

GOD DEEMED THE RABBIS DESERVING TO INTERPRET HIS TORAH. IT IS THEREFORE FITTING THAT WE DO NOT VIEW THEIR WORDS AS WE VIEW OURS, BUT THAT WE TAKE GREAT CARE IN STUDYING THEM.



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IN THIS ISSUE

PARSHA: SHEMOT	1-3
GENTILES & TORAH	1,4,5
PARSHA: MOSES' 3 SIGNS	6,7
LETTERS	8
EXERCISE	9
NEWS	10

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Weekly Parsha

Shemot

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And a new king arose that did not know Yosef.” (Shemot 1:8)

Sefer Shemot discusses the suffering of Bnai Yisrael in Egypt and their eventual redemption. Our passage introduces the events that led to the enslavement of Bnai Yisrael. The Torah

(continued on next page)

MAIMONIDES ON

GENTILES AND TORAH STUDY

THE DEPTH OF THE RABBIS' WORDS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reader: I read your posts on gentiles studying Torah. I disagree [that Noachides are prohibited].

Everything I have read regarding restrictions on Torah study only applies to “idolaters”...not Noachides. The Talmud and Rambam refer to Star Worshipers (Ovade Kochavim). I know that this term was a result of the Christian censors, however, I also know that in the Temani manuscripts of the Mishneh Torah the term is “AKuM” (Star Worshiper). These manuscripts are free of the many errors of the Vilna edition. The Rambam makes a point to distinguish between a “Noachide” and an “idolater”. See his Laws of Sabbath

(continued on page 4)



(Shemot cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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tells us that a new king arose over Egypt. This king did not know Yosef. He was not familiar with Yosef's contribution to the salvation of Egypt from famine and to the creation of its great empire. The apparent message of the passage is that this king did not feel indebted to Yosef, his family, or Yosef's descendants. Any favor that previous rulers had shown towards Bnai Yisrael was replaced by antipathy and prejudice.

Rashi comments that Rav and Shmuel suggest alternative interpretations of our passage. Rav explains that this king was literally "new." Shmuel disagrees. He suggests that the king was new in his conduct. He put in place new policies – specifically towards Bnai Yisrael.[1]

Both the interpretation of Rav and the alternative offered by Shmuel present problems. Rav explains that he understands the passage in a literal sense. The simple meaning of the passage is that a new king occupied the throne. However, there is a problem with this interpretation. The passage contains an extra word! There is no reason to refer to the king as "new." The passage could merely have stated that a king arose who did not know Yosef. It would be obvious from this statement that he was new. Only a new king could be ignorant or unappreciative of Yosef's contribution to Egypt.

Shmuel's interpretation provides an explanation of this seemingly superfluous term. The passage refers to the king as "new" because he is only new in his conduct and behavior. But, Shmuel's interpretation ignores the simple meaning of the passage. It seems that Shmuel is asking the reader to interpret the passage in a manner that is completely inconsistent with its obvious and clearly stated meaning.

Gur Aryeh and others respond that Rav and Shmuel are not arguing over the actual historical event. They both accept that simple meaning of the passage. The "new" king was a newly appointed monarch. However, both are bothered by the term "new." Why is this term included in the passage? If a king arose who did not know Yosef, obviously he was new! By referring to this monarch as "new," the Torah is communicating a message about him. Rav and Shmuel differ on the message.

In order to understand Gur Aryeh's explanation of the dispute between Rav and Shmuel, we must consider our passage more carefully. Although our passage is short, it communicates three points: First, the passage tells us that a king arose. Second, the passage relates that the king was – in some sense – new. Third, the passage tells us that this king was not familiar with Yosef. Obviously, these three points are

presented as elements of a single passage because they are related. However, what is the precise nature of the relationship?

Before we attempt to understand the relationship between the three elements of the passage, let us identify the fundamental unifying message of the passage. Then, we can consider the relationship between the various elements within the context of the overall message.

The basic message seems obvious: Bnai Yisrael entered Egypt as a favored, privileged minority. In a relatively short span of time they lost their privileged status and became persecuted, enslaved, and eventually, subjected to genocide. The Torah explains how this shocking transformation occurred. The Torah tells us that the first step towards this transformation was somehow related to a change in the ruler of Egypt.

Now, let us reconsider the three elements of the passage. There are two possible understandings of the structure of the passage: The first option is that the first portion of the passage explains the second. A king arose. This king was "new." Because he was new, he

did not know Yosef. In other words, he was not bound to the policies and behaviors of his predecessor towards Yosef's people. This is Rav's understanding of the passage.

However, the pasuk can be understood differently. It is possible that the second portion of the passage explains the first. The first portion of the

passage tells us that a king arose and that this king was – in some sense – new. The second portion of the passage explains the nature of the king's novelty. He broke from the policies of his predecessors in his treatment of Yosef's family. This is Shmuel's understanding of the passage.

In other words, both Rav and Shmuel agree that a king arose and that his attitude towards Bnai Yisrael was very different from his predecessor. However, they differ on the reason behind this change in attitude. Rav argues that this king's rise to the throne represented a new era and a break with the past. He was not bound to the policies and practices of his predecessors. He implemented his own policies.

Gur Aryeh suggests that Rav seems to be describing a deposing of the former monarch and his dynasty rather than the succession of a monarch within a dynasty. A monarch who continues the dynasty of his predecessors is committed to implementing his predecessors' policies and basic outlook. However, when a king is deposed and his dynasty is replaced, the new ruler owes no loyalty to the policies of the past. Instead, he may be tempted to distinguish himself

(continued on next page)

(Shemot continued from page 2)

Weekly Parsha

from the previous rulers of the overthrown dynasty. He does this by breaking with the past and establishing a new – perhaps radically new – path. According to Rav, this king's attitudes towards Bnai Yisrael were a consequence of his disavowal of the past and his need to strike out on a new path that would be uniquely his.

