



"Praise Him sun and moon
praise Him all bright stars
for He commanded
and they were created."

King David: Psalm 148

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Who Deserves Death?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reader: How can it be logical to murder someone for their false beliefs? Where is the "due process" involved when a religious person murders another person due that person "deserving death because their ideas are so wrong"? My reasoning for the belief that Jews were meant to coexist and act as a beacon of education for the Gentile world comes from TaNaKh, prophets, etc. Why else did Hashem say to us that we would have to struggle with Gentiles after Joshua failed to drive them from the land? Are we not

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Reincarnation

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reader: (IsraelWire-8/6) In his weekly Saturday night address, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the spiritual leader of the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party, stated the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust were the reincarnated souls of sinners being cleansed. The rabbi stated the victims were paying for their previous sins. I would be interested in your opinion concerning his "answer."

Mesora: I will begin by stating that any valid Torah ideal - by definition - must be based on rationale. As all Torah ideals emanate from God, all His wisdom is true, and must follow reason. When Saadia Gaon calls reincarnation "absurd", he goes through an analysis of the theory, and dispels its false foundations. (See his work, "Beliefs and Opinions"). Saadia Gaon - unlike many of today's Jews - did not say that since a reputable rabbi held a view, I cannot oppose him. Not one of our Sages or Rabbis followed the leader. They followed reason, and as the Talmud states, a sage once said, "even if Joshua the son of Nun said it, I wouldn't accept it...". (Talmud Chulin 124a, at the very bottom). This teaches that reputation is of no consequence in deciding truth. We do not follow an "authority", even one who was under the direct tutelage of Moses, as was Joshua. What do we follow? The answer: "Reason." Therefore, when one follows a view, let him have well reasoned arguments for his opinion. If he does not, simply "following the leader" is of no merit to himself, as his mind has been absent in any selection of his actions.

How would Ovadia Yosef explain God's accusation of Sodom for their own wrong doings?

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COLLIDING GALAXIES

(Photo above) Located 300 million light-years away in the constellation Coma Berenices, the colliding galaxies have been nicknamed "The Mice" because of the long tails of stars and gas emanating from each galaxy. Otherwise known as NGC 4676, the pair will eventually merge into a single giant galaxy.

The image shows the most detail and the most stars that have ever been seen in these galaxies. In the galaxy at left, the bright blue patch is resolved into a vigorous cascade of clusters and associations of young, hot blue stars, whose formation has been triggered by the tidal forces of the gravitational interaction. Streams of material can also be seen flowing between the two galaxies.

The clumps of young stars in the long, straight tidal tail [upper right] are separated by fainter regions of material. These dim regions suggest that the clumps of stars have formed from the gravitational collapse of the gas

and dust that once occupied those areas. Some of the clumps have luminous masses comparable to dwarf galaxies that orbit in the halo of our own Milky Way Galaxy. Computer simulations by astronomers Josh Barnes (University of Hawaii) and John Hibbard (National Radio Astronomy Observatory, Charlottesville, Va.) show that we are seeing two nearly identical spiral galaxies approximately 160 million years after their closest encounter. The long, straight arm is actually curved, but appears straight because we see it edge-on. The simulations also show that the pair will eventually merge, forming a large, nearly spherical galaxy (known as an elliptical galaxy). The stars, gas, and luminous clumps of stars in the tidal tails will either fall back into the merged galaxies or orbit in the halo of the newly formed elliptical galaxy. The Mice presage what may happen to our own Milky Way several billion years from now when it collides with our nearest large neighbor, the Andromeda Galaxy (M31). □

Image was taken on April 7, 2002.



"Twisters" composed of cosmic matter. Each one is a half light year in length, and 5000 light years from Earth. Captured by the Hubble space telescope.

To Love

RIVKA OLENICK

All love that is humanly possible can only exist if one has love of God. Any love relationship between anyone, the foundation of that love, if it is real love can only be if there is love of God.

