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Weekly Parsha

Matot Masai

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“Take vengeance against the people of Midyan and afterwards you will be gathered to your nation.” (BeMidbar 31:2)

The closing passages of Parshat Balak provide an introduction to our

(continued on next page)

FATAL FANTASY

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE & TERRORIST NEGOTIATIONS: DOOMING JUDAISM & JEWS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

This week, ArutzSheva.com reported as follows:

“International Jewish bodies have called upon the Vatican to “clarify” a new Papal edict expanding use of an old prayer that asks Divine help for Jews to overcome their blindness. Pope Benedict XVI issued a directive last week, authorizing expanded use of a prayer service known as the Tridentine Mass. The phrase “perfidious Jews” was removed from the liturgy in question by Pope John XXIII in 1959, such that the anti-Semitism that accompanied it for centuries is not self-evident. However, the prayer, recited on Good Friday, still includes a prayer for the conversion of the Jews, asking Divine help in removing “the veil from their hearts” and overcoming their “blindness.”

The article also isolated a callout, which reads,

“How do we now sit and dialogue when the other side believes we are blind and need to be converted?”

Note the words “How do we NOW sit and dialogue...” What must strike

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(Matot/Masai cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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passage. Women from the nations of Moav and Midyan enter the camp of Bnai Yisrael. These women seduce members of Bnai Yisrael. The heathen women use these illicit relationships to lead their partners into idolatrous practices. Discipline and sexual restraint begin to break down. Ultimately, Zimri – a leader of Shevet Shimon – publicly enters into a romantic liaison with a woman from Midyan. The woman – Kazbi – is a princess of Midyan. Hashem strikes Bnai Yisrael with a plague. Pinchas, the son of Elazar the Kohen, takes action. He executes Zimri and Kazbi. In response to Pinchas' zealotry, the Almighty ends the plague.

In Parshat Pinchas, Hashem commands Moshe to avenge the evil done by the people of Midyan. Moshe is told to "afflict" Midyan. Now, Hashem seems to repeat this command. He tells Moshe to take vengeance against the people of Midyan. This raises an obvious question. Why did Hashem repeat the command? Why is the command first stated in Parshat Pinchas and then repeated in our parasha?

It seems that each command is unique. The command in Parshat Pinchas does not indicate any specific action. It establishes a relationship. Bnai Yisrael is to view the nation of Midyan as an adversary. Our relationship with Midyan should be predicated upon this assumption. We should assume that the people of Midyan feel animosity towards Bnai Yisrael. We should act aggressively to protect ourselves. However, this command does not include a specific obligation to wage war.

The command in our parasha is more specific. It requires engaging Midyan in war. Moshe is commanded to seek out the people of Midyan and wage war against them.

Our pasuk makes an interesting connection. Hashem tells Moshe that he will die only after completing this task. This implies that Moshe's involvement is essential. Why is Moshe's participation important?

In order to answer this question, we must review the Torah's comments concerning Moshe's special status. In the final passages of the Torah, Moshe's uniqueness is described. The Torah writes that no other individual can achieve Moshe's prophetic level. The Torah also explains that the wonders performed through Moshe exceed those executed through other prophets. These passages teach another important lesson. The pesukim link Moshe's prophecy to the wonders he performed. Moshe was the greatest prophet. His closeness to the Almighty was reflected in the profound level of his prophecy.

This same intimacy allowed Moshe to perform wonders beyond the ability of other prophets.

Based upon the above analysis, Gershonides answers our question. He explains that Moshe could not die until Midyan was destroyed. This is because this war would be fought through the Almighty. Hashem would destroy Midyan through His wonders. Moshe's participation allowed for the performance of the greatest miracles. No other prophet could destroy Midyan as totally and wondrously.[1]

"And Moshe sent one thousand men from each tribe as an army. And with them was Pinchas the son of Elazar the Kohen as part of the army. And in his hand was the sacred vessels and the trumpets of the teruah." (BeMidbar 31:6)

This passage presents a problem. Hashem commanded Moshe to destroy Midyan. As we have explained, Moshe's involvement was crucial. Yet, Moshe did not lead the nation into war. Instead, he sent Pinchas. Why did Moshe, himself, not lead the nation into battle?



