

Last week's Haftorah condemned Jewish leaders and prophets for their idolatry. Our generation is no different if our leaders do not speak out against popular Jewish, idolatrous practices...simply to preserve their profitable posts.

Right: King Saul succumbing to the idolatrous practice of attempting to contact the dead Samuel. No one is immune; we're all responsible to speak out...especially Rabbis of congregations and students.



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IN THIS ISSUE

PARSHA: DEVARIM	1-3
9TH OF AV	1,5
ABSOLUTE REALITY II	4
HARRY POTTER	6
LETTERS	7-10

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Johannesburg	5:17	Seattle	8:41
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Weekly Parsha

Devarim

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And it was in the fortieth year, in the twelfth month, on the first day of the month, Moshe spoke to Bnai Yisrael regarding all that Hashem had commanded him for them.” (Devarim 1:3)

(continued on next page)

THE NINTH OF AV

GOD'S JUSTICE & WHAT IS EVIL

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Talmud Taanis records that Tisha B'Av (the Ninth of the month of Av) is set aside for punishments. When the spies returned from their self-elected, 40-day tour of the land, it was on Tisha B'Av that they returned with their evil report, and this became the inceptional event that forecasted tragedies for many generations:

“And the people cried on that night”. (Num. 14) “God said to them, ‘You cry a cry for naught, I will establish a cry for generations.’” (Taanis 29a)

We must understand God's severe response, as well as the cause: the Jews' cry. On that first Tisha B'Av, the Jews feared the worst at the riot incited by the 10 evil spies, agreeing with the spies they could not conquer the inhabitants, and would suffer definite

(continued on page 5)

(Devarim cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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Moshe delivered the address contained in Sefer Devarim at the end of his life. Moshe's address contained a rebuke. Rashi asks why Moshe waited to deliver this rebuke. Would it not have been more appropriate to have chastised the nation earlier? Why delay encouraging the Bnai Yisrael to examine their behavior?

Rashi responds that Moshe based his decision on the actions of Yaakov. Yaakov waited until the end of his life before reprimanding Reuven for serious shortcomings. Moshe decided that he too should patiently await the end of his life before chastising the nation.

Rashi discusses Yaakov's motivation for delaying his reprimand. He explained that Yaakov feared that Reuven might abandon him and follow Esav. In order not to estrange Reuven, he did not deliver his rebuke until his death approached. Moshe also feared that he might alienate the nation. Therefore, he followed Yaakov's precedent and delayed his discussion of the nation's shortcomings.[1]

A number of questions present themselves. Let us begin with Yaakov's decision. First, why did Yaakov believe that Reuven might not accept his rebuke? This is a very serious criticism of Reuven's character. What is its basis? Second, how did Yaakov resolve this concern? Why did he feel that he could be more effective at the end of his life? Third, the laws concerning rebuke are very specific. Maimonides discusses the basic requirements of the law. He explains that when we encounter a person acting improperly we are to challenge the individual. If the behavior continues, we are to persist in correcting the person. [2] It does not seem that the law encourages postponement of this obligation. On what basis did Yaakov and Moshe delay fulfillment of their obligation to correct wrongdoers?

It seems that we must distinguish between two types of rebuke. One type is addressed towards a specific behavior. We might tell a person that he or she has indulged in gossip. A person may correct a friend for talking during prayers. Dealing dishonestly in a business transaction may occasion a reprimand. In all of these instances, the rebuke is directed at a specific action.

A second form of rebuke extends beyond any specific action. In this type of rebuke the censure is directed at the person's personality or being. Specific acts might be identified. However, the objective is to identify a pattern of behavior. This pattern reflects a basic flaw in the very essence of the individual.

These two forms of criticism have different effects. This is a direct consequence of human nature. Every person has a self-image. We strive to see ourselves positively. Our reaction to criticism is influenced by this need to maintain a positive self-image.

The first form of rebuke is relatively benign. This is because it does not seriously threaten this self-image. It is directed against a specific action. We can accept this criticism without risking our overall view of ourselves. However, the second type of rebuke strikes directly against our self-image. We are being told that we have the flaw. We might become defensive and attempt to deny the flaw. If we are repeatedly challenged with the criticism, we may seek to flee. Flight sometimes seems preferable to admitting a basic fault.

Maimonides seems to discuss the first form of rebuke. It is relatively harmless. This is the form of reprimand that should be offered immediately and as often as necessary.

Yaakov was proffering the second form of rebuke. He carefully considered the best time to level his criticism. We can understand his fear. He intended to identify a basic flaw in Reuven. He knew that every individual is sensitive to such criticism.

Yaakov waited until the end of his life. How did this delay address his concerns? If Yaakov had offered his criticism earlier, he would force Reuven to choose between only two options. He could accept Yaakov's criticism. This would require a painful personal reassessment. Alternatively, he could choose to avoid this emotional anguish and flee. However, it would have been very difficult for Reuven to reject the truth of the rebuke and remain a member of the household. Every time he encountered his father, he would be reminded of Yaakov's assessment. Even if Yaakov never repeated his criticism, Reuven would know Yaakov's opinion. This would constantly be reminded of his father's disapproval. Flight would be the only way to avoid these reminders.