Why is love of God the essence of the human relationship? We are commanded to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, all thy soul and all thy might" to "love your neighbor as yourself?" and even to "love the stranger." It is difficult to love your neighbor "as yourself" and to love the stranger, so on what basis would you love them or anyone else for that matter unless it were based on the love of God? Love for other people is based on the understanding that they are like you, your neighbor is you and the stranger was you in Egypt. Both created by God. In one sense it's almost easier to have love of God, since we can see that God created the entire world and everyone and everything in it. How can any person not have this recognition and this great appreciation for all of God's creation? The world as it exists could not have been created by any entity other than God - it seems so obvious. The sky, the moon, the sun, the oceans, all plant and animal life did not "just happen" or evolve as so many foolish people believe. Everywhere you look in the entire universe is the incredible results of God's work that took place on each day of creation. There is no doubt whatsoever to this truth. For thousands of years before we came into existence the world already existed and we are now the benefactors!

Does anyone really believe that there is not a Master of the Universe, a Perfect Creator, a Being Who planned all human life from beginning to end including our eternal life. When a person is deceased, the body is attended to with the ultimate care and compassion guided by specific halachas, laws, the body is then returned to the earth. The body is returned to God, the

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Who Deserves Death?

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meant to educate the world? I feel some fear when I read on your website that "some people are so wrong in their beliefs, that they deserve death".

Concerned, Aaron

Mesora: Yes, the Jews are to act as a beacon to the rest of mankind. However, the light source of our tower is not generated within, by human reasoning. Our beacon of light - our teachings - are really a reflection of God's instructions. We mimic the Creator, as His knowledge is absolute truth. He alone provides true light.

Many errors arise when man attempts to project his own, false ideas upon the landscape of morality, previously spread out by God. Such a landscape is governed by God's objective borders. If we are to arrive at the basis for the death penalty, we must consult God's Torah, the only guidebook to morality.

We find that God killed peoples and nations for their distortion in practice, and yes, even for harboring corrupt ideas. The idolatrous city and Amalek are wiped out, although they harm no one physically. What does this teach us? The lesson here is that God's plan for man is the only plan for man. When people stoop to a level of philosophical deviance, their existence is worthless, purposeless, and harmful to others. If God wishes others be not led astray, His wisdom thereby dictates the destruction of all members of such a people, including babies. We can almost hear the shouts of "intolerance" and "brutality" at my last sentence, but again, man's reaction does not affect truth. Justice demands that even infant life born in such cultures be terminated, perhaps for a number of salient reasons, including the inescapable grip their culture bears down on all members. There is in some societies no possible salvation from their distorted views and practices. They must all be exterminated.

God's plan is man's achievement of perfection, knowledge of God and the practice of God's morality. Those members of mankind who reach this objective have realized man's true purpose, and are worthy of life, even extended life. Those who have not, but can, are given about 80 years to accomplish this task. Those who will never reach this goal, are at times commanded to be put to death - out of the way from other potentially perfected people, lest the latter stumble in their current state of ignorance.

Life per se is not a good unless it partakes of God's guidelines. When man does not live as God desires, he is punished for his crimes. Equally true, man is killed as a preemptive measure, saving others from following the corrupt fools, losing their one chance at a life of perfection. □

Reincarnation

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Is Sodom sacrificed for the sins of lives in previous generations too? God's words don't say this. God said "their sin is great". And if this is so, that Ovadia Yosef feels people may be created by God to rectify previous generations' sins, perhaps the original sinners themselves were in reality only reincarnated souls of an even more previous generation. Why does Ovadia Yosef assume the previous generation for whom the Holocaust victims died, were in fact original sinners? You see, this argument ends with the ability to have numerous generations not living for themselves, but as second, third, fourth and 100th chances for original sinners from time's beginning to "make good". This would also assume that the Holocaust victims matched the exact number of original sinners.

When, and by what rules does Ovadia Yosef make such claims? Will he say that Sodom, the Flood, the Jews in the desert were also paying for a previous generation's sin?

What does the Torah teach? God's words are, "ish bi-cheto yamus", "a man in his own sin will be killed". Nothing more need be added.

Many times we hear something in the name of a great person, but this must not be the criteria for following a concept. As Jews, we live rational lives and would not even follow a command in the Torah if it did not make sense as stated by Ibn Ezra in parshas Yisro. Judaism requires one to have "knowledge" of what one does and believes as true - in all areas. As the Ibn Ezra says in Parshas Yisro, "if we had found a command and after careful study and consulting with the Rabbis we saw no reason for it, we would abandon it".

