

For whom do we pray?
Does God need our prayers?
Should we pray for the sick?



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Weekly Parsha

Vayishlach

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And Rachel died, and was buried on the way to Ephrat – this is Betlechem. And Yaakov set up a pillar upon her grave; the same is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day.” (Bereshit 35:19:20)

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תפילה Prayer

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

The preamble to prayer is “know before whom you stand.” If one’s ideas concerning the One he is praying to are corrupt his prayers must be equally corrupt. I think it should be made clear that one of the cardinal principles of our faith is that the Creator lacks nothing, needs nothing, and obtains nothing from his creatures. God gains nothing from our worship of Him. We recite this in our prayer of Neila on Yom Kippur “And even if he (man) is righteous what [benefit] does he give you?” This is based on a verse in Job (35:7). Nachmanides expands on this topic in Deuteronomy (22:6) and states, “our words [of praise] and remembrances of his wonders are considered as nothingness and emptiness to Him”. He states unequivocally that all the mitzvos we do are only for our own benefit and give no benefit whatsoever to the Creator, “This is something that is agreed upon by all our Rabbis.”

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(Vayishlach cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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These passages describe the passing of Rachel. Yaakov returns to Canaan. During the journey, Rachel gives birth to Binyamin. Rachel dies in the process of childbirth and is buried in Betlechem. Yaakov erects a monument on her grave. This is the first and only instance in the Torah in which a monument is erected on the burial-site of a person. This practice – the erecting of a monument on the site of Rachel's grave – seems to contradict a teaching of the Talmud. The Talmud teaches that it is not appropriate to erect a monument on the gravesite of a righteous person. The Talmud explains the reason for this prohibition. It comments that a righteous person should be remembered by his or her actions.[1] In his discussion of the laws of mourning, Maimonides rules that this teaching is the law and that it is not appropriate to erect a monument on the gravesite of the righteous.[2]

Obviously, this teaching seems to be contradicted by Yaakov's actions. Rachel was a righteous person. Yet, Yaakov erected a monument at her gravesite. It is also difficult to reconcile the Talmud's teaching with normative practice. Throughout the generations, it has been the practice of the Jewish people to erect monuments on the gravesites of our departed. We do not differentiate between the righteous and the more common people. How can we reconcile Yaakov's actions and normative practice with the teaching of the Talmud?

Before attempting to answer these questions, it is important to carefully consider the prohibition outlined in the Talmud. This seems to be a strange prohibition. The explanation offered by the Talmud does not seem very helpful. We would imagine that the tzadik – the righteous person – more than anyone deserves the honor

of a monument. Yet, the Talmud seems to indicate that the very deeds that distinguish the tzadik are the reason for not erecting a monument in the person's honor. Should we not acknowledge these deeds through the creation of a monument?

Etz Yosef explains that the purpose of a monument is not to glorify the departed. Instead, it is designed to assure that the memory of the departed will not be

forgotten.[3] This is a fundamental distinction. If monuments were intended by the Torah as a glorification of the departed, then the Talmud's prohibition would be difficult to understand. More than anyone, the tzadik deserves to be glorified. However, as Etz Yosef explains, the purpose of the monument is to assure that the departed will not be forgotten. The righteous are to be remembered for their deeds and the guidance that they provided. They should require no other monument. The creation of a monument for the tzadik is a dishonor! The creation of the monument implicitly communicates that the deeds and the guidance provided by the tzadik are inadequate to assure that the person will be remembered. This means that either we are questioning the actual righteousness of

the departed, or that we are implying that we are incapable of recognizing the significance of true righteousness. In other words, the erection of a monument at the gravesite of a righteous person implies a depreciatory assessment of either the righteousness of the departed or of our own values.

Etz Yosef's comments also answer another troublesome problem. As noted in his laws of mourning, Maimonides rules according to the teaching of the Talmud. However, in his discussion of the laws regarding spiritual purity



(continued on next page)

and defilement, Maimonides seems to contradict this ruling. There, he rules that all gravesites must be marked.[4] In this ruling, Maimonides makes no distinction between the gravesite of a tzadik or another person. All must be marked.

However, Etz Yosef's comments resolve this apparent contradiction. Maimonides is identifying two different considerations that dictate that a gravesite should be marked. In his discussion of the laws of purity, Maimonides is concerned with protecting people from unintentionally associating with a source of impurity and becoming defiled. The body of a departed person is a potential source of impurity. In regards to the transmission of impurity, it makes no difference whether the departed was righteous or not. In any case, once departed, the body will potentially impart defilement. Therefore, in this context, Maimonides rules that every grave – even the grave of a righteous person – must be marked and identified. This is a precaution against the inadvertent transmission of impurity.

In his discussion of the laws of mourning, Maimonides is dealing with a different consideration. Maimonides begins the chapter by explaining that he will discuss the practices of the Jewish people in the preparation for burial and the burial of the departed.[5] These practices reflect our obligation to treat the departed with respect. In this context, the erection of a monument is an expression of respect. As Etz Yosef suggests, our objective is to assure that the memory of the departed is not lost. It is in this context that Maimonides rules that it is not appropriate to erect a monument at the gravesite of the righteous. Such a monument would not be an indication of respect. It would be a depreciation of the significance of the tzadik's deeds and counsel.

Gesher HaChayim explains that these two concerns require different responses. In order to assure that defilement is not transmitted, it is only necessary to mark the gravesite. Concern over preventing inadvertent defilement does not require the erection of a monument. Any effective marker is adequate. However, the requirement to demonstrate respect for the departed demands the erection of a more substantial monument. [6] It follows that according to Maimonides; the gravesite of a tzadik must be marked. However, a substantial monument is not appropriate.