Yaakov waited. As the end of his life approached, he addressed his son. He hoped he would accept the criticism. But Yaakov also accepted the possibility that Reuven might reject his reprimand. By waiting until the approach of death, Yaakov provided Reuven an alternative to flight. He could simply deny the accuracy of the insight. Yaakov would soon die. Reuven could remain a member of the household. No one would remind Reuven of his shortcoming.

Moshe understood Yaakov's concerns and the wisdom of his solution. He applied Yaakov's insights to his own situation.

(continued on next page)

(Devarim continued from page 2)

Weekly Parsha

“And I approved of the idea. And I selected from among you twelve men – one man from each tribe.” (Devarim 1:23)

Sefer Devarim begins with Moshe’s final admonishment of Bnai Yisrael. He reminds the people of their sins in the wilderness and the consequences of these misdeeds. He reviews the incident of the spies.

This incident occurred in the beginning of Bnai Yisrael’s sojourn in the wilderness. The nation was poised to enter the land of Israel. The people suggested sending spies to scout the land. Moshe asked Hashem. Hashem told Moshe to approve the suggestion. However, Hashem amended the original plan. He did not allow the people to choose the spies. He insisted that Moshe make the selection himself.

Why did Hashem insist that Moshe personally select the spies? Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra explains that Hashem knew that this task required uncommonly brave individuals. He wanted Moshe to choose spies who had the necessary courage.[3]

Seforno expands upon this explanation. Seforno explains that the report of these scouts would influence the attitude of the people. A positive report would generate enthusiasm. A negative report would discourage the people. The scouts must be individuals that will appreciate the fertility and wealth of the land. They must be capable of reporting accurately. Moshe was commanded to choose individuals who had the ability to execute this duty.[4]

What was the impact of this selection criterion? The spies returned. They delivered a negative report. Bnai Yisrael was discouraged. They did not believe they could conquer the land. They refused to follow Moshe into the land of Israel.

It seems that Hashem’s criterion did not affect the outcome of this affair. In fact, His insistence on choosing spies of courage and integrity may even have had a negative effect. These individuals were above reproach. Spies of lesser stature could have been more easily opposed. Moshe could have denounced lesser individuals and challenged their credibility. Why did Hashem insist upon a selection criterion that had no impact and seems to have contributed to a disaster?

Seforno explains Hashem’s insistence on sending these suitable individuals did have a positive affect. In order to identify the impact, we must begin by identifying the components of the spies’ report. There were three elements to the report. They described the land. They assessed the likelihood of its conquest. They evaluated the suitability of the land for occupation. Let us consider each element of their report.

The spies claimed that the land could not be conquered. It was occupied by mighty nations. The people lived in strongly fortified cities. They reported that the land was not fit for occupation. They said the land consumed its inhabitants. However, they acknowledged the overwhelming richness and fertility of the land. They even demonstrated this extraordinary fertility. They placed before the people beautiful fruit that they had brought back. In fact, they asserted that only very robust individuals could thrive in such a rich environment.[5] In other words, the spies reported the facts accurately. They praised the richness of the land. They misled the nation in their interpretation of their observations and their judgments.

Next, we must review the consequences of the nation’s sin. The Almighty decreed that the generation that had refused to enter the land would wander in the wilderness. The conquest of the land would be postponed until this generation died. The next generation would enter and conquer the land of Israel.

Upon learning of their punishment, Bnai Yisrael confessed their sin. They attempted to repent. They marched into the land of Israel. However, this was not true repentance. Real repentance required accepting the Almighty’s decree. Through advancing into the land, Bnai Yisrael was denying this decree. Hashem did not assist this attempt to defy His will. Bnai Yisrael were attacked by the inhabitants and beaten back.

Bnai Yisrael then repented again. This time the repentance was performed with a contrite attitude. The nation cried to Hashem and begged His forgiveness. This repentance was sincere.

We can now appreciate the positive affect of

Hashem’s criterion. What caused Bnai Yisrael to repent? Clearly, they were moved by Hashem’s decree. They would not enter the land of Israel. However, this does not completely explain the people’s new attitude. Why did they view this as a punishment? They had refused to enter the land!

Seforno explains that the report of the spies was crucial in reshaping Bnai Yisrael’s attitude. The spies had truthfully reported that the land was rich and fertile. The lushness of the land of Israel was never debated. Now, this generation realized that the opportunity to possess this land had been within its grasp. They had squandered the opportunity. This realization made contrition possible. In other words, without the accurate report of the spies, repentance would have been more difficult.[6] Hashem insured that this report would be delivered through His selection criterion. In short, this criterion did not prevent the nation from sinning. However, it did facilitate Bnai Yisrael’s repentance. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 1:3.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot De’ot 6:6-7.

[3] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 13:2.

[4] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Devarim 1:22.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 13:32.

[6] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Devarim 1:22.

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11:15 am: R. Ben-Chaim on Tisha B'Av

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Relative VS Absolute Reality II



“Our success is not our own”

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Written by student

Last week we discussed Rabbi Chait's comments on Pirkei Avos concerning the students of Abraham vs. the students of Bilam. Rabbi Chait spoke on Pirkei Avos' three characteristics that differentiate these two groups. The third character is a humble personality: one who has no categories determining with whom he can and cannot associate...he sits with all men. (Rashi) This week, Rabbi Chait elaborated further.