Da'at Zekaynim offers two answers to this question. Let us consider each answer. We will begin with the second explanation. Da'at Zekaynim explains that Pinchas had previously executed Kazbi – a princess of Midyan. He had begun to fulfill a mitzvah. Punishing the people of Midyan completed this mitzvah. It is appropriate for the person that initiates a mitzvah to complete it.

Therefore, Moshe charged Pinchas with the duty of completing this mitzvah.[2]

This answer presents a problem. According to this interpretation, this war completed a mitzvah initiated by Pinchas. Therefore, Pinchas was chosen to complete the mitzvah he had begun. However, the exact identity of this mitzvah is not clear. Pinchas executed Kazbi because she was publicly engaged in sexual activity with Zimri. The war against Midyan was a response to Hashem's command to destroy a dangerous enemy. These seem to be two separate commands.

Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik Zt"l deals with this problem. He explains that a more careful analysis does indicate that a single mitzvah underlies Pinchas' previous actions and the war against Midyan. Let us reconsider Rav Soloveitchik's analysis.

Pinchas acted within the law in executing Zimri and Kazbi. The Torah prohibits sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews. Primarily, this prohibition restricts relations in the context of marriage. However, even casual sexual relations are prohibited.

(continued on next page)

If a liaison is flaunted publicly, a zealot is permitted to execute the parties involved. Pinchas acted within the authority granted by this law. He was such a zealot.[3]

Maimonides points out that the Jew and the non-Jew are not executed for the same reason. The Jew is executed for violating the laws of the Torah. Obviously, non-Jewish partner cannot be punished for this reason. The non-Jew is not obligated to observe the laws of the Torah. Maimonides seems to maintain that the non-Jewish woman is executed because she served as the vehicle of the Jews abandonment of sexual morals.

Maimonides compares the status of this woman to another case. This is the case of an animal involved in an act of bestiality. The animal is destroyed. Clearly, the animal is not responsible to observe the Torah's laws. It is destroyed because it was involved in an act of sexual depravity. In our case as well, the woman is executed because of her association with immorality.

Maimonides adds another point. In order to understand this comment, a brief introduction is required. Bnai Yisrael defeated Midyan. They executed the men. However, initially they spared the women. Moshe was angered. He observed that these women had corrupted the men of Bnai Yisrael. Maimonides explains Moshe's objection. Moshe maintained that it was inappropriate to spare these individuals. They were associated with corrupting the sexual morality of Bnai Yisrael.

Based on Maimonides' comments, Rav Soloveitchik explains that a single mitzvah underlies Pinchas' initial actions and the war against Midyan. Pinchas executed Kazbi because of her association with Zimri's corruption. In order to complete this mitzvah, he led Bnai Yisrael in battle against Midyan. The commandment was completed with the execution of the women of Midyan. These women – like Kazbi—were put to death because they were associated with the corruption of Bnai Yisrael.[4]

Now let us consider Da'at Zekaynim's first answer. The first answer is that Moshe had received a kindness from Midyan. Moshe killed an Egyptian taskmaster. Moshe knew his life was in danger. He fled to Midyan. He remained there until Hashem commanded him to return to Egypt and rescue Bnai Yisrael. Da'at Zekaynim explains that it was inappropriate for Moshe to lead a campaign against Midyan. Midyan had provided him sanctuary. Moshe was obligated in hakarat hatov – acknowledging the benefit that he had received from Midyan. [5]

This answer presents a problem. Hashem commanded Moshe to wage war against Midyan. The Almighty wanted Moshe to be involved. This involvement was necessary to assure that Midyan would be devastated. This seems to mean that

Pinchas was merely Moshe's proxy. Moshe was the true leader that destroyed Midyan. In short, Moshe did not spare Midyan in any way. How did Moshe demonstrate his hakarat hatov? He destroyed Midyan thoroughly! Where was Moshe's show of appreciation?