Shmuel seems to describe a king who continues the rule of an established dynasty. In general, he is devoted and loyal to the status quo. However, this king was "new" in a single, important respect: He initiated a new set of policies towards Bnai Yisrael.

In short, Gur Aryeh suggests that Rav and Shmuel agree that a king arose who veered drastically from previous policies towards Bnai Yisrael. Yet, they disagree on the reason for this sudden change of course. Rav argues that the change was occasioned by political upheaval. A king arose who was completely new and disassociated from the policies of the previous king. Shmuel suggests that this ruler succeeded his predecessor in a normal political transition – without chaos or upheaval. He had no reason to not continue the policies of his predecessors. Nonetheless, in one area – his treatment of Bnai Yisrael – he differed drastically from the kings who preceded him.[2]

Let us consider Rav and Shmuel's positions more carefully. According to Rav, it may not be meaningful to consider the causes or roots of the new king's hatred or persecution of Bnai Yisrael. This king had no commitment to past policies. He represented political change. It is not surprising that this ruler would succumb to simple xenophobia and prejudice towards a privileged minority. Furthermore, Bnai Yisrael may have served as a convenient scapegoat to be blamed for the inevitable setbacks and failures that accompany political upheaval.

However, according to Shmuel, this new king, in most respects, was devoted to established traditions, mores and values. Why in one area did he depart from tradition? Why persecute Bnai Yisrael?

It seems reasonable to look for an explanation in the immediately preceding chapters of the Chumash. The closing chapters of Sefer Beresheit deal with the final years of Yaakov's life. Yaakov asks Yosef to bury him in the land of Canaan. Yosef agrees, but Yaakov is not satisfied. He asks that Yosef pledge himself with a vow and Yosef complies. Nachmanides is concerned with Yaakov's demand that Yosef provide a vow. It is unimaginable that Yaakov would not trust Yosef! Why was his solemn commitment not adequate? Why did Yaakov demand a vow? However, Nachmanides notes that a subsequent event provides the explanation of Yaakov's behavior.

Yaakov dies and Yosef must now fulfill the pledge he made to his father. Yosef asks Paroh for his permission to leave Egypt and bury his father in Canaan. He tells Paroh that he is bound by a vow. Paroh allows Yosef to travel to Canaan. But Paroh also indicates that the vow is a factor in his decision; he is not willing to require that Yosef violate a vow made to his father.

Apparently, Yaakov foresaw that Paroh would resist Yosef's request. Therefore, Yaakov did not require a vow from Yosef because he did not fully trust his son. Yaakov demanded that a vow because he recognized that this vow would help overcome Paroh's resistance. Yosef understood his father's design. He agreed with his father's assessment and in petitioning Paroh, he noted that he was bound by a vow to fulfill his father's wishes.

However, Nachmanides acknowledges that his interpretation raises an obvious question: Yaakov assumed Paroh would resist his wishes to be buried in Canaan by Yosef. Yosef agreed with this assessment. Both seem to have foreseen some obvious issue that would incite Paroh to refuse Yosef's request. What was this issue? Nachmanides suggests two possibilities. However, let us focus on the first of these responses. Nachmanides suggests that Paroh might not have had any objection to Yaakov's burial in Canaan. However, Yaakov wished Yosef to take charge of the burial and personally execute his wishes. Yaakov and Yosef predicted that Paroh might object to Yosef's leaving Egypt to travel to Canaan and would instead insist that Yosef charge his brothers with this mission.[3]

Nachmanides' explanation seems incomplete. He tells us that Yaakov and Yosef correctly anticipated that Paroh would resist consenting to Yosef leaving Egypt and traveling to Canaan. However, he does not explain the reason Paroh would resist this reasonable request. Let us consider the obvious possibilities.

Perhaps Paroh was afraid Yosef would not return. He relied on Yosef's council and administrative skills. He could not take the chance that Yosef might abandon him. Yet, this is not a reasonable explanation: When Yosef, his brothers, and a delegation of Egyptian dignitaries traveled to Canaan to bury Yaakov, Yosef and his brothers did not take their possessions and were not accompanied by their young children. Certainly, Paroh had more than an adequate number of hostages to assure Yosef's return.

Perhaps Paroh was concerned that Yosef's return to Canaan would inspire in him a desire to return to his ancestral home. He would return to collect his family and belongings and would then lobby Paroh to allow him and his family to return to their homeland. Of course, Paroh could resist granting Yosef's wishes. But he would risk losing Yosef's full support and assistance. The difficulty with this explanation is that Paroh even resisted the removal of Yosef's body from Egypt.[4] This seems to indicate that Paroh was not merely guided by the practical need to retain Yosef's services. He did not want Yosef to be associated with Canaan – not in life or even death!

It is not that difficult to imagine Paroh's concern. Yosef had tremen-

dous authority. In practical terms, he was the actual ruler. In order to hold his position, Yosef was required to speak, dress, and generally conduct himself as an Egyptian. Yosef's imitation of an Egyptian was compelling enough to convince his brothers. Why was this masquerade required? Apparently, the Egyptians preferred to think of Yosef as one of their own people. They were not eager to acknowledge that they were ruled by a foreigner – one whose true allegiance was to a different homeland!

Yosef's masquerade as an Egyptian – or, at least a naturalized citizen – was successful until his family came to Egypt. The emergence of his family must have created some controversy. But, Yosef could reasonably argue that his entire family had transferred its allegiance to Egypt. The death of Yaakov and Yosef's burial of his father in Canaan belied any claim of uncompromised loyalty to Egypt. Egypt was reminded of Yosef's roots and his connection with a foreign homeland.