Rabbi Chait cited Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l as a very humble person. Although a giant compared to others, Rav Moshe viewed his abilities as not due to his credit at all. He was created a certain way, and never viewed his unique nature as justifying any type of arrogance. He treated all others equally.

Abraham was also a giant; yet, he associated with all types, in his desire to truly help them in their life's mission. He cared about others, even risking his life. A person must recognize that his makeup, and events that contribute to his successes and status are completely outside of his control, for the most part. This realization will offer a person a true appreciation for how little he contributes to his success and his innate abilities. And when a person possesses no false arrogance for his intelligence and his successes, he will identify with others. He will see them as equal expressions of God's will. In this manner, he will not view them as "lesser" souls, with whom it is not "appropriate" to associate. He will in fact see them as deserving as good a life as himself, and he will treat them as God wills...as equals. ■

(continued from page 1)

Tisha B'Av

defeat. Before entering the land promised to Abraham, the people wrongfully asked to spy it out. But God had already told them they would succeed in vanquishing all opposition: yet they desired a reconnaissance mission. They questioned God's word. The spies returned from Israel (Canaan) and felt those giants currently in Israel were invincible. The spies denied God's promise of military success. The Jews were frightened that these spies – leaders of the Jews – were frightened themselves. The Jews followed their lead, and were also terrified. They cried out of fear, while also denying God's promise. But what was different about "this" Jewish rebellion against God on the Ninth of Av, that God responded "You cry a cry for naught, I will establish a cry for generations"? Had not the Jews rebelled prior? What aspect of this specific rebellion warranted God's severe response for many generations to come? Is there any clue in God's words?

This Talmudic portion also cites a dispute as to whether Tisha B'Av is the appropriate day to commemorate the tragedies, which occurred. Besides the 40-year decree to remain in the desert, on the Ninth of Av, both Temples were destroyed, Turnus Rufus plowed the City, and tens of thousands were killed in the great city of Betar. Rabbi Yochanan stated that he would have instituted the "tenth" of Av in place of the Ninth. His reasoning is based on the fact that the majority of the Temple's burning was on the tenth. But the Rabbis disagreed, stating that the initiation of the punishment, which was on the Ninth, outweighs the majority of the burning on the tenth. What is the point of contention? Such an argument must be rooted in a difference of theories, not simple facts.

We also learn that the mourning period commences with the beginning of the month of Av. Why must this be so? We do not have such a law concerning the 17th of Tammuz, or regarding Taanis Esther.

To answer our questions, we must ask one more: Why does one "cry for naught"? They do so based on misplaced values. Crying for nothing means that one values something other than what is truly dictated by reality. The Jews had no reason to cry, since God promised them victory. Therefore, the Jews did not accept God as the "ultimate reality". What is God's response? Tisha B'Av...for many generations.

A day, on which God repeatedly punishes, can no longer be viewed as coincidence...it must be that God is orchestrating events, and aligning all our deserving punishments to fall out on the same day. Had no other tragedies taken place on Tisha B'Av, God's intended significance would not be realized. God's plan was to address the Jews' misconception

of what is evil. Only through repeated tragedies on the same day, will man concede that God is causing these tragedies, not nature, and not man. Through this realization, we can then identify those actions that find no favor before God. We can repent. God is underlining for us, what He considers tragic. He is changing our worldview.

On the original Tisha B'Av, the Jews cried for no reason. They should have accepted God's word as more influential than their enemies' might. God was less of a reality to them. But with a repetition of calamities on this day, we are forced to adopt God's view of what we must consider a tragedy. For this miraculous coinciding of repeated punishments identifies all of those tragedies as "God's will". This imparts to us the undeniable lesson regarding that which God deplors. One or two tragedies might be viewed as coincidence, and the lesson would be lost. Since the first Jews had a misplaced notion of what tragedy is, their warped view demanded God's correction: "You cry a cry for naught, I will establish a cry for generations." So the "repetitive" aspect of tragedies on Tisha B'Av teaches that these tragedies are due to God. It also teaches in what exact areas we have sinned, underlining what God considers to be worthy of a cry. In other cases, the Jews may have had grounds for their rebellion, such as their need for food or water. In those cases, it was their "manner" of request that was corrupt, not the "object" of their request. And at the Red Sea, the Jews were not punished for crying upon seeing Egypt race after them to kill them. Their cry was not punishable. But on Tisha B'Av, the Jews already had God's word, unlike other events, so their rebellion was "for naught".

The Jews prioritized other considerations over God. The tragedies throughout time are to correct our skewed definition of what is evil, and realign ourselves to value only that defined by God. God gave us real calamities to cry over during this time, thereby highlighting what is worthy of a cry. Of course we caused the calamities, but the timing of God's punishments was God's work. He is the only one who defines what is worthy to cry about. Therefore, due to our continued, willfully committed sins, God delayed their punishments until Tisha B'Av, so as to focus us on; 1) what is worthy to cry about, and 2) that the punishments are undeniably due to God, as they fall out on the same date throughout time.

