeping things and ‘on’ the fish”. (Kings I, 5:13) This does not mean King Solomon conversed “with” animals, but that he spoke “about” or “on” the animals. King Solomon spoke about their greatness and their benefits to man; why the animal species is Kosher via two signs, whereas birds are Kosher with just one. (ibid, Rashi, Radak) This verse intends to display the great wisdom God granted this king.

Ignorance causes one to read this verse as man having dialogue with animals, where God said otherwise. Had animals the faculty of speech, this means that they too possess intellect, as speech is impossible without intellect. And this denies God’s words in Genesis when He granted man alone the intellect, the Tzelem Elokim. (Gen. 1:27) Furthermore, as King Solomon – and not the Ari – was granted special intelligence by God, which surpassed all others, (Kings I, 5:9-11) and yet he did understand animals as possessing language, certainly the Ari and others could not make such a claim. But again, this is all predicated on the error that animals might possess speech, which is impossible.

It is quite a shame that our Torah teachers are oblivious to that, over which they claim mastery, causing ignorant Jews to submit to idolatry, and deny God’s clearly written words.

James, I encourage you to continue defending truth, and that others should follow your lead. “Lo tagure memenu”, “Do not fear him”(Deut. 18:22) is stated regarding a false prophet: if proven false, you shall not fear him. Certainly we must not fear everyday men who prove themselves false with such foolish desires of consulting the dead, and man understanding “languages” of animals: things that cannot speak. ■

Torah vs. Zohar III

Shalom. I very much love your website. Today I downloaded your current newsletter, which speaks of the 100 daily blessings on the front page. On page 7 there is a response to a woman asking for an explanation of the differences of transmission between the Talmud and the Zohar. The response says that the difference is that the Talmud is not disputed and there is a known link; the names of heads of the Sanhedrin going all the way back to mosses who had the oral transmission...as opposed to the Zohar which is both disputed concerning who wrote or compiled it, or completely rejected, and no known link of named rabbis going back to Moses is known. I liked your answer, although one could claim that there are Jews who reject(ed) the Talmud and Mishneh, and the Oral Law before it was compiled...and that there are people who disagree with who is in the list of rabbis which Rambam listed...which could be said to cast doubt on the reliability of the chain -- though I personally don’t believe this casts doubt...because all opinions who accept the chain of rabbis going back to Moses agree that all of these people received the mesora.

THE MAIN THING I WANTED TO POINT OUT, however, is: Rambam does not consider the Talmud itself to be Oral Law...but rather that it contains the Oral Law and the dispute between the rabbis over how the law is learned or implied in/from the Torah, etc. Oral Law is learned from the Talmud, but not everything in the Talmud is Oral Law. Not everything in the Talmud was passed down orally from Moses to Rebenu haQadosh.

If I remember correctly, there is a place In Moreh haNevukheem Rambam states blatantly that the sages were flat out wrong on certain medical advice which they recorded in the Talmud...and he did not equate their medical advice with halakhah or Oral Law. Also, if one learns Hilkhoh Sanhedrin or Hilkhoh Mamreem, we learn that the Sanhedrin makes taqanot, gezerot, and authorizes certain minhagim as officially binding on Israel. If all of the Oral Law were passed down from Moses unchanged, then this nullifies the very meaning and existence of taqanot, etc. And none of these decrees from the Sanhedrin would ever be able to be nullified on any condition. But halakhah states that on certain conditions certain types of rulings can be nullified. The restrictions of a ba’al qeree from praying or learning Torah are just one example of a nullified decree. No telling how many have been nullified in the past, which were not recorded for whatever reason. Additionally, in his introduction to the Mishneh and in the Mishneh Torah, Rambam specifically states that included in taqanot, gezerot, and official minhagim are things

which the Sanhedrin did NOT learn out of the Torah using the 13 principles of interpretation.

Rambam is not alone in this understanding. Shmuel haNagid says that the agadot in the Talmud contain teachings or understandings of things according to the opinion of individual rabbis which they originated from their own minds - not from an oral tradition going back to Moses.

When Rambam and others say that the men of the Sanhedrin passed down Oral Law, he did not mean to imply that they all knew the entire Talmud by heart/memory... as many orthodox Jews seem to assume. This was, in fact, so hard for me to believe that it was a major reason why I did not accept Oral Law, until I learned ON MY OWN that this is not what the sages of the Talmud claimed to have done, nor what the Rishonim teach. Unfortunately no rabbi or any other living Jew who I met in person every explained this to me. I believe that this is one of the major reasons for many people rejecting the Talmud - they are given a misunderstanding what it is from people who do “accept” it but don’t know what it is themselves.