It seems that this answer is based upon a novel understanding of hakarat hatov. We usually, understand hakarat hatov as an obligation to repay a debt. An individual who receives a kindness is obligated to repay the kindness. This interpretation of hakarat hatov confounds us in attempting to understand the position of the Da'at Zekaynim. We can now better define our question. In order to repay a debt, some significant benefit must be proffered. Moshe did not show any mercy towards Midyan. He did not repay his debt through providing a substantial kindness in return.

Apparently, Da'at Zekaynim understands hakarat hatov in a more literal sense. Hakarat hatov means that we are obligated to demonstrate that we recognize receiving a benefit. Generally, the most meaningful act of recognition is to return the kindness. However, sometimes this is not appropriate. Moshe faced this situation. He was commanded to completely destroy Midyan. He could not show mercy. Hashem's commandment prevented him from returning the kindness he had received.

Nonetheless, the obligation of hakarat hatov applies. Even when we cannot return the kindness we must acknowledge its receipt. Moshe provided this acknowledgement. He refused to personally lead Bnai Yisrael into battle. This was not an act of kindness. However, it was an acknowledgement of the kindness received.

“These are the journeys of Bnai Yisrael that went out from Egypt in their groups through Moshe and Ahron.” (BeMidbar 33:1)

The final parasha of Sefer BeMidbar reviews the travels of Bnai Yisrael in the wilderness. The commentaries are concerned with the inclusion of this material in the Torah. The Torah is written very concisely. The recounting of the journeys in the wilderness seems superfluous.

Rashi explains that these journeys are recounted in order to communicate a key aspect of the wilderness experience. The Almighty had decreed that the nation should spend forty years wandering in the wilderness. Hashem did not constantly move Bnai Yisrael from one location to the next. The nation only traveled forty-two times during the forty years.[6]

This is a fitting conclusion for Sefer BeMidbar. The sefer recounts the changing of the relationship between

the Almighty and His nation. This change was brought about by the nation's refusal to enter the land of Israel. Hashem decreed that Bnai Yisrael should wander in the wilderness for forty years. According to Rashi, these passages capture the nature of this decree.

Maimonides offers an alternative explanation for the description of the various journeys. He explains that the wilderness experience involved a great miracle. The nation was sustained for forty years in a land of complete desolation. The Almighty provided Bnai Yisrael with water, food and all other needs. The generation that experienced these wanderings could recognize the miracle of survival. However, future generations would not have the benefit of experiencing the forty years of wandering. These future generations might not appreciate the extent of this miracle. They might assume that the nation traveled near populated areas. They might believe that the path taken by Bnai Yisrael avoided arid areas. The Torah provides a detailed description of the journey. All of the stations at which the nation camped are enumerated. This route does not pass through populated areas. The path described in the parasha leads through an arid, desolate wilderness. With this information the reader can appreciate the miracles required for Bnai Yisrael's survival during these forty years.[7] ■

[1] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1997), p 142.

[2] Da'at Zekaynim, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 31:6.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Esurai Beyah 12:4.

[4] Rav Shimon Yosef Miller, Shai LaTorah (Jerusalem 5755), volume 3, pp. 214-215.

[5] Da'at Zekaynim, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 31:6.

[6] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 33:1.

[7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Moreh Nevuchim, volume 3, chapter 50.

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Relative VS Absolute Reality

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Written by student

Rabbi Chait recently gave a brief Dvar Torah at a friend's Bris Milah. I will recount his words as best as I can...

Ethics 5:19 teaches that we are to be as the students of Abraham, and not as the students of Bilam the wicked. This is quite obvious. It is equally obvious that we need not be admonished to "Be as the student of Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l, and not as the students of Hitler", may his name be erased. But as this lesson is sourced in the Mishna, there must be a deeper lesson.