Let us return to our question on Shmuel's opinion: What brought about the regime's change in attitude towards Bnai Yisrael? What motivated the regime to deny and renounce Yosef's contribution to Egypt? Perhaps, Yosef's emergence as an alien from a foreign homeland was the root cause of this change. As long as Yosef was regarded as an Egyptian, the Egyptians could accept his leadership. But once events revealed to them that Yosef's allegiance was complicated and equivocal, the Egyptians came to resent him and their dependence on the foreigner. It is not surprising that this resentment led to eventual denial of Yosef's contribution to Egypt. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 1:8.

[2] Rav Yehuda Loew of Prague (Maharal), Gur Aryeh Commentary on Sefer Shemot 1:8.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 47:31.

[4] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 13:19.



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(continued from page 1)

29:25, and Laws of Blessings 9:9 (7), Laws of Forbidden Foods 11:5 (8 in Vilna versions), and Laws of Forbidden Foods 11:2 (4). It is in Laws of Forbidden Foods 11:8 that the Rambam takes special pains to point out that unless he clarifies the term Star Worshipper it is used to refer to an idolater: "And every place that says 'Star Worshipper' unqualified, behold, this is a servant of idolatry."

As far as I can tell this is very clear. Please correct me if I am wrong, but please quote sources so that I can study the issue, and so I can tell others the correct teaching. Thank you for your time.

Shalom,

A Noachide

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: You quote Maimonides Laws of Forbidden Foods 11:8: "And every place that says 'Star Worshipper' unqualified, behold, this is a servant of idolatry." Your intent was to suggest that Maimonides maintains there exists two distinct individuals: a Star Worshipper, and a Noachide. From that first step, you wished to deduce that since Maimonides says (in Laws of Kings) that only a "Star Worshipper" is prohibited in Torah study, this is limited to a Star Worshipper, and thereby permits a Noachide to study. But you did not read the opening words of that law (Forbidden Foods 11:8) where Maimonides makes clear that his definitions are for "that" section of Laws of Forbidden Foods alone. Therefore, you cannot transpose his use of terminology onto other areas, since he openly limits his terms to that section.

Furthermore, if your position is correct that the prohibition of Torah study applies exclusively to idolaters, and not to Noachides, why do we find no laws concerning "Noachide" Torah study? The answer is because the prohibition of Torah study applied to "idolaters" in fact refers to ALL non-Jews, Noachides included. (I explained before that the reason behind this law is to maintain the Jew as the sole authority of Torah. Since the Jew alone is required to practice all of Torah, he is best suited to teach it, as his obligatory practice enforces greater attention to the Torah's demands. This is not a racist law, but a practical law, which aims at insuring Torah for all people)

Now, a proof for my argument is derived from Talmud Sanhedrin 59a. It states there that an idolater who studies Torah is culpable of



death. But that very Talmudic portion then asks, "Why is this prohibition not an eighth 'Noachide' law?" Consider carefully: this Talmudic question cannot be asked, if this portion were not including Noachides in the general term "Star Worshipper". The Talmud is clearly referring to all Gentiles including Noachides, with its general reference of "idolater".

The Talmud continues, "A Star Worshipper who studies Torah is akin to a Jewish High Priest; but this is no contradiction to the former threat of death for his Torah study: this latter praise applies to his study of his 7 Noachide laws." Thus, the Talmud first condemns the Star Worshipper for Torah study, and then praises him for Torah study. The apparent contradiction is removed: the condemnation applies to one who studies more than his 7 Noachide Laws, and the praise applies to one who studies only his 7 laws. We thereby prove that the Talmud's use of Star Worshipper is synonymous with Noachide, in this case.

In other areas you mentioned such as Laws of Forbidden Foods, Maimonides uses the terms Star Worshipper and Noachide differently, referring to two exclusive individuals. However, in his Laws of Kings he uses these two terms as referring to one single person; not separate individuals, but two "statuses" within that person! I will explain.

Regarding a Jew benefiting from idolatrous wine outlined in Laws of Forbidden Foods, there is a difference between a Star Worshipper's wine, and the wine belonging to a Noachide. The Star Worshipper's wine has greater prohibitions, understandably. Here, Star Worshipper and Noachide refer to two distinct people.

This distinction, you have carried over to all areas, but in error. You feel that the Talmud and Maimonides' prohibition on Torah study is on Star Worshipers "alone". I have disproved your position from Maimonides' opening statement in Forbidden Foods 11:8, and from Talmud Sanhedrin...but there is more to learn here.

While researching your question, I realized an in interesting pattern in Maimonides' classification. In his Laws of Kings (Chap. 10) Maimonides switches off between referring to a "Noachide" and a "Star Worshipper". In that section when discussing any of the 7 Noachide Laws, he refers to the Gentile as "Noachide". And when he discusses laws pertaining to anything other than the Noachide Laws, he uses the term "Star Worshipper". On the surface, this might seem to support your theory, but I believe he switches his term for another lesson, which is quite insightful, and novel.

The 7 Noachide Laws include murder, stealing, cursing God, and others. When Maimonides outlined these 7 laws, he refers to the Gentile as "Noachide." But there exists other laws for every Gentile.

A Gentile cannot study most Torah sections, he cannot observe the Sabbath, and he cannot smite a Jew. When Maimonides discusses these laws, which are not subsumed under the 7 Noachide Laws, but are equally binding, Maimonides refers to the Gentile as a "Star Worshipper". The question is why Maimonides switches his term? Why is he not consistent in his terminology? The fact that he is referring to the same individual is proved from Laws of Kings 10:9: "A Star Worshipper who is engaged in Torah study is culpable of death, and he should only engage in his 7 Laws." The words "his 7 laws" proves that in this section, unlike his Laws of Forbidden Foods, Maimonides refers to "one" person as both a Noachide, and a Star Worshipper. He is intent on distinguishing roles within one person.