Although Etz Yosef's comments are useful in understanding the Talmud's ruling and resolving the apparent contradiction in Maimonides' rulings, they do not provide much assistance in resolving the original questions. Why did Yaakov erect a monument over the gravesite of

Rachel? How can we reconcile the normative practice of creating monuments at the gravesites of the righteous with the ruling of the Talmud and Maimonides?

In order to answer these questions, it is helpful to consider another comment of our Sages. Moshe sent spies from the wilderness to survey the Land of Israel. These spies decided that they would alert Bnai Yisrael to the difficulties the nation would face in its efforts to conquer the land. They were even willing to portray the land in a negative manner in order to discourage the nation from embarking on the dangerous task of conquest. Kalev was among these spies. He disagreed with the assessment of the other spies and did not wish to participate in their conspiracy. However, he was not sure that he had the determination to stand against them. Kalev traveled to Chevron – to the burial-site of the forefathers. There, he prayed for Hashem's help in facing this challenge.[7] It is not surprising that Kalev – faced with this challenge – made a pilgrimage to the burial-site of the forefathers. Kalev was confronted with the challenge of opposing his peers and standing alone against their overwhelming influence. Whose lives could provide greater inspiration than those of the forefathers? The forefathers introduced a radically new concept of G-d to humanity. They stood alone against the religious doctrines of their times. Their examples were a compelling inspiration to Kalev.

Kalev's behavior indicates an additional reason for marking the graves of the righteous. The lives of the righteous are a source of inspiration. In times of personal trouble, we can draw from this inspiration and this inspiration, hopefully, will infuse our prayers for Hashem's assistance in dealing with our own challenges. Based on this consideration, there is a reason to mark the gravesites of the righteous.

This explains our practice of placing monuments on the gravesites of the righteous. We do not do this as an expression of respect. As the Talmud and Maimonides rule, such monuments would not communicate respect. However, we erect monuments at the burial-sites of the righteous for our own benefit. We mark these graves so that we can visit them and draw inspiration from these unique individuals.

Gesher HaChayim confirms this thesis. He explains that there are three considerations that dictate the marking of graves or the erection of monuments. In addition to the two noted above – prevention of inadvertent defilement and as an expression of respect – he identifies

a third consideration. We also mark the grave so that we can return to the site and pray there. He further suggests that the Talmud and Maimonides only intend to prohibit the creation of an imposing monument at the burial-site of a tzadik. However, a basic monument designed to mark the location as the burial-site of a tzadik is completely appropriate. This basic marker makes it possible for us to return to the site and inspire our prayers.[8]

The midrash seems to indicate that this was the consideration that motivated Yaakov to erect a monument at the burial-site of Rachel. The midrash discusses our question. Why did Yaakov erect a monument at the gravesite of Rachel? Rachel was a righteous person. A monument would not seem appropriate. Among the responses is one that indicates that Yaakov intended to provide a source of future inspiration. The midrash explains that Yaakov foresaw, through prophecy, that his descendants were destined to be exiled from the Land of Israel. He foresaw that as they left their land, they would pass the monument he had erected at Rachel's grave. The midrash describes Rachel praying to Hashem. She implores Hashem to act with mercy towards her children – Bnai Yisrael. This midrash requires careful study. But, the comments of Etz Yosef provide an important insight. He explains that Yaakov's intention was to mark Rachel's gravesite as a place of prayer. He hoped that his exiled descendants would be able to return to this site at the border of the Land of Israel and prayer there for Hashem's mercy.[9] ■

[1] Talmud Yerushalmi, Mesechet Shekalim 2:5.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Avel 4:4.

[3] Etz Chaim, Commentary on Midrash Rabba 82:10.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Tumat Met 8:9.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Avel 4:1.

[6] Rav Yeschiel Michal Toktsinski, Gesher HaChayim, 28:1.

[7] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 13:22.

[8] Rav Yeschiel Michal Toktsinski, Gesher HaChayim, 28:1.

[9] Etz Chaim, Commentary on Midrash Rabba 82:10.

Perfection

תפילה Prayer

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Similarly Maimonides in his Guide states clearly that no change or emotion can be predicated of God (Guide book 1, chap.55). He further states that the gravest of sins is to have a wrong opinion of God (ibid. chap.36). One must never think that they, through their prayers, can produce some kind of affect in the Creator of the Universe. Such an idea is not only absurd it is blasphemous. He who believes such an idea would, in the words of the Rambam, “unconsciously at least incur the guilt of profanity and blasphemy.”

Rambam states in the Yad, Laws Concerning the Fundamentals of our Faith, Ch.1 Law 11, “and He does not change, for there is nothing that can cause change in Him. There does not exist in Him... anger or laughter, happiness or sadness...” It is patently clear from the Rambam and Ramban that we cannot say of the Creator that He is at one time sad, at another happy, at one time lonely, at another fulfilled. He, being perfect, does not change - ever. We cannot affect Him or change Him no matter what we do, whether we are righteous or evil, whether we pray or do not pray, whether we give charity or do not give charity, whether we repent or do not repent.

Two questions immediately come to mind: (1) If this is so, how can we pray to G-d and expect Him to change our destiny for the better, as Moses did when he prayed to G-d to forgive the Jews for the sin of the golden calf? (2) How do we understand certain verses in the prophets and certain statements from our Sages which seem to indicate the contrary? Before explaining the answers to the above questions I would like to state something very fundamental. When our Rishonim (early commentaries) teach us a principle of our faith we do not say that they did not know a particular statement of our Sages or verse of the Torah, but that they understood it

differently than it appears to us at first sight. We say that they had the correct understanding of these statements and verses and that we are deficient in our own understanding of them. We do not derive our own principles from these statements or verses and reject the ideas of our Rishonim. This is what is known as “emunat chachomim,” faith in our Torah scholars. If we abandon the above principle, we are destined to fail. One may ask as follows: “if G-d does not need our prayers, see the Gemara Yoma 38a which states, ‘everything which G-d created was only for His own honor and purpose (Proverbs 16:4).’” If one would hear of someone who had children for the sole purpose of having them praise him when they reached the age of four, what would one think of such a person? Would one not think he is doubly imperfect, because he is overcome by his desire and need for prayer, and because he is moved by the praise of a four year old? How can we ascribe to G-d, Heaven forbid, such imperfection?