To show that we truly believe God's lesson, that God decreed this "season" for tragedies, we express our belief with anxious "anticipation" and start the mourning period earlier than the Ninth. For our waiting until the Ninth to express any concern, gives the appearance that God's ability to continue this pattern of punishing during this season is false. As if we are not scared. Conversely, our anticipation refers to something "expected". Meaning, we no

longer deny what is worth crying for like that first generation. We accept God's lesson, that these tragedies are His doings, and with our anticipation of Tisha B'Av expressed in a preempted mourning from the 1st of Av, we testify to God's orchestration of those tragic days in the past, and His ability to mete out justice, literally "right now". Therefore, we learn that we are wise to avoid court cases in this time, lest we be punished with an unfortunate verdict now, due to our sins: God can certainly time the delivery of punishments due to us, to fall out during this time. Of course, if someone has not sinned all year, he has nothing to fear during these days, since "there is no affliction without sin". (Tal. Sabbath 55a-55b) To display our conviction in the nature of these days, we "anticipate" their arrival by commencing some measure of mourning from the first of Av.

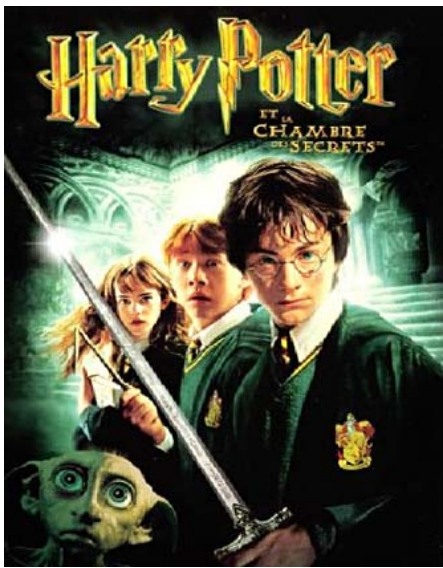
Our final question is the dispute between Rabbi Yochanan and the Rabbis regarding the focus of the tragedy: are we to commemorate the Temple's "destruction", in which case, since it burned primarily on the tenth of Av, Rabbi Yochanan would have instituted that day? Or are we recalling the "commencement" of the destruction, which occurred on the Ninth? Of course we rule in accord with the Rabbis, but we wish to understand the dispute...theoretically.

I suggest as follows: Rabbi Yochanan selected the tenth as the day of commemoration, as he viewed the "punishment" (fire) as most significant, and the majority of punishment transpired on the tenth. To Rabbi Yochanan, the day is to teach man about God's justice: justice is the category under which punishment falls.

The Rabbis disagreed. They stated that since the punishment "started" on the Ninth, therefore the Ninth was selected as the day of commemoration. The idea of something "starting" indicates a "transformation". To the Rabbis, the transformed state of the Jews from a good to an evil fate is the essence of the day. The fact we were punished is a mere result. But the fact that we deserved a punishment to commence – a transformation where God now rejected us – highlights something in the Jews that deserved this transformation: we faulted. So the dispute boils down to whether the day is to offer recognition of God's justice, or a detection of our sin.

According to either view, Tisha B'Av is a prime opportunity to focus on what truly matters. We can detect and address our shortcomings by witnessing God's justice, and examining those sins deserving His attention. "God punishes only those whom He loves." So these last few days of the Three Weeks, and Tisha B'Av can afford the person truly seeking perfection a window of opportunity. ■

the Mass Appeal of Harry Potter



RABBI MORTON MOSKOWITZ
AS WRITTEN BY
MATT SCHNEEWEISS

The question is: Why is Harry Potter so popular and successful. If something is very popular, it must satisfy deeply rooted unconscious feelings. The question is: which emotions are satisfied by Harry Potter?

The general answer is that Harry Potter satisfies childhood beliefs and fantasies. The explanation is as follows.

We emotionally feel that our wishes can come true. That is the reason why people believe in magic; deep down, they hold that their wishes can change reality. In a society based on science, this feeling still lurks in the unconscious and affects certain decisions and feelings. This unconscious belief in wish fulfillment is a very powerful emotion. When you are jealous or someone hurts you, and you can't do anything about it, you wish bad things on them as if your wishing has an effect.

The first appeal of Harry Potter is that his wishes come true, as we see from the beginning of the book with Harry's abusive foster guardians: his wishes to harm them came true even before he realized that he had powers. In other words, the first step is that when reality frustrates you, or doesn't allow you an outlet, you make recourse to an outlet in the world of fantasy in which your dreams and wishes come true.

Then Harry enters a totally new world, where everything is magical. This world is full of different people, creatures, words, clothes, sports, etc. Likewise, a child who is frustrated with reality will retreat into his own magical world of imagination in which he can be successful and not have to deal with reality. In other words, in the first step he deals with reality, but in a magical way. The second step is a step removed from reality, where he moves into his own world with no reality except for his fantasy world.

The second thing appealing thing about Harry Potter stems from the battle between good and evil in the unconscious. Here you have a child who is in conflict with evil adults - different authority figures he must deal with in reality. But through love and by not sharing the grand desires of the evil adults, Harry is able to overpower the oppressive authorities.