The Mishna isolates three character traits of Abraham's students: a good eye, a lowly spirit, and a humble personality.

A good eye means that the person is as happy with his friend's successes, as he is with his own. He is not "eyeing" his friend's success with envy, thus the term "good eye".

The second quality of Abraham's students is a lowly spirit. This means that he is not full of himself. When discussing the fate of Sodom with God,

Abraham said, "I am dust and ashes". He was an extremely humble human being.

And the third quality is a humble personality: where he has no categories determining with whom he can and cannot associate...he sits with all men. (Rashi)

The students of Bilam were the exact opposite; they had an evil eye, as Bilam saw the Jews dwelling and was envious. They had a high spirit, as Bilam refused to go with Balak's first servants: Bilam's estimation of himself was quite high. And Bilam's students also had no capacity to sit among others as equals, but possessed intolerance of mankind.

But what is the underlying message?

Relative vs. Absolute

What the Rabbis of the Talmud are teaching with this comparison is a deep idea: we are not to live a "relative" lifestyle, where all is measured by my comparative, or relative status. Rather, God desires that we live in the world of the "absolute". There exists only one thing: true reality, i.e., all that God created and His intended values for man. God does not desire man to live in an imagined, competitive mode, where all I seek is a fantasized status...always comparing myself to others. [In this case, man becomes the object of life, and God is abandoned.] God seeks that man lives in line with truth, and this means that we abandon the relative lifestyle, and search for absolute truth: that which is truly real, what God intends for us, and that which offers the greatest joy. We cannot enjoy life if we live based on relative values, and seek glory in our minds. Our enjoyment is in increased knowledge of the Creator. The relative self must be abandoned, replaced by a yearning to know more and more of God's absolute wisdom.

As I review Rabbi Chait's words now, I cannot help but sense my deep joy and total fulfillment in the unparalleled Torah life with which Rabbi Chait has endowed me, and hundreds of others these past 30 years. No words can thank him for his dedicated and tireless decades of Torah, and personal interest in each of his students.

I thought into his Dvar Torah, and realized these three traits identify the three parties with whom we can associate: our friends, ourselves, and strangers. We are to share in our friends' successes as if they are our own: a good eye. For God created him as He created me. We are to view ourselves realistically, as creations; thus, a lowly spirit. And we are to recognize that God's will extends to all of mankind: a humble personality.

Rabbi Chait concluded: Living in accord with absolute reality is difficult. So difficult is it, that only with God's help in the Messianic era, will our "hearts be circumcised". (Deut. 30:6) God will assist us in this challenge. May the Messiah be ushered in soon, that we may live lives guided by absolute truths, and not relative matters. ■

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Reality

us are not the sustained views of the Church, but the “surprise” of Jews at this Christian prayer that Jews “overcome our blindness” and accept Jesus. This has always been the Christian doctrine. It is not news “now”.

Surprise

The question is why the Church’s condemnation of Jewish beliefs is such a surprise to Jews. The word “surprise” must be defined, and when it is, the answer will emerge.

A surprise is that which is unexpected. This means that Jewish leaders did not expect the Church to include a prayer for Jews to convert. They wonder how they can “now” continue interfaith dialogue. Why are Jews surprised? This stems from a fatal flaw not monopolized by leaders and politicians, but by all mankind. That flaw is “imagination” or fantasy.

What leads Jewish leaders to interfaith dialogue? What allows Israel to negotiate with murderers? Reality clearly teaches that these actions are futile and lethal. It is man’s imagination that assumes change might take place. The Jews’ wish to be recognized by the world, lures the Jew into a fantasy state where he truly believes the Church recognizes Judaism. He truly believes he can “talk” murderers into laying down their arms and turning around 180°. It is the unexamined path, and baseless fantasies that sentences the Jewish future without parole.