Let us take the statement of our Sages “why did G-d make our Patriarchs and Matriarchs childless? Because G-d desires the prayers of the righteous (Yevamos 64a)”. What would we think of someone who tormented another person so that they turn to him for help? Would we not regard him as self-seeking and even vicious? How then can we ascribe such an imperfection, Heaven forbid, to the Creator? Is it not obvious that these words of our Sages are not to be taken literally, but that they are metaphors that contain a hidden idea, a deeper meaning which we must search for?

It is for this reason the author of the Siddur Avodas Halev, states in his introduction, “the agadic statements according to their outward appearances without understanding their deep meaning are prone to cause the blind to go astray on the way and to lead them to darkness and not light (Otzar Hatefillos p.20)”. In this way he explains Rabbi Joshua Ben Levi’s statement in Masechet Sofrim, “Those who write agadic statements have no place in the world to come.” (It should be understood that this was at a time when we were prohibited to write the Oral Law).

Why do we pray if we cannot change G-d or exercise any influence over Him? The answer is that the change that takes place through tefillah is not in G-d, but in ourselves. It is the same changeless G-d who treats the wicked one way and the righteous another way, the person who repents one way and the one who refuses to repent another way, the one who prays one way and the one who does not pray another way. Rambam

gives an analogy. The same fire makes one thing black, another white, one thing hard, another soft. The change occurs not because the fire is different but because the objects that come in contact with it are different. Prayer changes man in three ways. First, the change that takes place in man when he realizes that he is standing before the Creator of the universe. This comes under the term Amidah from the verse in Genesis 19:27 regarding Abraham’s prayer. The second is the change that takes place in man when he thinks through and organizes his priorities in life. The word Tefillah comes from the word “peelayle” which means to judge, as the above author in the Otzar Hatefillos says, “to clarify the thoughts that occur in the heart in a confused manner”. This is derived from the second term for Tefillah “sichah” from Genesis 24:63 regarding Issac’s prayer. The third change takes place when man, through his free will and creativity, presents before G-d an alternative life style, a change in his or her plans, as Hannah did when she stated to G-d (Samuel 1:11) “If you will... give to your handmaid a man child then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life.” This is derived from the third term for prayer, “pegiah” from Genesis 28:11 regarding Jacob’s prayer. Tefillah is the great medium, which G-d gave to man by means of which he can change himself. He can then establish a new destiny for himself in life and a new relationship with G-d. It is not the Creator that changes. Man does not influence the Creator as a defendant influences a human judge who has emotions and is subject to change. It is man himself who is changed. Once he has changed the same immutable Creator relates to him in a different way.

Anyone who thinks that through his prayer he effectuates a change in G-d denies the third principle of our faith, which we recite every day, that G-d is not physical and does not have any physical attributes. This means He is in no way to be equated with any of His creation whether inanimate or animate. The idea that man can cause a change in the Creator is an attempt to project onto G-d human qualities. This is strictly forbidden. As Maimonides quotes in the third principle of faith, “And to whom can you liken Me sayeth the Holy One (Isaiah 40:18,25)”. Far be it from G-d to be like His creatures who because of their imperfection are subject to change for better or for worse. Rambam makes it clear that all statements in the Torah that imply otherwise are metaphors used by the Torah to teach us some idea and are not to be taken literally (Yad ibid Law 12).

Now let us examine one of the statements of our Sages. “Why were our Patriarchs and Matriarchs

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childless? Because G-d desires the prayers of the righteous (Yevamos 64a).” Let us first examine the last half of this statement, “G-d desires the prayers of the righteous.” Our Sages are teaching that the prayers of the righteous are qualitatively differentiated from the prayers of the ordinary person; that the righteous, because their knowledge of G-d is different and their knowledge of prayer is different, in their act of praying fulfill the potential of man that G-d has given him through prayer. As Rambam says regarding the love of G-d, one’s love of G-d cannot exceed his knowledge of G-d (Laws of Repentance, Ch. 10 Law 6). So too in prayer one’s potential for prayer cannot be realized in excess of his knowledge and perfection. Thus only the righteous truly fulfill G-d’s will concerning prayer. The Rabbis do not mean, Heaven forbid the notion, that G-d, the Creator of the universe, is in want or in a state of loneliness waiting for some kind of satisfaction that he will receive when His creatures praise Him or ask Him for something. How can we think that man could praise G-d in any manner that would be satisfactory to Him, when our teacher Moses, the greatest of our species, was unable to comprehend G-d Himself in any way, even through prophecy, as it is written “because man cannot see Me and live (Exodus 33:20)”, and could understand no more than G-d’s actions? Even the praise of a four year old of the greatest human being would be closer to reality than our praise of G-d since the four year old at least perceives something about the one he is praising. It is thus patently clear as Ramban states, that all our praise are as “nothingness and emptiness to Him.”

The above statement of our Sages was not meant to indicate that G-d is seeking some satisfaction, only that G-d’s will, as expressed in His creation is being fulfilled. Whether His creation is fulfilled or not gives no satisfaction or sadness to Him. Its purpose is to provide man with the opportunity to approach G-d. In giving man free will G-d made it possible for him to fulfill his potential, one of the methods being through the medium of prayer. This is accomplished on the highest level only by the righteous not the ordinary person whose ideas of G-d and prayer are distorted. Our Sages are teaching an important idea, that the ignoramus fails to realize his potential not only in Torah, but in prayer as well.