I would also suggest that reincarnation poses a serious problem to one of the most basic tenets of Judaism - the institution of reward and punishment: If one has the ability to become another human via reincarnation, he thereby bypasses punishment for his own actions. As he has another chance, his original sin isn't necessarily addressed by punishment, if he gets it right in his "next life". So there is no punishment for a sin, he can "try again" as another soul. But God did not say this. God said there are punishments for corrupt acts. God did not say you can "try again".

Becoming another person solves other problems, as the believers of reincarnation hold the goal to be self rectification. I ask, "who remembers being another person from a previous life, in that he would recall previous sins so as to rectify them?" No one would admit to such an absurdity. One may also ask, "How many times may one be reincarnated?" If limitless times, there is no future world, no reward, and no punishment, clearly against the Torah.

There will be disputes in many areas of

Jewish thought. To determine your position, one cannot follow the man with the reputation. Perhaps after accepting an opinion, a person will read of another who is yet greater, and disagrees with the first. Do we now abandon the first view in favor of a second, more prominent rabbi? This method of following the reputable, is contrary to following truth. Nor does such a method incorporate the use of reason given to us by God for the very purpose of engagement. Such a position of constantly swapping one's accepted authority by reputation is a reaction to fear of being wrong. But if you do not select a view based on your own reasoning, you can never be wrong or right. It is a contradiction.

For our choices to truly be ours, to be a merit of our own free will, we must choose philosophical positions based on our reasoned principles, not via reputation.

How sublime: Man has no other choice than to actually choose! □

The Religious Emotion

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reader: In a number of articles on your website, you make reference to the fact that religious life should be entirely an exercise in rational thought and proofs. Your proof for this position is that since the difference between man and animal is abstract, conceptual thought, then clearly it is exactly that difference that man is to use in service of God. My only problem with this is that you make it sound like that is the *only* difference between man and animal, when that is clearly not the case. For example, man is also capable of ecstatic religious experiences, as opposed to animals. Based on your reasoning, why should man be an abstract, academic philosopher and not a carlbach chassid when both personalities are using faculties that animals don't seem to possess, at least to the same degree. Remember, animals do have some intelligence too, and in some cases are in fact capable of rudimentary abstract thought.

Mesora: Your claims have no support in reality. No animal will ever "ponder God". Its so called intelligence is merely an ability to mimic. In some species, this is their unique method of survival. Chameleons change hue to obscure visibility from the predators, parrots recreate predators' sounds thereby camouflaging themselves, or attracting mates, and others simply hide. Animals have no soul, they have no intelligence.

'Religious experiences' not governed by halacha, tend to move towards the Carlbachian free for all. The emotionally feverous and imagined 'closeness to God'. The same is seen by those gathering to sing Hebrew music composed of Biblical verses. Such a practice is prohibited by the Talmud, by Rav Moshe Feinstein, but yet, such prohibition does not deter those emotionally

riveted individuals from violation. These approaches are fallacy, and dangerous. They open the floodgates of emotion under the fabricated auspices of "religiosity", thereby condoning all that a person wishes to express and feel. He thinks himself religious, but is sorely misguided. He desires our Supreme, intelligent God, but in actuality, lives in a world of sense stimulation, full of psychedelic, unfounded visions. He indulges in what he thinks to be Kabbalah, assuming he understands metaphors as literal, and spirals down into a life only Judaic by name.

The Torah outlined our every action - even the prohibition on the unleavened dancing at the Simchas Baais haShoavah during the Succah holiday. Why is this? I believe for this very reason. The Torah does not allow celebratory acts by any other than those who truly understand the concepts being celebrated. Simple dancing bereft of true Torah insights is prohibited. Therefore only the wise men were allowed to dance. Otherwise, it is religious emotion without religion. To the shock of the unlearned, Judaism bans such empty activity. Only activity guided by intelligence is tolerated in Judaism. So, let the ignorant stop dancing, and open a gemara.

Thought is the only vehicle for approaching the Prime Intelligence - God. God is not involved in religious emotion, that such an emotion would be an approach to Him.

Study the Talmud and the great philosophers as a starting point for understanding the Torah's criteria for approaching God.

Reader: Man is unique only in the sophistication of his thought. Similarly, man is unique in the sophistication of his emotional faculties - you never see a cat having a religious experience like, say, a carlbach chassid would have. Based on all of this, I would say that since you cannot approach God completely through any one avenue of expression (intellect included), we have to utilize all the faculties available to us, all of which are more sophisticated than those of animals. Based on the above, I fail to see the premium you place on rational proof at the expense of the religious experience, when neither a) can take you all the way to God and b) is completely unique to homo sapiens.