God’s Warning

Judaism’s primary fundamental is to adhere to reason, and dispel fallacy. God teaches the Jews this primary lesson:

“And God spoke to Moses saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them, ‘I am Hashem your God. Like the ways of the land of Egypt that you dwelled therein, do not do. And like the ways of the land of Canaan that I bring you there, do not do, and in their statutes do not walk. My laws you shall perform, and My statutes you shall guard to walk in them; I am Hashem your God. And you shall guard My statutes and My laws, that man shall perform them and live by them; I am God.’” (Lev. 18:1-5)

Let us understand more profoundly God’s exact wording. Why do we need to be reminded here, “I am Hashem your God” and also, “that we dwelled” in Egypt? I believe God reiterates His being God – the Creator – to underline the very danger in assimilation, which God addresses in these verses: man ignores that God alone dictates what is real and true.

If we can ponder that momentarily, we realize – how impossible it is – that without God, nothing can exist. And equally true is this: ONLY that which He created exists. That may appear obvious, but it is not to many of us. Man rarely checks his beliefs before accepting them. He does not ask, “Is this God’s creation, or my imagination?”

To help steer us away from the fallacies of the nations, God reiterates, “I am God”. Meaning, “Accept only that which I created, for only THAT is true and in existence”. Again: if God didn’t create something, it does not exist. This lesson alone should suffice for someone attached to reality. He or she will realize that if God did not create something, then there is nothing to speak about. Therefore, the practices of the nations where they accept stone and wood figures as possessing power, is false.

But God also warns us here “why” we might accept idolatry, and a life of imagination, which idolatry truly is. We accept falsehood because “we dwelled in Egypt”. What does that mean?

Approval or Destruction?

Our ego, teamed with the very dwelling amongst others, creates a need to gain recognition. Therefore, many Jews accept even the most foolish, imagined beliefs, since it offers them “social approval”. It boils down to our self-image. We seek accolades of other nations, so we adopt their ways in an attempt to gain their applause, which in turn offers us a false, self-validation.

In truth, we achieve just the opposite when we mimic others...our insecurity is exposed as we convey this message: “We are nothing if you don’t like us, so we will copy you”.

Who does a movie star admire: his fans, or a greater star? Certainly it is the latter. Why? It is because when others praise man, he now accepts that he is better than they are. He despises the fans to some degree. He no longer needs them. So too: when we strive to mimic others, they will not applaud, but they will reject us.

A wise Rabbi once taught:

“Jacob would not permit Eisav the justification to act upon his anger and destroy Jacob. Jacob did not afford Eisav the opportunity to find fault with him and in this way, Eisav could in no way assuage his guilt and justify acting upon his hatred toward his brother.”

Jacob told Eisav that he was steadfast in God’s ways even while working under the wicked Lavan. It is the committed Jew who has nothing to worry about, not the assimilated Jew. If we would hold fast to our Judaism, other nations would have no basis to despise us, and attack us. We would even

offer them examples of God’s perfect system, regarding which they would most certainly appreciate. The Rabbi also said this:

“There is one further principle underlying the emotion of hatred, namely, the aggressive expression of one’s hatred toward another person always seeks out a justification from reality. The Koran, which expresses great hatred toward the Jews on numerous occasions, often points out that the Jews transgressed their commandments and are therefore lowly people. Sura 2:63 writes: “And well you know there were those among you that transgressed the Sabbath, and We said to them, ‘Be you apes, miserable slinking!’ And we made it a punishment exemplary for all the former times and for the latter; and an admonition to such as are God-fearing.” The Koran claims that the Jews did not adhere to the tenets of their own law and thus according to their Torah the Jews are despicable people. In this way Mohammed tried to justify the expression of his hatred toward the Jews in the Koran.”

Fatal Fantasies

Man has a tendency to accept as true, that which is repeated enough, what is in print, and that which is accepted by others. Man also believes as true, that which caters to his personal needs. Case and point: the belief that the Church recognizes Judaism. Jews want this to be true, since Jews place world accolades above truth. But truth cannot be denied: truth does not go away. And the truth here is that Judaism is diametrically opposed to Christianity, as black is opposed to white. Judaism’s primary tenets are: God alone retains all focus, God is not physical, and man is never to be deified. The Church has the opposite opinion on all three tenets. Thus, there is no possibility of interfaith dialogue.