The reason for this distinction I believe is as follows. Maimonides intends to educate the reader as to what "status" in Gentiles generates certain laws. In as much as one desires a right-to-life, he must observe a minimal set of laws, 7 Noachide Laws. If any one of these laws of

(continued on next page)

(continued from page 4)

The Rabbis

broken, the person is punished with death. Even if this Gentile steals a penny, he is killed, whereas a Jew would not be. Why is this so? What is the justice? The reasoning is as we said; these 7 laws are a minimal system, which earns the observer a right to continued existence. If one cannot observe at a minimum, these 7 laws, then he has fallen below the threshold of God's minimum standard of human life. He must be killed. But if a Jew stole a penny, he has not fallen below the threshold, since he has 612 others to keep him inline. God would be as lenient with this Gentile, if he chose to observe the 613 Commandments. God is equally just to all humans. This explains why Maimonides uses the term Noachide when addressing the 7 laws, since it is with these 7 that a Gentile earns his right-to-life; exactly what the Noachide Laws target.

But when discussing the Gentile's prohibition of observing the Sabbath, Torah study and smiting the Jew, Maimonides switches his term to "Star Worshipper". Why is that?

The reasoning is that here, Maimonides is no longer addressing laws regulating a Gentiles "right-to-life", but other laws; laws that "obscure the boundary of Jew and non-Jew". If a Gentile observes Sabbath, and studies Torah, he in fact renders himself to an onlooker ostensibly as a Jew: he acts like a Jew resting on the seventh day, and he partakes of the Jew's unique role as Torah educator with his study of more than his 7 Noachide Laws. This is not a lack in fulfilling his Noachide role, since the Gentile is in fact doing 'more' with these two commands. No...the violation committed here with Sabbath observance and Torah study is regarding his role as Star Worshipper. His status as Noachide does not enter the picture, but the other status does: i.e., his status of "non-Jew", or "Star Worshipper", which was the original classification that offset the first Jew who was monotheistic.

Maimonides is exact. He uses the term Star Worshipper when addressing a Gentile's violation in Sabbath observance and Torah study, since with these infractions, the Gentile is not failing in his "Noachide" role, but in his "Star Worshipper" role...a role which is diametrically opposite to the role of Jew. Just as a Star Worshipper opposes monotheism, so too, a Gentile who wishes to dilute the uniqueness of the Jew by copying his Sabbath ad Torah, equally destroys the Jew's role, and monotheism. Similarly, Maimonides uses the term Star Worshipper when addressing the laws about a Gentile smiting a Jew, for the same reason.

The Jewish "ideology" must be preserved by the Gentile's refrain from mimicking our



primary commands of Sabbath, and Torah study. And the Jewish "body" is preserved by the Gentiles' refrain from physically assaulting a Jew. And when a Gentile does not take care to preserve the Jew, that Gentile is failing due to his attachment to a "Star Worshipper" inclination. Appropriately, Maimonides calls that person a Star Worshipper, since these three laws address the preservation of the Jew so as to help the world oppose polytheism. Maimonides' intent is to underscore the capacity in the Gentile that generates this violation. The Gentile who observes Sabbath destroys the Jew by obscuring the Jew's role. Since this Gentile is not abandoning any of his 7 Noachide Laws, his violation is not in terms of his right-to-life "Noachide" status. Therefore, Maimonides does not address him as a Noachide. That status plays no role.

But when a Gentile fails to uphold all 7 Noachide laws, Maimonides now refers to him as a Noachide, that is, one who should have observed these 7 laws at a minimum. Here, he fails to uphold such a minimal system; he is referred to as a "Noachide who failed." Failing to observe the law of stealing for example is not due to Star Worship tendencies, but to a Noachide right-to-life issue.

We now realize that Maimonides, in one section, will use the terms Star Worshipper and Noachide as referring to two individuals; and in Laws of Kings, he uses the same terms to refer to two statuses in a "single" person. This explains why there is no discussion about a Noachide studying Torah, since he is the identical person described in the prohibition of Torah study by "Star Worshipers". Maimonides and the Talmud refer to a Gentile with a few references, thereby teaching the additional insight that certain sins are blameful due to certain roles for which we shirk responsibility.

When a teen fails to accurately compute geometry basics, we blame him for being a poor "student", since it is his studies that we address. And when the same person does not visit his father who is sick in bed, the parent would be incorrect to say, "What a poor student you are". For in this capacity, the blame addresses his role as a "child". The appropriate blame would be "you are not a good son".

So too here, Maimonides teaches us by changing a reference to the same Gentile, indicating his "capacity" or status that is to blame for his infraction. ■



RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

MOSES' III SIGNS

Exodus, 4:1-9: 1) *“And Moses answered and said, ‘They (the Jews) will not believe in me and they will not listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘God did not appear to you.’ 2) And God said to him, ‘What is in your hand?’ and he said, ‘A staff.’ 3) And He said, Throw it to the ground’, and he threw it to the ground, and it became a serpent. And Moses fled from before it. 4) And God said to Moses, ‘Send forth your hand and grasp it by its tail’. And he sent forth his hand and he seized it, and it was a staff in his palm. 5) ‘In order that they believe you, that God appeared to you, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ 6) And God said to him, ‘Further, bring now your hand into your chest’, and he brought his hand into his chest, and he took it out, and behold his hand was leprous as snow. 7) And He said, ‘Return your hand to your chest’, and he returned his hand to his chest, and he took it out, and behold, it returned to its flesh. 8) ‘And it will be if they do not believe you, and they do not listen to the voice of the first sign, then they will listen to the voice of the second sign. 9) And it will be if they do not listen to also these two signs, and they do not listen to your voice, and you will take from the waters of the Nile, and you will spill it onto the dry land, and it will be that the water that you take from the Nile, and it will be blood on the dry land.”*

God instructs Moses on his mission to free the Jews. God then responds to Moses’ doubt of the Jews’ conviction in his divine appointment, by giving him three signs. These signs will prove God’s appearance to him. A number of questions arise. Before reading further, take time to review the verses above, and discuss them with others. Simply reading on will remove your opportunity to engage in the process of learning and the use of your own thought. This process is how we become better Torah students, thereby refining our own thinking for future study. It is also an enjoyable activity. The Torah was purposefully written in a cryptic style so as to engage the mind in this most prized activity of analysis, induction, deduction and thought - our true purpose whose rewards are unmatched, both here, and in the next world. Once you have spent due time reviewing the issues, feel free to read the questions enumerated below, and our possible answers.