Mesora: You try to "prove" that rationale is not the only method of approaching God. Resorting to a similitude of reasoning contradicts your very statements, where you preach emotional experience. The Torah has formulas, and you are introducing that which is alien to Torah.

Maimonides teaches the purpose of sending away the mother bird is to avoid her anguish. Seeing her offspring taken away is as difficult for animals, as it is for man. Your statement that man's emotions also differentiate him from the animal kingdom are also false.

Emotions have a place, God gave them to us. See my article: The Purpose of the Emotions □

To Love

RIVKA OLENICK

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soul is returned to God. The will of God's even in death, proclaims profound love for His created being, the selem elokim, the significant human entity that God brought into the world. This love is given to us through God's Torah knowledge. His laws tell us how we should live most beneficially and incredibly how we are to be cared for even at death, so that are not frightened by death. We aren't reduced to a jar of ashes; that is frightening! Christianity completely distorted the idea that "man returns to the dust," by creating a horrendous act against the physical body. It is our maker we are "returned to," not a canister.

God demanded that there be great sensitivity for human life even as we depart from this world. This is also love for His created beings. He created each of us with a purpose, the same purpose, to live our lives according to His Torah that instructs us to preserve each other's well being and each other's lives. This instruction assists us in love of God and is also love from God as His creations. Since He created us, He knows better what we are and how we should live. Isn't it logical that the entire system of Torah was set up with our true nature in mind, and within our capabilities? That through that system each of us could thrive and reach our maximum potential by internalizing that system? That is also love for His created beings. The more we are immersed in His system through thought and deeds the more love a person has for God. This is a natural result.

He provided us with the means to achieve happiness in this world by giving us the means to sustain ourselves physically. Simultaneously He gave us the blueprint, the plans, the map, the direction that is all contained in all of the extraordinary ideas of the Torah. Didn't He also implant within our nature the capacity for love, so that it permeates our lives, in all of our relationships with others? We should become more aware of who God wants us to be, the "Klal" and what God wants us to be for those outside of the Klal, the "light."

How can a person not have love of God? I say it is impossible. How can a person not love one who has love of God? That is also impossible. In the Shemoneh Esrei, we recite the blessing of peace, Sim Shalom: Establish peace, goodness, blessing, life, graciousness, kindness and compassion upon us and upon all of Your people Israel. Bless us, our Father, all of us as one, with the light of Your countenance, for with the light of Your countenance,

You gave us, Hashem, our God, the Torah of life and a love of kindness, righteousness, blessing, compassion, life, and peace. And may it be good in Your eyes to bless us and to bless all of Your people Israel, in every season and in every hour with Your peace (with abundant strength and peace). □

Declaration of Fulfilling Tithes

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

What purpose is there for the Torah command to verbally declare our fulfillment of our third year tithes?

It is strange that of all the mitzvos, only two, mentioned in KiTavo, first fruits and third year tithes - are commanded for us to make declarations, and the latter, that we fulfilled the law exactly. Why does the Torah command us to make such statements? Is not the act of tithing the goal? And why is declaration required in this specific matter of apportioning our produce to others?

Rashi says that by making such declarations, we are telling God that "we have done what You commanded us, now You do what is upon You to do". (Referring to Bechukosai, where God promised to deliver rain in due season as a result of our adherence to His laws).

A Rabbi taught that any topic taught in Navi and Ksuvim (Prophets and Writings), cannot be entirely new, but must find its root in the Five Books of Moses, the Chumash. The Chumash contains all concepts of Judaism, even those seemingly new in the Prophets and Writings. If this is so, I wondered where in the Chumash we would find the concept taught in Malachi where we are requested to test God by giving our tenth of our produce, as we see stated openly in Malachi.

It seems clear that this area in KiTavo is where Malachi is based, and Rashi points this out. The Torah is teaching us that the declaration subsequent to man's tithing is done to invoke a response from God. Only a verbalization can qualify a subsequent bounty of produce as a "response" from God. This is also why the pasukim in both areas dealing with first fruits and third year tithes state that man must make his declaration "lifnay Hashem", "before God". Meaning, we declare to God our exact fulfillment of His word, thereby awaiting a Heavenly response in the form of plenty. Therefore, verbal declaration is made to render our bounty a response from God, and not mere happenstance.