The first half of this statement of our Sages also teaches us an important concept. Our Sages wonder why our Patriarchs and Matriarchs were childless. Were they not righteous? The answer is that sometimes G-d puts man in a state of want not because he has sinned, but in order that he may have the opportunity to perfect himself. Our Patriarchs and Matriarchs were answered through

their prayers. In addition they achieved thereby a higher degree of perfection. This teaches us the great value of prayer since we usually only think of prayer as a means to obtain something we want and do not realize that the greatest benefit may result from the perfection we receive through the act of praying itself.

Now consider how in Tractate Yevamos, our Sages through the medium of a metaphor explained all this in the few short words, “The Holy One blessed be He, longs to hear the prayer of the righteous”.

I of course cannot expound on every statement of our Sages in this article, nor do I claim to understand every one of their statements. I only wish to stress how important caution is when approaching a statement of our Sages, and how careful we must be not to grasp at the first idea, which comes to our minds, especially where such an idea contradicts the basic premises of our faith.

In closing let me explain what is meant by Isaiah 43:7, “And everyone that is called by my name I have created for my Glory.” The Radak comments: “Israel, who believes in Me, I have created for my Honor, so that they spread My Glory to all the people.” Radak is saying that G-d’s compassion and kindness is not limited to the nation of Israel, but includes all of mankind. It is incumbent upon Israel to be concerned about all of humanity as well as themselves, and to teach all of mankind the true ideas of Torah. This is stated in Isaiah 2:2,3 and elsewhere throughout the Prophets. It is G-d’s will that all of mankind should have the opportunity to live according to the Torah way of life. This is what the verse is teaching, not that G-d, Heaven forbid the notion, is seeking His own glorification through human recognition.

We should understand Proverbs 16:4 mentioned above in a like manner. It is for our benefit that we recognize G-d’s Glory, not for His.

May we live to see the day when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9).

Addendum I

Due to several requests, I submit the following addendum to my article on prayer:

I did not wish to imply that God does not answer prayers. The purpose of my article was to make it clear that the very essence of prayer is the

correct idea of God. “Know before whom you stand,” is the preamble to prayer. If one has an erroneous idea of God all his prayers are worthless. If, for instance, one believes God has emotions and that his prayers are affecting these emotions, he is not praying to God. Since God is one He has no emotions. Also since God is perfect He cannot be affected by man. Thus in the above example, the individual is not praying to God but to a figment of his imagination. The fact that God does not change does not mean He doesn’t listen to or answer our prayers. God has endowed us with the ability and the right to place our requests before Him. When we turn to God it is we who change and thereby warrant that the unchangeable Creator of the universe hear our prayers since He is one who listens to prayer. This may seem like a mere subtlety but it is of the greatest importance since the wrong idea of God totally invalidates our prayers, indeed, even all our mitzvot. As God’s wisdom is not the same as ours we have no way of knowing whether or not He will answer our prayers. Even a person as great as our teacher Moses could not know this. Thus the Talmud says that we should not feel confident that God will answer our prayers. We can only be assured that He listens to our prayers. One should nevertheless turn to God in all his needs. It should be noted that the act of prayer is one of the great mediums through which man rises to a higher level. His fate will thus be changed for the better even if his particular request is not answered. He may indeed reap a far greater reward through prayer itself than he anticipates through the answer to his request.

Addendum II

One may and should pray for another person insofar as one has sincere concern about their well-being. It is nevertheless the prayer of the sick person himself, which is of the greatest value. This is stated in the Torah, Genesis 21:17, “And God listened to the voice of the lad...” Even though Ishmael’s mother Hagar prayed for him, God listened to Ishmael’s prayer over that of his mother’s. Rashi comments: “From here we derive that the prayer of the sick person himself is superior to the prayer of others, and it is prior in terms of being accepted by God.

We must pray for Israel because since Sinai, the fate of each Jew is inextricably bound with that of every other Jew. No Jew can escape this. In praying for Israel, we are ipso facto praying for ourselves. There is a higher level of praying for Israel and concern for Klal Yisroel, but this is only for those few who have been fortunate enough to reach a truly high level of serving God. Nevertheless, we must all aspire to reach that level. ■

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



Charity Clarity

Reader: What constitutes giving of charity? Does giving money to the poor, or to a street person asking for a handout, count? Does giving money to an organization like the Red Cross count?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: The Shulchan Aruch states that giving to other nations is categorized as part of Tzedaka, as a “path of peace”. So you may count that charity as part of your 20%. However, and this applies even to Jews, one must not give to a person who is a sinner, and has not repented. Of course this is difficult to assess, but based on the principle of “Judging your friend favorably”, we must not assume others sin with no reason. Furthermore, as a Rabbi once taught, we are not permitted to turn down any poor person’s request. But we need not give so much, since he or

she asks of all people. Therefore, the obligation to “supply all he or she lacks”, does not fall squarely on any one individual; we may give a beggar 25 cents. But our giving in general is limited to 20% maximum. The only exceptions are multimillionaires, and those on their deathbed – both may disperse more than 20%.

Reader: If one is supposed to give 20%, is some degree of rounding acceptable? For example, if 20% of a paycheck turned out to be \$228.328, should we round to the nearest cent, or can we round to the nearest dollar? I don’t mean to split hairs here; just want to make sure that I do it correctly.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: I would follow Maimonides’ teaching that the mitzvah of Tzedaka, more than all other positive commands, requires the most care. I would round “upwards”, to either a cent or a dollar, as you wish in each case. But make sure not to exceed 20% total on all profits of the year.

Reader: If I receive a settlement in an automobile accident that includes an amount over and above actual damages - an amount designed to make up for loss of time, pain and suffering, etc. - is that amount subject to charity?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: It seems to me that such a settlement is also profit, and would be subject to Tzedaka.

Reader: I work for a large firm. My paycheck is calculated something like this:

Gross pay
 minus federal taxes
 minus Social Security taxes
 minus amount used to purchase company stock
 minus my cost of elective benefits
 minus a state tax
 minus an amount set aside to pay for health care expenses with pre-tax dollars (this is elective)
 minus my elective contribution to a 401(k) retirement plan
 equals net pay.