Also, Rambam writes in the Mishneh Torah that the ORAL LAW WAS WRITTEN DOWN before the compilation of the Sanhedrin. The difference is that it was never officially written for the public to learn from in a organized form. Before the Mishna was written the members of the Sanhedrin would take notes on the teachings and rulings they heard, learned, or gave. When compiling the Mishneh, Rabenu haQadosh compiled this notes from many yeshivot and rabbis and used them in the compiling of the Mishna. It is not as though he sat down and just wrote it all down from memory. When people know this it makes the Talmudic tradition much more believable, and in my opinion, even more so reliable than the Zohar. Rambam states in Moreh haNevukhim that the meanings/teachings of Ma’aseh Merkuva and Ma’aseh Bresheet [authentic “mysticism”] were NEVER written down at all -- and they weren’t allowed to be according to the halakhot concerning them, unlike normal halakhic Oral Law. In Rambam’s introduction to the Mishna he writes that there are only 30 ACTUAL Oral Laws which are real literal halakhah l’Moshe m’Sinai.

I am not disagreeing with the point of the article. I simply think that there are much stronger evidences of distinction between the reliability of Talmudic Oral Law and the reliability of modern day “Kaballa” that could be given. I also do not know whether you already know these things and have some logical reason for why you did not use this evidence. If so, I am curious to know why, b/c for me it would make a big difference.

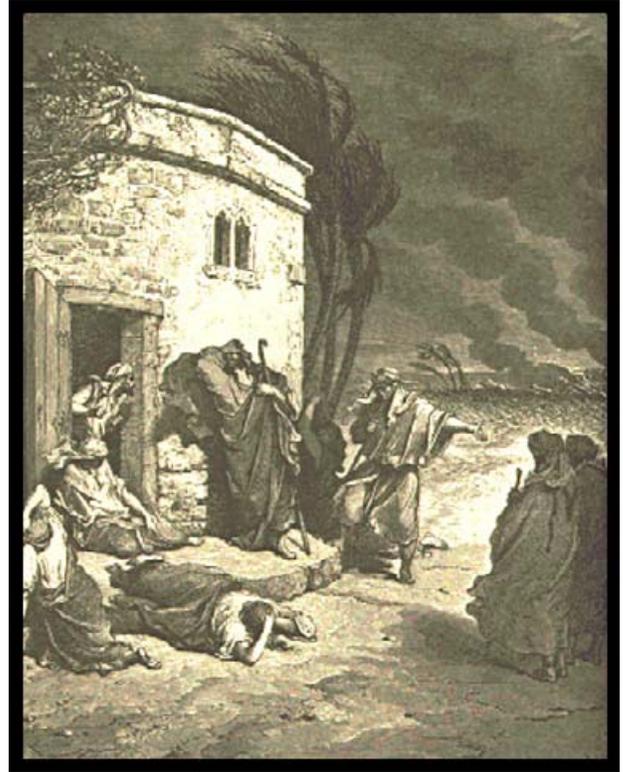
Your website is much appreciated.

All the best, Yosef ■

the Book of Job

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Transcribed by students



CHAPTER I

In his "Guide" discussing the book of Job, Maimonides describes the different levels of men who can withstand certain pains, but cannot stand others. He concludes that nobody can withstand the pain that is within his own person: "the person will murmur against God either with his heart or with his tongue." There are two possibilities for man's troubles: 1) God is ignorant of the person in pain; or 2) God is aware, but does nothing about it. It is this second view, which causes many to rebel against God. However, it is striking how the person in pain never murmured against God, while other people were in pain. This unveils the small-mindedness of this person. The complaint is due to an emotionally subjective view of reality, and not based on one seeking justice.

We ask, "Why has this person in pain never recognized injustice in the world, until it happened to him?" However, this is not the theme of the Job. The book of Job focuses on what happens 'after' the pain strikes: how does man deal with it? Job was not someone who ran away from God. Even while he possessed all his wealth, he served God perfectly. After every feast, he offered God sacrifices. He never allowed his success to run away with him, or delude him with feelings of security. He placed his security in God. Most successful people act otherwise.

We must question if, as the verses imply, it was just for God to take away all that Job had, in order to discern if Job would remain faithful to God. Did Job deserve these tragedies?

We cannot suggest that these things that God took were for Job's good. For the only reason the physical is taken away from someone, is because he is not using it as a means towards perfection. But if someone is leading the proper path, then, the more physical he possesses, the more perfected he can become. In fact, we read that Job made good use of what he had (sacrifices). On this point, the Rabbis teach, "For every fruit that a person passes without benefiting, he will be judged."