To summarize, the main emotions which are satisfied by those who read or watch Harry Potter: winning over reality with wishes, the escape from reality into your own world, and the fact that you have more power than your authorities.

Bruno Bettelheim is a psychologist who wrote about the importance of fairy tales. In many fairy tales (such as Jack and the Beanstalk or Hansel and Gretel) the main characters defeat their enemies through clever trickery. In these stories the protagonist defeats his enemy - who is usually bigger and stronger than himself - through strategic thinking. Even though even though the fairy tales do not discuss these ideas openly, they unconsciously teach the child that he must use his mind to defeat his enemies.

Harry Potter, on the other hand, does not rely on his intellect to escape conflict [1]. In this sense, these fairy tales are better than Harry Potter in helping the child to deal with reality. ■

[1] Indeed, Harry himself admitted this in Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix. Ron and Hermione were in the middle of recounting Harry's heroic deeds from years past when Harry stopped them: "Listen to me!" said Harry, almost angrily, because Ron and Hermione were both smirking now. "Just listen to me, all right? It sounds great when you say it like that, but all that stuff was luck - I didn't know what I was doing half the time, I didn't plan any of it, I just did whatever I could think of, and I nearly always had help . . . And I didn't get through any of that because I was brilliant at Defense Against the Dark Arts, I got through it all because - because help came at the right time, or because I guessed right - but I just blundered through it all, I didn't have a clue what I was doing" (p.327). I realize that things changed somewhat in the sixth book, but if anything, you can at least agree with Rabbi Moskowitz when it comes to the first two books.

*Matt Schneeweiss authors the blog:
<http://kankanchadash.blogspot.com>*

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



3-Year-Old Bride?

Reader: Was Rivkah actually 3 years old when she met Yitzchak?

Larry Warren

Mesora: Rashi does say this is so. Rashi teaches that Rivkah's birth was announced to Abraham right after the intended sacrifice of Isaac. At that time, Rashi says Isaac was 37 years of age, and he waited until Rivkah was of age for marriage, which is three years of age. It is quite hard to grasp this idea, that a mere child is ready for marriage, and that Isaac would accept someone this young. But we do learn that Abraham pondered God at that early age of three as well. Perhaps God granted mankind such gifted people to act as our leaders for a maximum amount of their life spans. Perhaps too, the nature of a marriage for the patriarchs centered only on the perfection of the person, and this perfection gave them the patience to wait for their spouse to mature. But they did not delay marriage once a special individual was found. Isaac must have seen qualities in Rivkah at her young age that he saw necessary for establishing the Jewish people. There-

fore, Isaac married her even though she was quite young, to guarantee she would be his wife, but he also waited for her. Back then; this type of marriage was not odd at all. But we can also understand this metaphorically...

Perhaps describing Rivkah as a young girl conveys her perfection (watering Eliezer's camels) at such a young stage of development. It teaches us that the matriarchs were not typical people, but highly perfected from their youth. The statement that Isaac married Rivkah when she was just three, means that at three years old, Rivkah already possessed some of her perfections. ■

Did God Do It?

Reader: While davening this morning I read, "Abraham raised his eyes and beheld a ram after it had

been caught in the thicket by its horns". Question: The Torah spells out in great detail this event. However, I am puzzled by the ambiguity, giving no credit to "Hashem" for the ram's sudden appearance. This sentence makes the ram's entanglement appear accidental, as if it is only natural that a ram is caught by its horns. But since Abraham told Isaac that "Hashem" will provide the animal, why doesn't he exclaim "You see Isaac, Hashem has done what He planned"?

Chaim

Mesora: Ibn Ezra teaches, "Isaac could not have been older, for if this were so, Isaac would have deserved a much greater mention in Torah, since he sacrificed his life, whereas Abraham did not. Again, Isaac could not have been five years of age, for the Torah teaches that Isaac carried the wood for the sacrifice, something a small boy cannot do. Ibn Ezra concludes he must have been approximately 13. Abraham must have forced him down upon the altar to sacrifice him, as we see that Abraham concealed the matter by saying 'God will provide the ram.'" Therefore, according to Ibn Ezra, prior to finding the ram, Abraham did not truly think any ram would avail itself through God. He lied to Isaac concerning that ram to accomplish God's command. This was a necessary lie. But had Abraham said later regarding the newly found ram, "You see Isaac, Hashem has done what He planned", Abraham would have lied unnecessarily since he had no conclusive knowledge whether God had planted this ram in the bush, or not. But the Rabbis do say that this ram was prepared during the Six Days of Creation. This means that this ram was essential. My close friend Shaya Mann suggested a brilliant reason: Abraham was not "relieved" when

subsequently; he was commanded not to slaughter his precious Isaac. The sacrifice of the ram displays a subtle, yet important lesson about Abraham. Abraham did not remove his attention from God, once 'he had his son back'. Only someone on a lesser level of perfection would suddenly be overcome with joy that his son would remain alive with him, and then indulge that emotion with no attention to anything else. But Abraham's perfection didn't allow such a diversion from the entire purpose of the binding of Isaac. Although commanded not to kill Isaac, Abraham's attention and love was still completely bound up with God. This is where Abraham's energies were before the sacrifice, and even afterwards, when his only son was spared. Offering the ram teaches us that Abraham never removed his thoughts from God, even at such a moment when others would certainly indulge in such joy. Abraham did not rejoice in Isaac's life, more than he rejoiced in obeying God. The ram teaches us this. Abraham remained steadfast with God. Abraham's perfection was twofold; 1) he was not reluctant to obey God, at any cost, and 2) nothing surpassed his attachment to God. ■