One may ask why the Torah saw this as so important, that man deserves a

response. We must recognize that the monetary concerns of man outweigh all others, as the Talmud teaches, "the money of man stands him upon his feet". Man's security stems from his estimation of his success, and his worries from the converse. The Torah sees fit that man is secured in his wealth, specifically when he is bidden by the Torah to part with up 20% of all profits during his life. This is a sizable portion of his earnings, and man justifiably worries when he must part with such a quantity. God recognizes this and would not require man to do that which opposes his psychological needs. God therefore tells us that we may test God to see if "He will open the storehouses of heaven, and empty a blessing for us which is more than enough", as stated in Chapter 3 of Malachi. But this concession for man to actually test God is made in this area only, as man would otherwise not part with such portion without a Divine guarantee. As self sustenance is our prime instinct, against which, we cannot oppose, God requests us to give - in order to become richer. This is the guarantee which we must realize is within God's capacity, and that it is God's will.

We should all take a strong lesson from the words of Malachi. We should not feel that our success is due to our long hours of toil, when the Rabbis themselves taught, "one should minimize his labor, and maximize his learning". Also, "all is in the hand of heaven, except the fear of heaven". This teaches us that our sustenance depends on God, not ourselves. If we follow His laws, give our tithes and tzedaka, He has many messengers to make us wealthy. We should not view giving tzedaka as a diminution of our wealth, but rather, as a 100% secure insurance policy of our success.

God created the entire world, the billions of stars - far larger than our sun, and the perfect laws governing them. Therefore, the ability to enrich man is certainly within God's reach. □

Stone Sets with Torah Incriptions

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

What purpose was achieved by writing the Torah in 70 languages, and inscribed on three sets of 12 stones (36 stones total)? According to Talmud Sota, 35b, which opposes Rashi on the Chumash, one set was erected in Moav, one in Gilgal, and the third set in the Jordan itself. What is to be learned from these three sets of stones and their placement?

I believe a significant idea is borne out of this one-time enactment.

God promised Abraham He would give the Land to his descendants. Question: Are Abraham's "descendants" defined

biologically? Is the "biological" definition all that God's meant by, "I would give the land to your (Abraham's) seed?" Meaning, if the Jews would abandon the Torah, would God still give Israel to them since they descended from Abraham? I don't think so.

To demonstrate that 1) God fulfilled his promise, and that 2) these were in fact Abraham's true descendants, i.e., those who follow Abraham's teachings, it was necessary that the recipients of God's promise to Abraham demonstrate that they do in fact follow the same ideology as Abraham. Being a descendant was no guarantee of receiving Israel. Sharing genes is insufficient. Abraham's children and grandchildren are defined as those who hold fast to Abraham's teachings. Their writing of the Torah on these stones prior to their entrance to Israel displayed their entitlement.

But why have such testimonial stones erected at three separate locations: One set in Gilgal (Trans-Jordan), one set in Israel on Mt. Eval, and one set in the Jordan river?

These three sets, I believe, prove that God was solely responsible for bringing the Jews into Israel. By erecting 'road signs' on both sides of the Jordan river, shows from where the Jews journeyed, and where they arrived. Placing one more set in the Jordan river itself, we discover how the Jews entered the land, i.e., through a miraculous event of the splitting of the Jordan. It would be impossible for anyone to erect and cement such huge stones while immersed in the river. The stones therefore delineate the starting point, the end point, and the path. Such a path of entrance is only possible via a miracle, and therefore enacted by only God Himself. God thereby eliminates all possible explanations of the Jews entering the land bereft of His divine intervention. God fulfilled His promise. I believe this to be the reasoning behind the miraculous conquest of Jericho as well. An indisputable proof of God's essential involvement.

The fact that the Torah is written in 70 languages upon these stones is to teach that the Torah is ultimately for all mankind. As we say in Alenu each day, "...and all children of flesh will call Your Name".

These three sets of stones teach future generations of the miracles of the entrance into Israel - God entered the Jews into the land in accordance with His oath. For that ancient generation, it was a demonstration that they truly followed Abraham's teachings, and his Torah taught to him by God. As God stated in Genesis, "Will I keep hidden from Abraham what I shall do (to Sodom)?" "And I know him, in order that he will command his son and his household after him, and they will keep God's path." □