If Jews were living in reality, they would have studied what makes Judaism, Judaism. But since Jews treasure alien accolades over the pursuit of truth, there exists a preponderance of Jewish leaders who are suddenly “surprised” at the Church’s prayers. Our Jewish leaders don’t know what Judaism is.

In truth, there cannot be any dialogue. We don’t proselytize others: we leave their lives to their own freewill as God demands. But we also must not delude ourselves, when God Himself has warned us so clearly not to learn from the ways of others. We must not seek their approval, for their ways are idolatrous. The ironic truth is, other religions should not accept interfaith dialogue with us either, since it violates their King James version too, as God says Jews must not learn from others.

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Reality

A Doomed Israel

It is this fantasy lifestyle that sustains Israel's position to talk to murderers. Israel seeks a political platform, and ignores God's words. We just read the Song of the Day yesterday that states the following:

"If only My people would listen to Me; if Israel would follow My ways, in an instant I would subdue their foes; and against their tormentors [I would] turn My hand". (Psalms 81)

We have guarantees from the Creator. We have proof of His providential protection from countless miracles and victorious wars. When we obeyed Him, He protected us. But this seems to carry no weight anymore. Although we must not rely on miracles, nor ignore political maneuvers, we must not deny God's acts and promises. Israel ignores history. God is simply not part of Israel's equation. So Israel dooms itself to increased casualties.

Why are Israel's religious leaders not insistent on pushing a Torah platform, for a land only claimed through the Torah's history? Our claim of Israel is based on the Torah history regarding God's oath to Abraham...yet, we ignore God's terms of residence. And by our further ignorance of His warnings, we will be ousted by God.

God's Torah decrees death for those who kill. This makes sense, since leaving a murderer alone can invite your own death. Christians accept this Biblical passage (Gen. 9:6). The U.S. sentences murderers to death. So why does Israel negotiate with terrorists? It is as God forewarned: "Do not learn from the nations".

If however the terrorists met with a deathblow each time they killed a single Jew, they would cease their murders from both a strategic decision, and ultimately, because their murderers would no longer exist.

Israel has adopted the fantasy life where anything imagined is possible. But just as imagination cannot grow back a severed limb, imagination cannot convert terrorist into peace lovers. Imagination cannot undo the decades of martyrdom indoctrination indelibly tattooed in thousands of Arab hearts.

If you are not surprised that Arabs wish us dead, don't be surprised that the Church wants us converted. In both cases, it is a denial of reality that promotes a fantasy of hope.

The Correct Path

What we must do is change our course, and accept only that which reality dictates. Forget about interfaith dialogue. We share no common ground. And if we do engage in this dialogue, it displays just how blind we are to Judaism. This does not mean we should not admonish the Church if it does anything to counter the American freedoms guaranteed to all Jews.

We are responsible first to our own, and this responsibility is to make the Torah truths known. It demands we educate Jews towards a path where reason and proof are the sole arbiters of our actions; where fallacies and baseless notions are rejected. Judaism does not impose anything, on

anyone. But we must also be courageous enough to select God's words over man's accolades, and follow what He knows to be reality, not what we wish to be true.

If we choose the path of reality, then God's proven Torah words and laws must be upheld on all platforms, starting with Israel. Jewish leaders should be courageous and responsible to fulfill their roles and their debt to all Jews...or they should step down.

An Israel governed by Torah is the only Israel: its leaders the only true leaders.