I have been assuming that the correct amount on which to calculate charity is as follows:

Gross pay
 minus federal taxes
 minus Social Security taxes
 minus state tax
 minus my elective contribution to a 401(k) retirement plan (which I would presume to pay charity on once it is withdrawn)
 equals net pay for the calculation of charity?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Yes, correct. ■

Torahless Torah

Reader: Rabbi: Allow me to commend you on yet another excellent article, the one appearing this week entitled “Why the World was Created.” In the context of the article, twice you raised the issue of our Avot fulfilling the mitzvot. This issue has always caused me some acute disquiet since, as you say in your article:

“God cannot command man to celebrate the Egyptian Exodus, until it occurred. So it is clear that the Torah of 613 commands could not possibly exist in early generations. The Rabbinic commentaries that state “Abraham celebrated Passover” must be understood on a deeper level, since the Exodus did not yet transpire.”

Your observations caused me to ruminate and investigate exactly what the Hachamim meant when they stated the Avot fulfilled the mitzvot and what esoteric message they sought to impart. I flipped back a few parashot and looked at the Akeida Yitzhak. Specifically, just as Abraham was about to plunge the knife into his most beloved son Yitzhak and offer his child up to Hashem as a korban, Hashem prevents this most perplexing of deeds and tells him in Bereshit Chapter 22 verse 12. “Do not lay a hand on the boy”, he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

What does it mean that Hashem only now knows that Abraham fears Hashem? Which Abraham is Hashem referring to? The Abraham who had already passed nine (9) previous tests in which his fealty to God was tested and in each and every circumstance his fidelity to Hashem was proven to be unsurpassed? The Abraham who founded ethical monotheism – an idea that is unsurpassed in its impact in the entire course of world history? The Abraham who is 99 years old and has only shown love and dedication to Hashem since his early age? So given everything that preceded the Akeida, how could it be that only now Hashem knows that Abraham fears God? Moreover, by all accounts this fear of God is apparently the apotheosis of knowledge and love of God since God required no further tests of Abraham. What exactly is this fear of God that we should aspire to?

If one turns to Devarim 10:12 I think we may find the answer. There, Moshe tells us: “And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God.” What is it that Moshe is asking Israel in asking that they “fear the Lord our God.” What does that entail? How does one fear God? Simply continue on with the verse and the answer unveils itself - “to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with

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all your heart and with all your soul.” And that was Abraham, to wit, in fulfilling the dictate to sacrifice his own son; Abraham demonstrated that he loved Hashem with all his heart and with all his soul. He was the paragon of faith and the quintessential Jew. As stated in your article, “Abraham possessed the same perfections “as if” he celebrated Passover.”

In allowing himself to fulfill every command, he demonstrated to the world that he loved Hashem with all his heart and with all his soul; a level that stands as the ultimate standard by which we all are to aspire. But the question remains – how do we simple Jews “serve the Lord [our] God with all [our] heart and with all [our] soul.” While we may aspire to be an Abraham, we are certainly not there yet. Is there any message the Torah can impart that can help us reach this most sought after, yet elusive of goals? Certainly, just continue reading the next sentence – “observe the Lord’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good.” Thus, by observing Hashem’s commands and decrees, or more specifically, the mitzvot we too can be on our way towards “serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

Which brings us back to the original question - what did the Hachamim mean when they stated the Avot fulfilled the mitzvot? Simple – inasmuch as Abraham proved that he feared Hashem he had shown that he had indeed “serve[d] the LORD God with all [his] heart and with all [his] soul” as if he had “observed the Lord’s commands and decrees.” As you stated in your article, “Most people aren’t an Abraham. Thus, we need a Torah to assist us towards a lifestyle Abraham led. For Abraham, it as if he followed all the mitzvot since he wholly and fully responded to the call of “what does the Lord your God ask of you.” For us post-Sinaitic Jews, we must follow the mitzvot – but not for Hashem’s good but “for our own good.” ■

Respectfully,
Nativ Winiarsky

Genes, Genders & Gentiles

Reader: Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim, by reading your site I’ve learned that for Judaism, all human beings are God’s creatures and that even if the role of Jews are different from that of Gentiles, we all have the same rights. Have I understood well?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Yes, that is correct. However, there are technical differences that must be understood in each and every case. On the

surface, certain laws might appear racially biased.

Reader: People quote the Talmud out of context and use them to “demonstrate” that Judaism is a racist religion. Maimonides states in his Mishneh Torah, (Hilchot Rotze’ach 2:11): “A Jew who killed a righteous Gentile is not executed in a court of law.” Can you explain me in what context this affirmation can have sense?

I think it is very limitative to divide the world in Jews and non-Jews, I think there are very different kind of persons. When in the Talmud there is a statement about gentiles, does it regards to all gentiles? Are we considered with free will? Are we recognized by our acts?

Thanks for your time,
Aurora

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Not all Gentiles are referred to in all cases. There are righteous Gentiles and there are idolatrous and even murderous Gentiles, as we witness in Iraq and Israel. And a Jew can exhibit the same exact behavior. But it would be a fair statement to say that observant Jews and Noachide Gentiles are less inclined to idolatry and murder, than are non-Noachide Gentiles and non-observant Jews; the latter lack Torah education. This is not racist, but simply true. It is equally true that religious fundamentalists are more inclined to murder themselves and others, than are other Gentiles. This commentary applies to cultures, not to genes emanating from certain religious groups. This is clear from Esav’s great sins, while his twin Jacob was a prophet who abstained from sin. There are Jews who side with Palestinians in Israeli day parades, and others who violate idolatry, deifying their Rebbe as infallible and still alive, and a worthy recipient of their faxed message to his grave.