Questions:

1. The sign of blood is said to be the ultimate proof of God’s directive. How does this sign surpass the others? 2. If blood is more convincing than a staff turning into a serpent, or leprosy, why not instruct Moses to perform the blood sign first? Three signs would then not be necessary! 3. What

are the ideas conveyed through each specific sign? Why were these three selected? 4. Why does God give Moses signs easily “duplicated” by the magicians? 5. What is meant by the “voice” of each sign? 6. In both cases, the transformation of a staff into a serpent, and Nile water into blood, does not take place until both objects reach the ground, as it says, “and he threw it to the ground, and it became a serpent”, and “it will be blood on the dry land.” What is the reason for this “miracle at a distance”? 7. Why do the first two signs “return” to their original objects? What need does this serve? 8. Why is Moses requested to “conceal” his hand in order for it to become leprous? God could certainly make him leprous without him concealing it. 9. In contrast to the sign of blood where God tells Moses what will happen to the Nile’s waters before the sign’s performance, why does God not tell Moses what will happen to the staff or his hand before those miracles? 10. What will the Jews learn when they hear Moses referring to God as “the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”?

We must say the following: The reason for three signs is twofold; 1) God wished the viewer to be convinced of His appointment of Moses with minimal, emotional amazement; and 2) God wished this from everyone, as additional signs of less deniability accompany the first. God knows what the most convincing sign is, i.e., blood, but He desired it come last in the sequence. A Rabbi Mann teaches in this weeks JewishTimes issue, God desires we use our minds.

Action at a Distance

It is for this very reason that additional features are found in these signs. I refer here to the fact that both the staff, and the Nile’s waters transformed only once on the ground. It is not the ground that is essential here, but the “distance” between Moses’ hand and the transformation. All magicians require tactile control of their manipulated objects. Without physical contact, they cannot create illusions through sleight of hand. However, Moses’ objects did not transform, while in his hand, but only once distanced from his control. “Distance” teaches that this was not sleight of hand - his hand was nowhere near the transformation! These signs could only be explained as true miracles, as God’s actions.

Magic Does Not Exist

Sforno on Exod. 4:3 cites Talmud Sanhedrin 67b: (Responding to the plague of lice, and their inability to mimic it) “Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, ‘this is the finger of God.’ This proves that a magician cannot produce a creature less than a barley corn in size. [Strengthening this first position] Rav Pappa said, ‘By God, he cannot

(continued on next page)

produce something even as large as a camel! [So what does it mean that a magician cannot produce a creature less than a barley corn?] [It means] these that are larger than a barley corn, he can collect, and produce the illusion that he has magically created them." This Talmudic portion teaches that the human hand cannot control that which is too small.

Sleight of hand was known in the times of the Talmud, and in Egypt's times. All magic is illusory. What these Egyptians performed by hand was quicker than the eye, but only when the object was large enough to manipulate. Our Rabbis did not accept that any powers exist outside natural laws. God is the only One capable of altering natural law – only He created it, only He controls it. Saadia Gaon too stated that the Egyptian's blood trick was performed by the use of colored dyes, and the frogs leaped out of the Nile by their use of chemicals that frogs repel. Sforno also states that the Egyptian's snakes had no movement, i.e., they were not real. Moses' staff transformed into a "nachash", not the lifeless "tanin" of the Egyptians. The difference in terms indicates to Sforno, a difference in the two performances.

Blood

Blood is the source of life. When one sees water transformed into blood, one realizes that life itself is in God's hands. This strikes at the core of any person's greatest fear - death. Additionally, its creation from the Nile disputed the Nile's position of grandeur. But as God wishes we come to know Him by the use of our higher nature - our intellect - He did not order the blood sign first in sequence. God offers a person the chance to rise to a higher level by following his mind. With a minimalist performance, man has the opportunity to exercise his thinking, and derive truths concerning God's will (His appointment of Moses) and His very existence.

Creation: Arrived at Through Reason

I digress to focus your attention on a related and essential idea: God's position as the Creator is the most important concept of human comprehension. Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed", Book II, end of Chap XXV: "...Owing to the absence of all proof, we reject the theory of the Eternity of the Universe: and it is for this very reason that the noblest minds spent, and will spend their days in research. For if the Creation had been demonstrated by proof, even if only according to the Platonic hypothesis, all arguments of the philosophers against us would be of no avail. If, on the other hand, Aristotle had a proof for his theory, the whole teaching of Scripture would be rejected, and we should be forced to other opinions. I have thus shown that all depends on this question. Note it."

Maimonides teaches, "all depends on this

question". What does he mean? I believe him to mean that by design, God wished that our conviction of this most central idea - God as Creator - must be arrived at through thought, and understanding, not through amazement at marvelous feats. In other words, our recognition of God as the Creator 'must' be apprehended through our reasoning. This is the highest form of recognition of God, and the preferred method to knowing Him, and His works. "All depends on this question," means that proof of Creation was purposefully left to the realm of the "philosophical", and not to "emotional" via astonishing, miraculous displays. It is easy to witness a miracle, and be convinced, but in such a case, our mind forfeits the exercise of reasoning - THE mark of man's perfection. It is fitting that man use his crowned capacity in the pursuit of this question, of God as the Creator. I now return to our topic.