It is something I hope I see in my lifetime. ■

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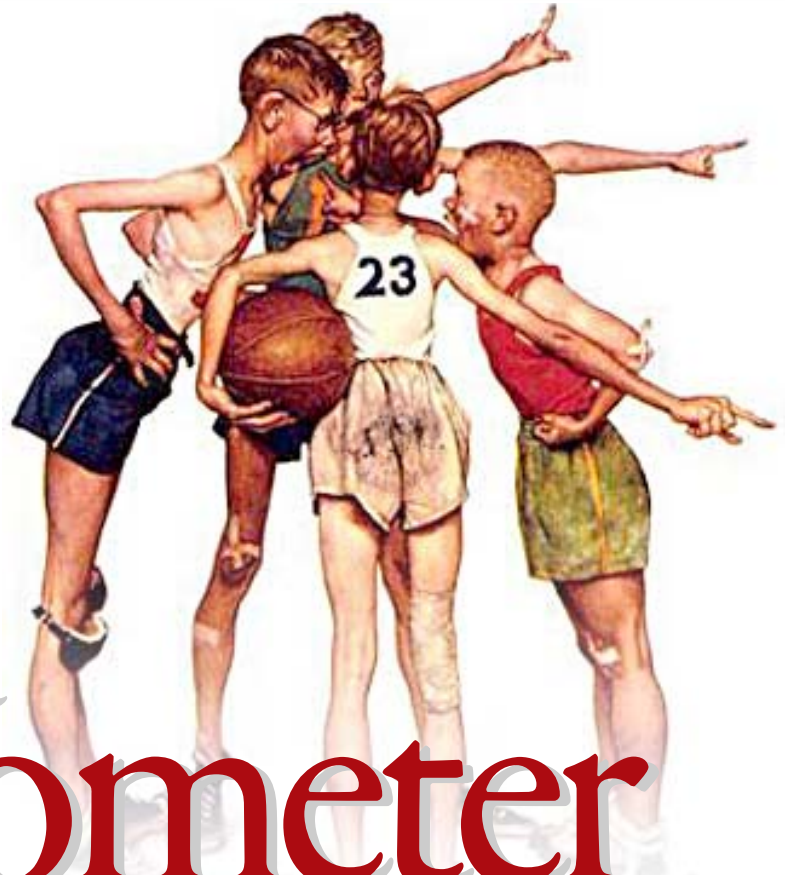
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the Ego as a Thermometer

MATT SCHNEEWEISS

"It is sooooo hot in here!" "It is freezing in here!"

Whenever I hear someone say something like this, I want to ask them: What do you mean by "it"?

When a person says, "It's hot" or "It's cold," what the person really means is "I am hot" or "I am cold." Such a person is really making a statement about the temperature relative to himself or herself, but couching that statement in objective terms. What is really a subjective feeling is being treated as an objective quality of the room, in the same way one might say, "This room is off-white" or "This room is empty." In truth, it is more precise to say, "I feel hot" or "I feel cold."

"So what?" you might ask, "People speak imprecisely all of the time. Everyone knows what they really mean."

Believe it or not, I have seen many people get into arguments over the temperature in a room. One guy will complain, "It's freezing in here, let's turn on the heat!" and the other guy will respond, "What do you mean? It's stuffy in

here! You're crazy!" Each one of these individuals is making the same error: treating a personal feeling as an objective reality.

As long as each disputant treats his position as an objective statement, there is no room for resolution. If I say, "The earth is flat" and you say "The earth is not flat," only one of us can be correct. We can examine the properties of the common object of discussion and come to an agreement. But when one person says, "It's cold" and the other person says, "It's warm," they won't get anywhere because they are talking about different "it"s. If both of them would recognize that they are really just making statements about themselves, they would go about settling their quarrel differently.

In a nutshell, the mistake being made is confusing matters of taste with matters of truth. Even in seemingly innocuous matters, the division between these two realms should be kept in mind. ■

Matt Schneeweiss authors the blog:
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Letters



Letters

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Al Qaeda Report via CNN.com -- July 12, 2007 5:57 PM EDT

Al Qaeda is stepping up efforts to sneak terrorists into the U.S. and has rebuilt most of its capability to strike here, an intelligence estimate states, according to The Associated Press. ■

Forcing Freewill?