Let us be mindful that before God gave the Torah, there were 7 Noachide Laws, which applied to each and every human, including the prohibition of murder. After God gave the Torah, He did not lessen the evil of murder. It was not ‘then’ permitted to kill people after the Torah was given! Surely, the Torah came to enforce greater laws, not weaken laws. Such laws teach for whom we violate the Sabbath to save a life, and who are not worthy of such acts. God created morality, and He alone dictates what life is worthy of saving, when it creates a Sabbath violation. It is not our place to determine the value of each individual life, in any given circumstance. Those who attempt to do so, in fact, disagree with the Creator of life.

The author of the Shulchan Aruch comments on Maimonides’ words, stating that although the human courts can no longer punish the murderer of a righteous Gentile, the murderer’s fate is nonetheless handed over to God. Therefore, the sin is equally evil, but the ‘administration’ of punish-

ment has been transferred from human courts, to God. Perhaps this transfer after Torah was given, was not to lessen the crime of killing any human, but to elevate the crime of killing a Jew: one who now upholds God’s complete system of 613 Laws. When one law appears to be lowered in gravity, it may not mean at all that the crime is lessened, but the lowered status has another aim: to elevate something relative to it.

As a Rabbi once taught, men do not ridicule a woman in their morning blessing “Blessed are You that I was not created a woman”. This blessing is a relative means of thanking God for the additional laws we possess as men. The very order of the prayers bears out this truth. We first thank God that we are not without Torah: not a Gentile. But we do not ridicule a Gentile with this statement. We don’t now why God created one person as a Jew, and another as a Gentile. A Jew cannot claim intrinsic superiority over a Gentile. It is one’s perfection that elevates him or her. Many Gentiles are more righteous than some Jews. I can attest to that personally.

We then bless God for not being with fewer laws: a slave. And then we bless God for not being created a woman, who has more laws than slaves, but less than men. The progression of these three blessings indicates that we are in fact not ridiculing other humans, but that we are most thankful when compared to Gentiles, less thankful when compared to slaves, and even less, but still thankful, when compared to women. Again, the fact that I am a man, in no way means I am more perfected than a woman, a slave, or a Gentile. We simply recite our appreciation as men, for additional obligations. God created a system where men and women are essential. Each possesses their own role for mankind. And just because someone is created a woman, this does not mean men’s laws are restricted from her performance. For any woman, slave or Gentile may follow the entire Torah. But again, God’s wisdom decreed that genders, Gentiles, and Children of Israel exist.

Man could not exist without a female parent. So it is quite foolish to ridicule women. We also could not exist, had God not created the first Gentiles! Unfortunately, many egotistical Jews read one statement, and then jump to suggest it elevates them over other humans. To those Jews, I remind them of this: Messiah, King David and King Solomon all descended from Ruth the righteous Gentile. Abraham, Noah and Adam were all Gentiles.

Some statements do ridicule Gentiles since they do not abide by God’s laws, and many times violate them. And the same ridicule is made regarding Jews. In the first letter in this week’s issue, I respond to a reader who inquired of giving charity to Gentiles, which we must do. The Torah also teaches that a Jew who sinned and did not

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repent is not given charity. A Jew who kills, or brazenly violates even minor Torah laws, is killed. (Maimonides' Hilchot Rotze'ach, 4:10)

When one's father and Rabbi are both thrown from a ship, and neither can swim, the Rabbi must be saved first. This displays the Torah's value system. If someone killed accidentally, the court does not sentence him to death since he did not comply with Torah laws of "intent" or premeditation. If someone kills another by not giving him food, there is a lack of "action", and again, he is not treated as another, who killed with a gun, where activity is present. Nonetheless, Maimonides still calls him a murderer (ibid, 3:11) and adds, "One who seeks out blood, his blood will be sought out". The Torah has precise definitions, and can only be appreciated after much study, since God's wisdom is not easily apprehended, nor are people's emotions easily changed.

I mean by all these examples, to unveil a very exact system of Torah, one that demands we abandon infantile ideas, and elevate our thinking, and decide matters not based on subjective preferences, but by God's wisdom. This does not happen quickly...but with earnest study, it can.

A Gentile is required to keep a very minimal system, and those laws' benefits are apparent. If a Gentile cannot abide by prohibitions against murder, adultery, stealing and the few others, this displays a very corrupt individual. If the Gentile kills by accident, he has failed more grievously than a Jew who killed by accident. So although a Jew is not killed for accidental murder, a Gentile is. The rule we derive is this: that which is more incumbent on an individual, is treated more harshly. Thus, an adult is punished for his robbery, while a child is not.

This displays the same lesson. ■

Light Flight

Reader: Dear Rabbi Moshe Ben Chaim, Thank you for your response. Your raised several points which I will try to address one at a time. Your first point seems to be that if in fact God created the stars "with a stream of light already in travel" that the "wisest of men (Einstein) viewing this object's light and using reasoning will miscalculate its age. God is really fooling us." I disagree. Einstein would not have miscalculated. He would have calculated correctly with the data and information he had at hand. His answer was correct assuming that the light he was seeing had in fact emanated from the distant star and taken all that time to reach

him. My point was that it did not necessarily do so, and that he might have been operating from a false premise. His calculation may have been accurate, and his conclusion based upon that data correct, but not necessarily the truth.

The objection that if God did in fact create the universe this way means He was fooling us does not seem to me to follow. Chazal tell us that Adam Harishon was not created as a newborn, but rather as a fully matured 30-year-old male. I of course was not there, but speculate that if he had undergone a complete physical at the time, the examiner would have found a 30-year-old male with all the telltale signs of his body in fact being 30 years old even if he had only been created that day. There would have been the antibodies of the seven childhood illnesses in his system, a degree of tooth decay consistent with that of a 30 year old, as well as the age appropriate amount of arteriosclerosis in his arteries for example.