The Serpent and Leprosy

Before resorting to blood, why did the staff transform into a serpent? On the surface, both the staff and a serpent have similar appearances, they are narrow, elongated shapes. Once transformed into a serpent, the viewer might second-guess what he saw, "Was it in fact a staff before hand, or was it a serpent in some stiffened state?" Control of one's emotions and clear thinking are required so as not to dismiss a miracle. Moses was given these signs for the very reason that the Jews were bent on disbelief in God's appointment of Moses. Hence, subsequent to a sign, the Jews might seek to explain away the miracle. To say the very minimum about this specific sign, we may suggest that it teaches that God controls life. He can turn a lifeless staff into a living organism. God's control of life would appear to offer the most impact on the Jews. Therefore God's signs were indications of His control of life. But this was yet animal life. More impressive, was Moses' hand becoming leprous. Here, God sought to teach that He controls human life. He does so in the negative (becoming leprous) as well as the positive (healing of Moses' leprosy). The fact that Moses' own hand was smitten, may serve to teach again that it was not Moses who created such a feat, as one would not risk self injury. Similarly, one would not create a dangerous serpent.

Another observation of the serpent and leprosy is that the transformation into a serpent displays God's control over the "matter" of creation, while leprosy displays His control of His "laws" of creation. Transforming a staff into a serpent displays God's control over matter itself. Disease has a natural process. Moses' leprous hand displays that God controls "how" things behave. These two, initial signs bear witness to God control of both aspects of Creation - of matter, and laws governing that matter.

Perhaps, in order to minimize the affect of "astonishment", God instructed Moses to first conceal his hand before it became leprous. For if a hand became leprous in plain sight, it would overwhelm the viewer, prohibiting his mind from fully functioning. This feat would startle him. Therefore, God told Moses to hide his hand. God also gave Moses signs easily "duplicated" by the Egyptians. And as Rabbi Mann taught, this was for our reason that the viewer use intelligence to discern true miracles of God, from man's sleight of hand. We may also suggest that the "voice" of each sign refers to the underlying "concept" derived by the mind, as opposed to the feat per se. God wished the viewer to understand each sign's message - its "voice".

Why did the first two signs return to their original forms? This may also be a practical issue, that Moses may once again perform these signs.

Why does God not tell Moses what will happen to the staff or his hand before those miracles? Mindful that God enabled these signs as a "response" to Moses' concern that he be validated, perhaps God did not inform Moses of the sign until it happened for good reason: God wished that Moses sense the effects of a these signs, just as would the Jews. By experiencing the sign without advance warning, Moses could identify with the perception and emotional impact afforded the Jews through these signs. Thereby, Moses' "first hand" knowledge gave him the security in these signs. God answered his concern in a primary fashion. He now knew how the Jews would react to these signs - that they were impressive. Had God told Moses what was about to happen, his expectation would lessen the emotional impact of these signs.

The Fulfillment of God's Promise

Our final question was, "What will the Jews learn when they hear Moses referring to God as "the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? I believe this may serve to illustrate God's consistent kindness. As Moses was God's emissary for the Redemption, the Jews would be more inclined to accept this news and Moses' role, by recalling how God favored their ancestors, and not just on one occasion, but the lifetimes of many individuals. The Redemption was not a deviation, disbelieved by the Jews, but it was consistent with the manner in which God relates to His people - to His prophets' descendants. We learn from this that God saw it necessary even prior to the act of redemption, the Jews required a psychological conviction in God's forthcoming salvation. This state of mind was necessary, and God reassured the Jews of His unchanging kindness through this statement. ■

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



Excerpt

Christian Noachides Message Boards

"Its strange that Jesus would take responsibility for all our sins, when the Torah says "Fathers will not be killed for sons, nor sons for fathers...each man in his OWN sin shall die". Jesus goes against God's very words. Not only are these the Torah's words, but it makes sense.

Additionally, I have never found proof for Jesus so called miracles, since there were no witnesses, and the stories concerning him weren't written until decades after they supposedly happened. In contrast, I accept that God gave the Torah on Mt. Sinai, since there exists an unbroken chain of transmission in the Jews who witnessed the event. It wasn't written down decades later, but from that event and forward. The story traces the Jewish families from Egypt, through Sinai, and even afterwards. All this detail is absent in connection with Jesus.

And if faith is what Jesus requires, then what stops another person today from popping up, and claiming HE TOO requires faith? Why shouldn't I blindly accept a new messiah? Both the new messiah today, and Jesus have equal grounds...that being faith, and no proof." ■

Contradiction

Reader: I believe there is an inconsistency between the following statements on your website:

STATEMENT 1:

Reader: I heard once the following explanation: Why should Hashem listen to the prayer of a third

person: Because though Hashem decided that the best for a person is to be sick at this moment, Hashem did not want that a third person should be in distress. Thus, if a (third) person really feels the pain of another person and davens for him, Hashem might decide that the sick person should become healthy.

Mesora: The Talmud's explanation makes sense. Your explanation does not: What perfection comes about for the sick person through the distress of a third party, that G-d would remove this sick person's suffering? Was not the victim's suffering due to his imperfection? Does he not still remain with his imperfection? Additionally, we see from G-d's response to Moses' prayer for Miriam, that G-d does not remove illness due to stress on a third party (i.e., Moses).

STATEMENT 2:

As Rabbi Reuven Mann recently recalled, "It could be due to the merit of another more perfected person, that I will obtain God's favor: God might save me, since my death could negatively impact another person." This however does not remove the prohibition to recite Tehillim for any sickness, for anyone. This concept stated by Rabbi Mann means - as the Torah taught - that God will intercede on behalf of one person, due to the perfection of another.

INCONSISTENCY:

Statement 1 implies that it doesn't make sense to say that G-d will listen to the prayer of a perfected individual so as to relieve him from distress. Statement 2 implies that G-d will save a person from death so as to prevent a negative impact on another.

I eagerly await your reply.

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: There is no contradiction: I stated the first quote which is wrong, and Rabbi Mann stated the second one. This area requires further study, but I do wish to highlight one issue.