Elyn: Shalom! I appreciated the article "One Path To G-d," and it makes me wonder why, then, do Jews not involve themselves in proselytizing so that other people can also join us on the One True Path? Why does our vision -- even in times of Mashiach -- not include everyone's conversion to Judaism?

Thank you,
Ellyn Hutt (Denver)

Mesora: In fact, we do pray each day that "all sons of flesh" recognize God. But it must be through their free will. Coercing or proselytizing violates God's will that each man use his free will to realize and fulfill God's will. The prophets do however teach that gentiles will "stream to Jerusalem" to learn Torah in Messianic times. God will assist all to benefit from the ultimate state of perfection. As God's will extends equally to all men and women who seek Him. ■

Fiery Answer

Joshua: Dear Rabbi Ben-Chaim, Thank you for the article in the last JT on Torah Study Methodology and asking the right questions. It was very thought provoking. I have some questions on the particle area of Torah concerning the fiery serpents.

You suggest, "If there were two aspects to their punishment (serpents and fiery), there must be a reason for both. So 'serpents' come to correct evil speech, and 'fiery' comes to correct their denial of the good manna."

I can see the connection between serpents and evil speech. As Rashi says, "Let the serpent who was punished due to his evil talk come and exact punishment from those who spoke evil." I do not, however, see the connection between fiery and denial of the good manna. Could you explain how these are related? It seems from the Rashi that both evil speech, and denial of the good manna are suggested by the serpents. As he goes on to say, "Let the serpent come, to whom everything tastes as one, and exact punishment from those who denied the good."

I would like to offer another explanation for the question "why fiery?" which also answers the question "why copper?" Please let me know what you think of my conclusion, because I am not sure that I have arrived at a proper answer.

According to a footnote in an English translation of the Chumash, Rashi says that Moshe made the serpent from copper because of the similarity between the Hebrew words for serpent, "nachash", and between copper, "nichoshes". This is my idea: Perhaps Moshe understood that the aspect of fiery "seraph", was to direct the people to examine their thoughts "saraaph", so he demonstrated this by choosing to make the serpent (nachash) out of copper (nechoshes). One similarity in spelling might bring to mind another. Psalm 139:23-24 "Examine me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts (saaraph). And see if a way of rebellion is within me; and lead me in the way of eternity."

Joshua Plank

Mesora: I enjoyed your answer, which is quite creative and intriguing.

Thank you Joshua,

Moshe Ben-Chaim ■

Motives & Minds

David: I thank you for sending me the Jewish Times each week. I read with interest your response to the letter in the July 6 issue expressing a preference for the Conservative movement. I tend to agree with most of your answer, but there are two points on which I differ.

You suggest that there have been no brilliant minds in the Conservative and Reform movements and that the leaders of these movements were/are not seekers of truth. While these groups have been in existence for less than 200 years, and clearly cannot have two thousand years worth of scholarly activity, I think it is unfair to say there has been no brilliance. I have known some Conservative rabbis who were very bright and have read some of the Conservative literature--specifically A. J. Heschel--and found them full of knowledge, insight and good ideas. I believe that Rabbi Shaul Lieberman of JTS was well respected in Talmudic scholarship circles. They were just wrong about the importance of maintaining continuity in ritual practice. One can be brilliant and still be wrong.

I also think it is difficult to question the motives of these leaders. The ones I know/knew were well intentioned and strongly motivated in their search for truth. Once again, their motives may have been right, but they were wrong in their decisions, and those who follow them have been led astray.

I do not believe it is productive to attack people's motives and personality when there are so many valid arguments in support of halachic Judaism based on ideas.

David

Mesora: I do not believe their motives were correct, and I cited the motives for that very reason. I do not understand why you opine that we cannot question motives. I concede that good minds may exist in all camps. But how do you feel about the fact that we find no Maimonides, Rashis, Nachmanides, Sforno et al in the Conservative and Reformed camps? And how do you feel that these great minds unanimously held steadfast to Orthodox Judaism? ■

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