Similarly, God could have created the universe 5766 years ago, that had all the history of a 15 billion year old universe, with all the telltale signs there for whoever looked for them, including already existing streams of light reaching Earth from the far distant corners of the universe with out them actually having traversed those distances. This hypothesis is internally consistent, and therefore no less valid than any other.

Finally you state that I contradict myself regarding when I seem to trust my senses and when I do not. I see no such contradiction. I do not "Without basis, reject senses and reason in connection with age issues." I simply put forth for consideration an internally consistent alternate explanation, that addresses in a totally plausible manner (God after all, is omnipotent) the apparent contradiction between a 6,000 year old universe and a 10 million year old photon appearing on Earth's horizon.

Sincerely,
Fred Wolfish

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Fred, the one great distinction between Adam's adult creation, and the star's light assumed to be created "touching Earth", is that God informed man of Adam's age, but not of the light's creation already reaching Earth. Therefore, the analogy is not accurate.

What I mean about contradicting yourself is this: on the one hand, you accept the distance of the star based on laws of vision and physics. On the other, you reject your very same perceptions of light's physics, and claim that time was unnecessary for its travel. Without God informing us – as He did regarding to Adam – that He created the star's light touching the Earth, we should not assume He did so. ■

Song Sense

Reader: Dear Rabbi, While davening Shachris, I became more aware of the numerous references in our prayers to Music, Song, Musical Instruments, and Singing. When I returned home I made the following list of these occasions:

Baruch She'amar: "We shall laud You, Hashem our G-d, with praises and songs."

1 Chronicles 16:8-36: "Sing to Him, make music to him."

Psalms 144:15: "I will sing to Hashem, for he dealt kindly with me."

Psalms 100: "Come before Him with joyous song."

Halleluyah! Praise Hashem O my soul! I will praise Hashem while I live. I will make music to my G-d while I exist.

Halleluyah! Praise Hashem with the blast of the shofar; praise Him with lyre and harp. Praise Him with drum and dance; praise Him with organ and flute. Praise Him with clanging cymbals; praise Him with resonant trumpets. Then Moses and the Children of Israel chose to sing this song to Hashem, and they said the following: I shall sing to Hashem for He is exalted above the arrogant, having hurled horse with its rider into the sea. May Your Name be praised forever-Our King, the G-d, the great and holy King-in Heaven and on earth. Because for You is fitting-O Hashem, our G-d, and the G-d of our forefathers-song and praise, lauding and hymns. Blessed are You Hashem who chooses musical songs of praise.

And on each day of the week, a special song was sung in the Temple which we now mimic.

What place does song and instruments hold in Judaism?

Thank you,

Chaim

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: A Rabbi once explained why the Final Psalm 150 is about instruments alone. He explained that although we attempt with all our abilities to praise God, and express ourselves with the highest level of expression, meaning with songs, our attempts fall short. "We cannot know God while alive." Therefore, we cannot praise Him accurately. To demonstrate our inability to verbalize God's praises, we end Psalm's with instruments, and no words. With our verbal silence, we attest to our inability. Words cannot describe God, yet we cannot remain silent as sensual and expressive beings. Therefore, we, in a manner, "clap" using instruments. We denounce human words and thought as possessing accuracy regarding God's greatness. Using instruments, and not saying a word, we simultaneously claim that God deserves praise, but man cannot accomplish this with words. ■

Collected from published news sources including
DEBKAFfile, Arutz Sheva & ScienceNews.org



WorldNEWS

DECEMBER 8, 2006



Prime Minister Olmert Rejects Baker-Hamilton Recommendations on the Golan

by Nissan Ratzlav-Katz

In his first public reaction to the US government's Iraq Study Group (ISG) report, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert rejected the report's recommendation that Israel relinquish the Golan Heights to Syria.

"We have a different opinion," Olmert told a conference of editors in Tel Aviv on Thursday. "To the best of my knowledge, President Bush also had a different opinion on this matter. I don't know what the president will decide regarding the report, but I can say that the views that I heard from the president and from all leading adminis-

tration officials on the matter of Syria were that there is no possibility of negotiations - neither American-Syrian nor Israeli-Syrian. I very much trust the president's measured consideration and responsibility."

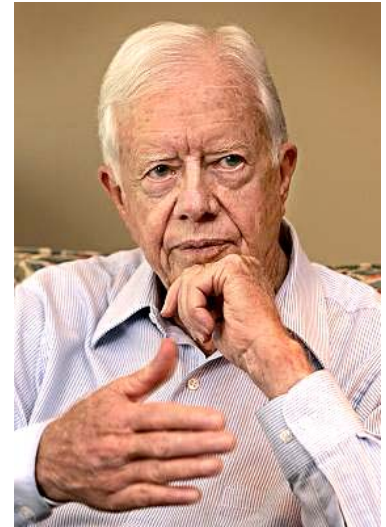
While claiming that no one is more interested in opening talks with Syria than the Israelis, the prime minister cited the Syrian regime's ongoing support for the Islamist Hamas terrorist organization as a factor mitigating against any negotiations in the near future. Hamas is currently the ruling power in the Palestinian Authority, although many of its political offices and leading personnel are located in Damascus.

The comprehensive ISG report, which primarily addresses the situation in Iraq, was prepared by former US Secretary of State James Baker and former Democratic congressman Lee Hamilton. It claims that if the United States does not take a more leading role in the Mideast Israel-Arab conflict, there is no hope of America achieving its goals in the region. To that end, the Baker-Hamilton report recommends a summit based on the 1991 Madrid Conference model - a meeting of regional leaders that would be aimed at solving the conflict between Israel, the PA, Syria and Lebanon. In addition to an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan, the report calls upon Israel to recognize the establishment of a Palestinian state.