According to Rabbi Mann, the fact that God didn't let you die was due to the prayer of the other person...my very point. God is answering the "other" person...the one who prayed; not you. And if that person did not pray, then you would die. In the end, you did not receive a stay of execution due to your merits, but merely for the benefit of another person. So what have you gained, if God spared you for the sake of another? You still remain with your flaw, and until you remove it, you deserve death.

I clearly must retract my position that God will not save one person for the prayer of another, since He did so when Moses prayed for the Jews. But we must say that He did so, since the need to destroy the Jews was now removed by Moses' increase in perfection, not the Jews' perfection. ■

Prayer & Perfection

Reader: Why are we obligated to recite the Amida? Why is Mincha the most powerful time to pray and make our requests to God?

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim: Amida, or the Shemona Essray is obligated upon us for many reasons. Primarily, this obligation teaches us that we are dependent beings, created by a Creator, and in constant need of His will so that we might continue to exist. We do not exist after He created us in an "automatic" or auto-pilot fashion. This is provable: since we could not create ourselves, our existence is therefore not due to us. It then follows the quantitative increase in our existence as well - our continued lives - is not due to us. We need God each moment to exist for another second, and another, ad infinitum. This is most profound.

Our existence also depends on many factors, including knowledge, attachment to God and His system, forgiveness by God so we may endure, physical healing, money, and an array of elements. Fascinatingly, these factors in the order as I cited, is the very order of our requests in the Amida. We ask God for His help in the order of each factor's vitality to human existence and perfection. So we learn that the Amida is also important, as it allows us to request our vital needs.

I never heard nor is it sensible that afternoon prayers should be more effective. Abraham did not pray in the afternoon, since Isaac instituted it. God in no way answered Abraham less than Isaac.

The Torah states that God hears us from wherever we call to Him. So "whenever" we call Him should be equally recognized by God. This truth also teaches that it matters none if we pray by the Western Wall, or in our homes. We are no closer to God in Israel, although living there can affect our thoughts, and help us focus on Israel's purpose. The Rabbis teach that the "Air of Israel makes one wise". But this must be understood. If someone devoid of Torah lives in Israel, he will not become wise. It is only he or she, who recognizes the significance of Israel, and who studies Torah and is imbued by Israel's history and purpose, that they will become wise.

Recognizing God as our Creator, that we are temporary creations, and seeking our needs, are the most important roles of the Amida. We are thereby humbled, and reminded of our short term here on Earth. This facilitates the removal of our attachment to futile pleasures and involvements, freeing our energies to reattach to God, as is His will, for our benefit. ■

Health



a
Torah
Perspective
on
Exercise

RABBI DANIEL MYERS

Years ago, I had the pleasure of running the New York City Marathon. Looking back at that experience, the question arises whether that jog through New York (and all the training that led up to it) was a fulfillment of the Mitzvah of “And you shall guard your souls”, or an exhausting case of teenage time wasting. Let us take a look at some of the writings of our Baalai Mesorah in an attempt to formulate a position on the merit of exercising.

Before we analyze the Halachic attitude towards exercising, we must first ask a basic and sensitive philosophical question: Can one actually prolong or shorten his stay in this world by caring or abusing his body -do we not maintain that Hashem has already determined

one’s time of death, and one’s intervention can not alter this pre-destined time? The Tosfot in Ketuvot (30a “Hakol”) writes that although we maintain “Hakol Bidai Shamaim, Chutz M’Yirat Shamaim,” everything is in God’s control except for one’s Yirat Shamayim, one can in fact, take his life before his pre-determined time if he acts in a reckless and irresponsible manner. This is why, Tosfot explains, the Gemara prohibits one from walking in a dangerous place. Similarly, the Rambam (Pirush Mishnayot Pesachim Sof Perek Dalet) writes that one who does not seek medical help for his ailment may hasten his own death and die before his prescribed time. This concept of being proactive regarding one’s own health is in line with the Pasuk of V’rapoh Yirapeh, which demands one to heal himself when he is ill, and not wait passively for Divine Intervention.[1]

Regarding the Halachic attitude towards exercising, the Rambam writes in Hilchot Daiot (4:1,2,14): “It is Darchai Hashem to have a healthy body since it is most difficult to develop spiritually when one is sick. Therefore, one must refrain from activities and foods, which harm the Guf (body), and perform activities that strengthen the body. Exercise and a proper diet help preserve the Guf, while idleness and an unhealthy diet harm the Guf.” It appears quite evident from the Rambam that attending to one’s physical health certainly is a Mitzvah. This Mitzvah is not a typical Halachic activity like Kiddush or Brachot that is extensively dealt with and clearly delineated by the Poskim. This Mitzvah is more subjective and must be treated on a case-by-case basis; an individual born to a family with heart disease may need a different regimen than one born to a family with no history of such complications.

Although it is clear that a healthy lifestyle, which includes a well-balanced diet and proper exercise, is a Mitzvah, it is crucial that we approach this topic with the proper Torah perspective. The Rambam writes the following in the fifth Perek of the Shmoneh Perakim, his introduction to Pirkei Avot:

“Man needs to subordinate his soul’s powers to one goal, namely, spiritual perfection. He should direct all of his actions, both when at motion and when at rest, and all of his conversation toward this goal so that none of his actions are in any way frivolous, I mean an action not leading toward to this goal. He should make his aim only the health of his body when he eats, drinks, sleeps, is awake, and is in motion or at rest. The purpose of his body’s health is that the soul finds

its instruments healthy and sound in order that it can be directed toward spiritual growth. On the basis of this reasoning, he would not aim at pleasure alone, choosing the most pleasant food and drink, and similarly with the rest of his conduct. Rather, he would aim at what is most useful. If it happens to be pleasant, so be it, and if it happens to be repugnant, so be it. On the basis of this reasoning, the art of medicine is given a very large role with respect to the virtues, the knowledge of God, and attaining true happiness.”