Reputation vs. Truth

Reader: Hi. I stumbled across your website and am very impressed by a lot of the material thereon. However, there are some things I would like to know. First of all, can you provide me with some biography of Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim. Where did he learn? From whom did he receive semicha?

I am also very concerned with the attitude that one may question and not accept mitzvos if they don't appear logical. I don't know what the Ibn Ezra did or did not say, but I do know that all traditional orthodox Jews accept ALL of the mitzvos - all of the talmud, all of the mishna, and all of the shulchan aruch - although there are many things therein that are not logical. We even accept "Chukim" - God's statutes which are laws, which, in their highest essence, are not amenable to logic.

I am also concerned that you don't accept and take on the authority of the kabbalah and the zohar etc. This is a part of our tradition that is accepted by the entire Jewish people - from litvaks, to chassidim, to sephardim, to ashkenazim. Perhaps a few do question it but the vast majority accept it.

I want to conclude by telling you what I heard a very great Rabbi say was the definition of Torah, against which we cannot argue: Anything which was accepted by the mass majority of the Jewish people is Torah and we cannot argue with it. This means the gemara, the shulchan aruch AND the kabbalah.

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Letters

I would appreciate it if you could explain how you can square your position with the aforementioned matters.

I'm not bashing your site, I think it provides a lot of great material and backing to our religion, but I am deeply unhappy with some of your philosophies, and am afraid you are sending wrong messages out to the public, alongside your wonderful material that supports our tradition.

Dovid

Mesora: I don't see the relevance of biographies. Such a philosophy where authorities are accepted based on reputation, and not on their content, favors people, over truths. If you follow this path, you are doomed to follow notions not tested by your reason. Perhaps this is why you can accept the notion that Chukim are meaningless.

But since you follow authorities, I am puzzled at your contradiction: you follow your peers on matters of following mitzvos, and disregard Ibn Ezra...without having read his words. And on whose authority do you claim that Chukim are not logical, and "are not amenable to logic"?

Regarding Kabbalah, there are some great minds who deny its authenticity, and some who accept it. Such a debate does not exist regarding the Five Books of the Chumash, Prophets, Writings, or the Talmud. So you should view those in a different light than Kabbalah. But that Torah is defined by what the majority accepts, would condone Conservative and Reformed Judaism. And as soon as a new form of "Judaism" arises that musters greater numbers, these two forms will become obsolete, and the "New Judaism" will become the "New Judaism." This all smacks a bit similar to that 2000-year-old book...doesn't it? I think you see the refutation of this view quite clearly. Now if you mean to say that what "orthodox" Jews accept becomes Torah, then the same problem occurs if most Orthodox Jews accept Red Bendels, and other idolatrous rites.

In truth, all God's ways are logical and pleasant to our minds, "And all its ways are pleasant". (Proverbs 3:17) No Rabbi or Sage follows your subjective opinion that "Chukim are not amenable to logic". Don't you recall the saying that "King Solomon knew the reasons for all the mitzvos..." which include many Chukim? Or that Talmudic portion in Chullin 124a where the Rabbi said he wouldn't accept something even if stated by Joshua bin Nun? Aaron too disagreed with his brother Moses, and was correct in the end.

Torah's sources unanimously support the view that we follow ideas, not people. It matters none what many Jews do, or who said what, if we know an idea to be false. See the Ibn Ezra. ■



The Obligation to Work

CHANANYA WEISSMAN

We live in a world where no truth can be taken for granted. It is difficult for me to imagine that the premise of this article would even need to be discussed in any prior generation, let alone bear the status of an "underdog" opinion. Nevertheless, the notion that it is an obligation for Jewish males to support themselves and those dependent on them has become so unpopular that in many circles those who work for a living are looked down upon as Jews who do not fear heaven.

In the absence of prophets, Hashem speaks to us in two ways: through His Torah and through His handiwork. Indeed, the very nature of the world that Hashem created reflects the necessity for Man to work. If it were true that the "ideal" lifestyle is to completely immerse oneself in Torah study, then a critical mass of people attaining this ideal lifestyle would spell the death of the human race. It is inconceivable that the ideal state of existence in this world is not

self-sustaining without nature-defying miracles. (This is one of the great refutations of the Christian sects that promote celibacy as the holiest lifestyle.) Consequently, the nature of Hashem's handiwork dictates the necessity to work as a component of the ideal and intended lifestyle.

The physical frailty of the human being also indicates that Hashem intended for Man to work. After all, the primary motivation for most people to work is to pay their bills, to be able to provide the basic physical necessities. Fortunate is the individual who derives personal and spiritual gratification from his occupation in addition to his paycheck. Were Man created in such a way that he did not require constant expenditures on physical needs, the average person would have little interest in working – and thereby the world would grind to a halt. It is only because of our physical needs and interdependence on one another for survival that society functions and can progress.