We also cannot suggest that God punished Job so mankind will behave for the correct reasons. An illustration of this impropriety is a teacher who occasionally hits a good child, in order that the other children will behave for the right reasons. The other children should behave because it is the right thing to do, and not to avoid pain. This would not be justice: the good student is not receiving what he deserved. Thus, Job too could not be punished to scare humanity towards a better path, for this would be an injustice to Job. God does not operate except with perfect justice.

Additionally, to maintain that the book of Job is to

teach of a man who possessed certain evil traits, and that punishments came to remove those evils, is an untenable position. This theory is already known, and a separate book of Job would be redundant. Conversely, the verses tell us that Job was perfected, "Ish Tam v'yashar v'yera' elokim", "A perfect man, and upright, and God fearing." Thus, Job had no sins, for which he required punishments.

We must discount Job's situation as a test of any sort, for God to "learn" how Job might function in certain situations, for this imputes ignorance of God, the omniscient. Therefore, since Job's evils could not afford God any new knowledge, God must have delivered these tragedies to Job, for Job. This implies that Job must have possessed some imperfection if this trial is to help him. For one is only helped in as far as he needs help. But this would mean that Job has not truly reached perfection, contradicting the verses! So what does the verse mean by "tam v'yashar", "perfect and upright"? A possibility was offered: trials are those uncomfortable situations, in which God perfects man through the situation itself. However, this reasoning is wrong. Judaism maintains that man perfects himself in only one way: attainment of knowledge. The only time man is in pain so as to help himself, is when he must uproot a poor character trait, as Maimonides teaches, we must go to the other

(continued on next page)

Job

extreme, and this carries some temporal, emotional stress. But after this trait is neutralized, any further pain will only serve to keep man away from the best state of mind for perfection. Pain cannot contribute to man's perfection. Additionally, Job was "perfect." There were no character traits, for which he required perfection.

If Job required no correction, perhaps his pain is a good, in that it conditioned him to handle pain for the rest of his life. Perhaps this is why God troubled Job. In order to answer this suggestion, we must know how the pain is perfecting him. Pain straddles two parts of man: 1) physiological - the scream after being inflicted with a wound, and 2) psychological - the fact that he feels he cannot go on with life due to the physiological aspects of the pain. In regards to physiological aspects, the scream is unavoidable. This is the inevitable, emotional reaction to a sense perception. The human condition demands this must occur. So if one maintains that the endurance of pain is perfecting, it must be limited to the psychological sphere. Wherein lies this perfection? If we suggest that perfection is in the 'acceptance' of this state, why is that any different than the acceptance of any other reality? The truth is that it is not any different. Therefore, when we talk about accepting pain, we are really talking about 'accepting reality'.

What is it that allows a person to accept reality? It is knowledge of the causes that were responsible in bringing about that reality. What follows is that if knowledge is the factor that allows one to accept reality, endurance of the reality should not play any role. It does not seem to help at all. It is the knowledge of this specific reality that makes it easier for man to accept it. Therefore, we cannot be of the opinion that Job was given pain to prepare him for future pains. If God wished to teach Job how to better accept pain, he would have given him knowledge, and not pain. However, one may yet maintain that pain may help a person obtain knowledge of the causes of reality. But of course, this theory is baseless, as physical pain is unrelated to the attainment of knowledge.

The last possibility is that the endurance of a great pain prepares one for a smaller one. Why would one think this way? The reason is that as long as a person can remember his tragedies, anything less seems like pleasure. If, for example, someone would experience a great pain on January 1st and then a lesser pain on January 2nd, he would think the lesser pain was not (as) painful: his current grief over his previous day's troubles obscures the lesser pain today. But if the lesser pain arrived at December 31st, the person would definitely view it as painful, since the past year was free of pain. By comparison, the pain received on December 31st, a full year later, registers as a real, acute pain. Therefore, this theory of "training" a person in greater pains so lesser pains are tolerable by comparison, does not achieve its objective, and is not a satisfactory explanation. ■

Education

Crisis in Education

*An Open Dialogue
with the
Modern Orthodox
Community*

← Curriculum →

Rabbi Pinchas Rosenthal, Dean
Torah Academy of Long Island

Over the last few years there has been extensive coverage of an upsurge in observance. Increasingly sophisticated efforts at kiruv have resulted in large numbers of returnees – ba'alei teshuva – rediscovering the beauty and depth of an observant lifestyle. An important concomitant of this revitalization of Orthodoxy is that we now have more Jewish schools serving more Jewish children than ever before. Since education is viewed as both an indication of the health of the community and a guarantor of its continued health in the future, it appears that American Orthodoxy is on the move. Confident of success and secure in its underpinnings the Orthodox world seems poised for a bright future of unprecedented growth.