The Golan Heights, a commanding mountain range on the border with Syria, was conquered by

Israel in the June 1967 Six Day War. The Syrian army and irregulars had used the Heights to shell and shoot into Israeli agricultural communities in the Galilee Panhandle and along Lake Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee) below. The Golan was annexed as an integral part of the State of Israel in the 1980s.

In a statement released to the press on Thursday, the left-wing Peace Now organization called on Israel to implement the Baker-Hamilton report. According to the statement, Israel's refusal to implement the recommendations of the report will only lead to additional violence in the region, including a "Third Intifada." ■



Plagiarism Charge Against Carter Is 2nd To Roil Jewish World

by IsraelNN Staff

A plagiarism charge was leveled this week by a former close associate of Carter's, who has resigned from the Carter Center in protest over the ex-president's new book, *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid*.

It is the second high-profile plagiarism case involving Jewish affairs this year.

Prof. Kenneth Stein's resignation from the Atlanta-based Carter Center ends his 23 year association with the institute, including ten years as its executive director. Stein also co-authored Carter's previous book about the Middle East, *The Blood of Abraham: Insights in the Middle East*.

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Prof. Stein, who teaches Mideast history at Emory University, where the Carter Center is based, is also director of the university's Middle East Research Program and its Institute for the Study of Modern Israel. Explaining his resignation from the Carter Center, Stein said that Palestine Peace Not Apartheid "is replete with factual errors" and Carter "simply invented segments." Stein's statement did not cite the book's title by name, saying it is "too inflammatory to even print."

Carter's publisher, Simon & Schuster, and his allies had expected supporters of Israel to criticize the book for its arguments. But they appear to have been taken by surprise by another of Prof. Stein's charges: that the book is "replete with ... copied materials not cited."

Mr. Carter's spokeswoman, Deanna Coneglio, issued a statement in the former president's name which downplayed Prof. Stein's connection to the Center as "titular." The statement did not address the plagiarism charge. Simon & Schuster publisher David Rosenthal told the New York Times that he is "confident in [Carter's] work," but then hedged slightly, saying, "Do we check every line in every book? No, but that's not the issue here. I have no reason to doubt President Carter's research."

Prof. Stein declined to name the book or books from which he says Carter copied words, because he is preparing an article that will reveal those details. He told the Times, "There are elements in the book that were lifted from another source. That source is now acting on his or her own advice about what to do because of this."

The Carter plagiarism controversy is the second such affair to seize the attention of the Jewish community in recent months. Earlier this year, The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies released a report which found that a new book defending President Franklin Roosevelt's Holocaust record "contains at least twenty-one passages that have language identical, or virtually identical, to language used in other published works," yet the author "does not use quotation marks to indicate that the words were composed by a different author." The book, *Saving the Jews: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust*, was authored by Robert N. Rosen, a divorce lawyer in South Carolina. Ironically, one of Rosen's first major speaking engagements when his book was released was at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, in Atlanta. ■



Opposition leader Binyamin Netanyahu: Instead of restraint, Israel should topple the Hamas government

December 5, 2006, 9:27 AM

In a radio interview Tuesday, the former Likud prime minister questioned the current state leadership's capabilities for preparing Israel's armed forces for the "next war." What should be done now, he said, was to wipe out the burgeoning Palestinian terrorist infrastructure and stem the vast stream of weapons entering Gaza. Instead, the Olmert government was exhibiting weakness by its decision to let eight days of continuous Palestinian ceasefire violations from Gaza go unanswered. In this period, 16 Qassam missiles were fired against Israeli civilian locations.

Amid widening criticism of the government's decision to accept the Hamas "ceasefire" and its violations, Netanyahu said earlier said that Israel's restraint had the effect of strengthening Hamas and weakening Palestinian moderates.

Defending the decision, prime minister Ehud Olmert argued to the Knesset foreign affairs and security committee Monday that the Israeli military operation had not stopped the Palestinian missile offensive. DEBKAF file adds: This further stung the military whose anti-missile operation in northern Gaza he halted mid-stream.

Olmert also explained that if the ceasefire is allowed to gather momentum it could stimulate diplomatic engagement. ■

New Solar System? Twelve planets and counting

by Ron Cowen

Pluto aficionados, rejoice! Pluto is a planet. So are the giant asteroid Ceres, Pluto's moon Charon, and a large outer-solar system object called 2003 UB313. The solar system has 12 planets instead of the familiar 9, according to a proposal that the General Assembly of the International Astronomical Union (IAU) will vote on next week in Prague, Czech Republic.

The IAU had asked a panel of seven astronomers, writers, and historians to better define what constitutes a planet. According to that panel's proposal, announced this week in Prague, a planet is any body that orbits a star, is neither a star nor a satellite of a planet, and has gravity strong enough to pull it into a rounded shape.

"We finally have a definition of a planet after 2,500 years, and I applaud any definition that gives us an unambiguous answer," says Neil deGrasse Tyson, director of the Hayden Planetarium in New York City.

Planethood has become increasingly controversial since 1992, when astronomers began discovering objects beyond Neptune in a region known as the Kuiper belt. Astronomers consider Pluto to be in that belt. Pluto has a small size relative to the other planets, an oddly shaped orbit, and other features shared by many of the nearly 1,000 objects now known to reside in the belt. Furthermore, last year astronomers found that 2003 UB313, a belt object, is larger than Pluto.

The simplest solution would be for astronomers to admit that they erred in originally calling Pluto a planet, but "it takes guts to demote a planet that many people claim to love," says Mike Brown of the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, a codiscoverer of 2003 UB313. ■



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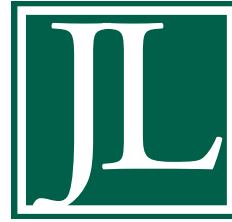


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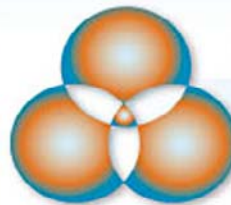
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