Maintaining one’s body is clearly a most important means towards spiritual perfection; therefore, one must never be too focused on the means, and lose sight of his true goals. The lion’s share of one’s activities must certainly be in the spiritual arena – Talmud Torah, Chessed, characteristic refinement, etc. – while the Guf is maintained as a Kli, a vessel, which is essential for his pursuit of spirituality. Obviously, one with this goal would spend much more time and energy on the latter. Even when spending time on the Guf, one may try to be involved in the spiritual, such as exercising while listening to a Shiur, riding a stationary bike while reading a Saifer, etc.

Regarding our original question about running a marathon, as we said, one’s specific regimen is subjective and should be discussed with a doctor, so we cannot say what is appropriate for each individual. However, one must be wary about spending so much time on his physical well-being, and must challenge himself with questions regarding values and priorities. Maybe after one’s visit to the doctor, for guidance regarding matters of the body, one should meet with his Rabbi for guidance regarding matters of the soul! ■

[1] Regarding Divine Providence and human intervention see Yoma 85b, Rabainu Chananel Chagiga 4b, Rambam Shmoneh Perakim chapter 8, Moreh Nevuchim 2:48, Ramban Milchamot Hashem, Sanhedrin 74b, Radvaz 3:444, Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 618:1, Alshich Braishit 37:18, Maharal Chidushai Agadoth Rosh Hashana 16a, Ohr Hachaim Braishit 37:21, Birkai Yosaif Yoreh Daiah 336, Tashbaz 1:51, Malbim Shmuel Bet 24:10, The Lonely Man of Faith by Rav Soloveitchik end of chapter 8, Yechaveh Daat 1:61. However, see also Emunoth V’daiot 4:5, Chovot Levavot Shaar Bitachon chapter 3, Ibn Ezra Mishpatim “V’rapoh Yirapeh,” Ramban Vayikra 26:11, Tosfot Baba Bathra 144b “Hakol Bidai”, Iggeret Hakodesh #25 by the Baal Hatanya, Shaim Olam by the Chafaiz Chaim chapter 3.

Collected from published news sources



WorldNEWS

JANUARY 12, 2007



Stereo Images

NASA's twin Solar Terrestrial Relations Observatories (STEREO) sent back their first images of the sun this week and with them a view into the sun's mounting activity.

Image above: A close up of loops in a magnetic active region. These loops, observed by STEREO's SECCHI/EUVI telescope, are at a million degrees C. This powerful active region, AR903, observed here on Dec. 4, produced a series of intense flares over the next few days. Credit: NASA ■

US air strike kills Al Qaeda's East African commander

Officials in Washington say these air strikes are based on credible intelligence of the presence of al Qaeda's regional leaders in the seafont jungle areas to which they and Islamist leaders headed after being routed in Mogadishu. Fazul, a Comorian, was a big fish. His FBI dossier is long and diverse. DEBKAF's counter-terror sources report he was one of al Qaeda's most outstanding, versatile and elusive commanders. ■

Baghdad Battle No. 2 Has Begun

Joint US-Iraqi forces were deep into their biggest operation ever to subdue the Iraqi capital

forty-eight hours before US president George W. Bush formally unveiled his new Iraq plan on Wednesday Jan. 10. The operation started out against "terrorist hideouts" in and around the Sunni stronghold of Haifa Street. Some 50 insurgents and jihadists were reported killed while fighting back with mortar and rocket-propelled grenade fire. "A great number of Arab nationals," many of them Syrians, were detained, according to the Iraqi government. ■



Restoring a Mud-Brick Tribute to a Departed Egyptian King

Before the great pyramids, ancient Egyptian kings left less grandiose monuments to themselves: fortress like sanctuaries enclosed by mud-brick walls. Inside these mortuary complexes, people presumably gathered to worship and perpetuate the memory of their departed ruler. The crumbling, almost vanished remains of such structures, archaeologists say, attest to the political hierarchy and religion of the newly unified Egyptian state, beginning more than 5,000 years ago. As symbols of the early power of kings and their roles in the cosmic order, these mysterious funerary centers are considered ancestral in purpose to the classic pyramids of Giza. ■



Apple Waves Its Wand, Again

SAN FRANCISCO, Jan. 9 - Remember the fairy godmother in "Cinderella"? She'd wave her wand and turn some homely and utilitarian object, like a pumpkin or a mouse, into something glamorous and amazing, like a carriage or fully accessorized coachman.

Evidently, she lives in some back room at Apple.

Every time Steve Jobs spies some hopelessly ugly, complex machine that cries out for the Apple touch — computers, say, or music players — he lets her out.

At the annual Macworld Expo in San Francisco, Mr. Jobs demonstrated the latest result of godmother wand-waving. He granted the wishes of millions of Apple followers and rumor mongers by turning the ordinary cellphone into ... the iPhone.

At the moment, the iPhone is in an advanced prototype stage, which I was allowed to play with for only an hour; the finished product won't be available in the United States until June, or in Europe until the fourth quarter. So this column is a preview, not a review.

Already, though, one thing is clear: the name iPhone may be doing Apple a disservice. This machine is so packed with possibilities that the cellphone may actually be the least interesting part. ■



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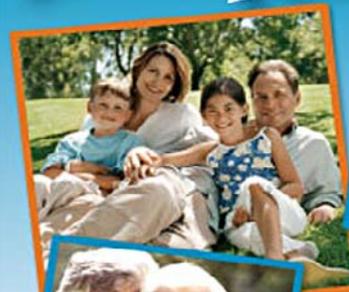
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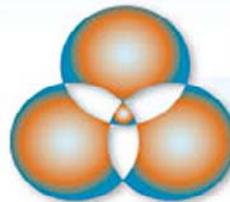
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