This is a key point that is often neglected by those who argue in favor of working. Although Hashem indeed made it necessary for people to work in order to survive, the reasons to work do not end at survival. After all, the need for survival is merely the mechanism by which Hashem compels people to work. But there is a deeper purpose to working that transcends one's selfish needs: contributing to yishuv ha'olam, the needs and development of society, or, more simply, to make the world go 'round.

When viewed in this light, whether one is a world-class surgeon or a truck driver, he fulfills the will of Hashem through his worldly labor. The world needs a healthy supply of manpower and talent in all occupations, and the Jewish people should be amply represented – in fact, should serve as role models for their colleagues.

Of course, Hashem expects one to properly balance his physical pursuits with spiritual pursuits. The proper balance will vary from person to person, but it is not a mainstream Jewish lifestyle to be engaged exclusively in the physical or the spiritual, nor is involvement in the physical world to be denigrated as "less than ideal". It is in the physical realm that one's achievements in the spiritual realm are brought to life and have the greatest impact on civilization.

While there is certainly no shortage of Torah sources that admonish us not to place primary importance on the physical world, which is temporary, there is also a wealth of Torah sources that emphasize the importance of working and supporting oneself.

In Parshas Noach the dove returned to the ark with an olive branch to indicate that it is prefer-

(continued on next page)

(continued from previous page)

Letters

able to subsist on a bitter sustenance that nevertheless comes directly from Hashem (through one's own work being blessed) than to subsist on handouts (Sanhedrin 108B). The Maharsha notes that we in fact pray for this regularly in Bircas Hamazon: "Please, Hashem our God, don't cause us to be dependent on the gifts of people nor even their loans, but on Your full, open hand...in order that we not be humiliated."

Indeed, subsisting on charity is consistently portrayed in Torah literature as the harshest of fates, certainly not a fate that should be pursued. "A poor man is considered like a dead man." (Nedarim 64B) "Make your Shabbos profane (by not honoring the day with special food) rather than make yourself dependent on others." (Shabbos 118A)

Our parents and grandparents understood and appreciated the degradation of accepting a handout, let alone asking for one. Many of them scraped by week after week, yet continued to work all kinds of unglamorous jobs with pride and determination to support themselves and their families. Accept charity? Over their dead bodies.

Nowadays, however, it has become fashionable to snub supporting oneself as being beneath a true Torah Jew, and prominent rabbis regularly "endorse" charitable "causes" that our ancestors would scoff at. Their determination, work ethic, pride, and keen sense of priorities are largely absent in our generation. The ideal is now portrayed as someone who is "completely immersed" in Torah study to the exclusion of all worldly interest and involvement.

In Torah literature, however, supporting oneself through the labor of one's hands, relying only on Hashem for one's sustenance is portrayed as the ideal. Working for a living – and in fact working as a contribution to society and personal development – is consistently spoken of in the highest of terms. In fact, an entire chapter of Pirkei Avos D'Rabbi Nasan, chapter 22, has been dedicated just to drive home this point, filled with statements by many of the most prominent authors of the Mishna. A selection:

"Shemaya said, 'One is obligated to love work and to engage in work.'

"Rabbi Eliezer said, 'Work is great, for just as the Jews were commanded regarding Shabbos, so were they commanded regarding work, as it says 'Six days you shall work and do all of your work.'"

"Rebbe said, 'Work is great, for people speak negatively about all those who don't work. From where does he eat? From where does he drink?'"

"Rebbe further said, 'Work is great, for those

who are engaged in work always have some money on hand."

"Rabbi Yosi said, 'Work is great, for anyone who is not engaged in work is responsible for his own death. How so? Through idleness he will run out of money for food and may come to misappropriate money belonging to hekdesch.' (In modern times, one may be drawn to other forbidden behaviors to raise money.)

"Rabbi Eliezer said, 'Work is great, for one who benefits the value of even one perutah from hekdesch is a transgressor, yet laborers in the Bais Hamikdash receive their wages from hekdesch.'

"Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said, 'Work is great, for every tradesman takes pride in his trade. He goes out with his uniform or instrument and takes pride in his trade. Even Hashem called attention to His own work...'

"They further said, work is great, for even if one has a dilapidated courtyard or garden, he should go and involve himself with them so that he should be involved in work."

These sources sing the praises of working, as a source of livelihood, as a source of personal gratification, as a protection from sin brought about by self-imposed poverty, and, without question, as a mandate from Hashem. And they are referring to skilled labor or physical labor, not Torah study. Torah study is a companion to work, not a substitute.