Unfortunately, this security may be a bit misplaced. To paraphrase Paul Harvey, here is "the rest of the story."

In her groundbreaking work, *Off the Derech*,

Faranak Margoles describes a counter-trend in Jewish life, one which is not receiving the same amount of attention – observant Jews leaving their Orthodoxy behind. Some of these are ba'alei teshuva, tiring of their newfound lifestyle; some are from families that have been observant all along.

Over the years I have often seen these problems emerging in young people from "good" families, families that are themselves committed to observance that have sacrificed to send their children to Jewish day schools. These students share many commonly seen characteristics – uninspired mechanical davening, sloppy mitzvah observance, fascination with the entertainments and fads of the non-Jewish world, and a general lack of pride in Jewish identity. In many cases these young people lead a schizophrenic existence – outwardly observant while in school and with their parents, but significantly less so on the weekends with their friends. The parents of these children cannot understand the reasons for their children's lack of interest in Judaism. They ask a question that should concern all of us: how is it that a strong Jewish education has failed to inspire their children? Are they wrong to feel that Jewish education that claims to play such a central role in keeping Jews "on the derech" must also be held accountable for failing to meet the needs of their children who abandon Torah observance?

Margolese hints at some of the reasons for this in her second chapter. The essential model of Torah education employed in contemporary yeshivas and day schools originated in the European ghetto and was only designed for the small percentage of elite students who actually attended yeshiva. Furthermore, the ghetto was intellectually and physically closed to outside influences. The Torah curriculum, the only curriculum of the ghetto, was designed for a student who would never stray beyond the shtetl walls, never be challenged by the lures of a secular society, and never find his or her intellectual underpinnings tested.

Is it any wonder that so many young people seem so uninspired by their years of yeshiva learning? In accordance with the requirements of their yeshivot, these students may have "learned" many blatt of Gemara, or memorized many pasukim of Chumash with Rashi. But their souls have not been touched. And when, after high school graduation these same young people enter college, their commitment to Jewish ideals, their attachment to an authentic Jewish lifestyle, and the depth of their understanding of core Jewish concepts is sorely lacking. Is it any wonder that they

(continued on next page)

(Crisis continued from page 10)

Education

cannot find relevance in a curriculum developed for another world, a world so foreign to their experience? What we should expect is indeed what we are getting: ever increasing numbers of students whose attachment to Judaism remains sentimental at best, and cynical and rebellious at worst. This situation is intolerable and a recipe for disaster. Ultimately, a community will act on its lack of ahava (love) for Jewish life in the form of assimilation. Similar to New Orleans our current culture is a levy whose hurricane Katrina will inevitably come.

We believe that given the realities of our circumstances, we must recommit ourselves to the core educational objective of relevance. We must acknowledge the fact that such a path requires core change in the fundamental infrastructure of our schools.

This means committing real resources to achieving concrete, measurable progress in the following critical areas:

1) Curriculum - Formulating a vision specifically designed for the modern American student. The principles of this vision must permeate all textual study and imbue it with relevance.

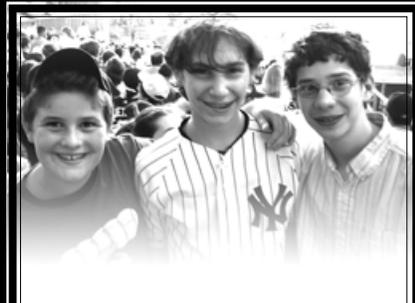
If the child is not shown how the concepts of the text are relevant to his life, the experience is both futile and alienating. These ideas must be articulated in both the Torah and General studies curricula and student life in the school.

2) Intellectual atmosphere - Questions on any topic must be welcomed and responded to without any fear of rejection.

3) Assessment - Clear procedures to determine whether a student is in fact, developing properly through the stages of maturation involved in attaining love for Judaism. Great care must be taken to measure students' skills in the creative application of relevant Torah principles to their lives. A 95 in Gemara is not always a measure of a love of Judaism.

Constraints of space and time do not permit for a full discussion of the issue and its possible solutions in this article. But at least, we have begun to honestly frame the problem. We cannot close our eyes to the magnitude of this situation, and the responsibility that we all share in revitalizing the Jewish educational system. I invite all interested community members to begin this dialog. As Pirkei Avos says, "You are not required to complete the task, yet you are not free to withdraw from it." ■

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