The Pnei Yehoshua notes an apparent contradiction between a comment of Rashi in Bava Kama 100A and another in Bava Metzia 30B. In one place Rashi interprets "the house of one's life" as the study of Torah, whereas in the other place he interprets it as learning a trade through which to support oneself. The Pnei Yehoshua explains that these are two sides of the same coin; Moshe was informing the Jews that with their study of Torah they should not neglect to acquire a trade. This is in line with the teaching in Pirkei Avos (2:2) that Torah that is not accompanied by "the way of the land" (meaning working) is destined to fail. Acquiring a trade is the primary "life" of Torah study. So writes the Pnei Yehosua. (Bava Kama 100A)

The Medrash Rabba comments on Koheles 9:9 that the Pious of Jerusalem earned that distinction by working in the winter and learning Torah in the summer. (This is quoted by the Ran in Brachos 9B.) Others have it that they divided their days into thirds, one part each for prayer, Torah study, and working.

In the Rambam's hierarchy of charity, the highest level is making the poor person self-reliant so that he no longer needs charity. Suggestions include offering him a job, teaching him a trade, or giving him a free loan to

further a business enterprise.

My father once offered a job to a young man who was snoring money during morning prayers. (He was one of those professional, enterprising snorers who come from out of town in a van full of snorers to collect in various shuls. I sometimes wonder how one gets one of these limited spots in what is surely a competitive new industry.) The young man scoffed at my father's offer, claiming he makes more money collecting – this, from someone with no education and no discernable skills. Nowadays subsisting indefinitely on charity is not a last option that is painfully resorted to, but a business decision, if not a dream for those who are fortunate enough to merit it. The Rambam is turning over in his grave.

There is a mitzvah to help someone load his animal with merchandise that has fallen off. The Torah qualifies this mitzvah by applying it only to situations in which the owner of the animal participates in loading the animal (assuming he is physically able to do so). However, if the owner crosses his legs, sips some lemonade, and tells you to do a mitzvah and work on his behalf, there is no obligation to help him. One who performs work for this person, who expects others to do more for him than he is prepared to do for himself, is known as a sucker.

It is true that there is a tradition of wealthy businessmen making private arrangements to support outstanding Torah scholars in exchange for a share in the mitzvah. However, there is no precedent for the welfare communities, the widespread intentional impoverishment that we are witnessing today. This brings neither glory to the Torah nor Torah scholarship to the Jewish people. While Chazal emphasize maximizing one's time to learn and encourage certain individuals to make a career of learning and teaching, this never was and was never meant to be popularized for the masses. Chazal themselves emulated their own model of supporting themselves, and who is to say they are greater and deserve more?

The great luminary Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch summed it up best: "But as help and support for necessitous poverty is ensured under the regime of Jewish Torah law, Zedaka does not shame the recipient who requires it. Yea in the spirit of this law, one who is unable to work, or is out of employment, or, out of misplaced pride, goes short himself, or makes his family go short in the necessities of life rather than to resort to Zedaka to which he is entitled is taking a grave responsibility on himself – it is as though he is spilling blood (Yerushalmi at the end of Pe'ah).

(continued on next page)

Letters

Tisha B'Av

“But just this law lays very great value on retaining self-independence, on restricting oneself to the bare necessities of life, on taking on what in the eyes of the thoughtless world is looked down on as the very lowest work to avoid having to recourse to charity. Nowhere in the world is honest work to gain an independent living held in such high esteem and honor as was the case in ancient Jewish circles. Our greatest spiritual heroes, whose light still illuminates us, and to whom their age and all ages looked up to, and still look up to full of respect and honor, a Hillel, a Rabbi Yehoshua, a R. Chanina and R. Auchio, a R. Huna all lived in the most straightened circumstances and earned their living as a woodchopper, cobbler, porter, drawer of water, and by their example taught the maxim, ‘live no better on Sabbath than on the rest of the week, and be independent’; ‘skin carcasses in the open market and get paid, and do not say ‘I am a priest, am a learned man, such work is beneath me.’”

“At the end of Pea, the Mishna says: ‘He who does not really require Zedaka and still takes it, will not be allowed to leave this world without having to resort to charity out of dire necessity. But he who really could be entitled to take charity but manages to live without doing so will not leave this world in his old age without having supported others out of his own fortune.’” (Hirsch Commentary on the Torah, Judaica Press edition, Devarim page 275).

These powerful words are a stinging rebuke to our generation. If the comprehensive words of our Sages are not enough to cause us to rethink the proper balancing of our priorities, an increasingly grim reality eventually will. If the many thousands of able-bodied Jewish men who decline to contribute to the economy, decided to support themselves while still devoting themselves to Torah study, countless millions of tzedaka dollars would become available – perhaps even to the extent that providing a solid Jewish education to all of our children could become readily affordable. Is this not a more appropriate use of our resources? Would this not build a better foundation for the future?

We can dismiss the exhortations of Chazal and rationalize the status quo, or we can make important changes before change is thrust upon us against our will. The choice is ours. ■

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Tisha B'Av

A day when we can worry about all the food we cannot eat...which won't help matters. Or, we can use our reliance on God for food, to awaken our reliance upon Him for direction to what will truly improve us. We can ponder the Temples' destructions, and the sins which caused them, and identify those very sins in us that keep the Temple a distant history.

Or...we can do what we should, and go the final mile: recognize our flaws as identified by God's Torah, confess our sins to God, and plan to never return to those harmful acts and character traits. The choice is ours; as are the benefits.

May your respective fasts evoke the true goal of Teshuvah.

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