

“Know it today, and place it on your heart...” Deut. 4:39)
 Rabbi Bachya teaches that this verse commands us to follow the Rabbis – “Know it” – but not to stop there. We must ultimately “place it on our hearts”. Meaning to arrive at 100% intellectual conviction in the ideas of the Torah.

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People

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Houston	7:54	Phoenix	7:09
Jerusalem	7:15	Pittsburgh	8:18
Johannesburg	5:08	Seattle	8:31
Los Angeles	7:34	Sydney	4:42
London	8:38	Tokyo	6:26
Miami	7:45	Toronto	8:25
Montreal	8:08	Washington DC	8:02

Weekly Parsha

Bechukotai

RABBI BERNIE FOX

“If you follow My laws and are careful to keep My commandments, I will provide you with rain at the proper time, so that the land will bear its crops and the trees of the field will provide fruit.” (Lev. 26:3-4)

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Christians, Jews & Neighbors

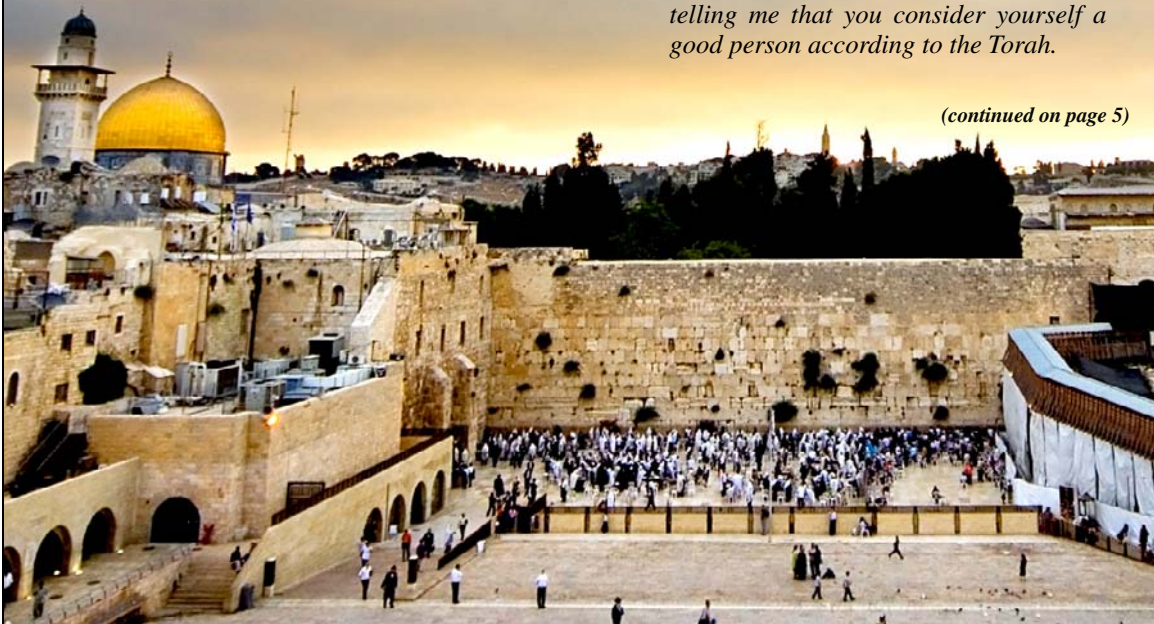
RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Christian Ignorance

A close friend wrote me this week. He said his friend started chatting with a missionary. My friend asked this: "What would you respond to this message the missionary sent?"

"Thank you for writing me again and telling me that you consider yourself a good person according to the Torah.

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(Bechukotai cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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The Torah promises us that our observance of the commandments will be rewarded in this world. The Almighty will sustain us and provide us with material well-being.

This pasuk is representative of many such assurances throughout the Torah. These assurances seem to contradict the famous dictum of our Sages. The Sages teach that there is no reward for the performance of the mitzvot in this life.[1] Clearly, the Torah indicates that we will receive material reward for observing the laws of the Torah!

Maimonides deals extensively with this issue in his Mishne Torah. He explains that the Sages did not intend to deny that the Almighty provides for us in response to our observance of commandments. The Sages recognized that the Torah unequivocally asserts that we will be blessed or punished in this world as a consequence of our actions. Instead, the Sages wished to teach us that the benefits we receive in this world are not the ultimate reward for the performance of the mitzvot. The true reward is the eternal existence of the soul in Olam HaBah. Similarly, the ultimate punishment is not suffering in this material world. The ultimate consequence of evil is forfeiture of the eternal existence of the soul after death.

Maimonides poses a question on this thesis. If the ultimate reward is eternal spiritual existence – the survival of ones' sacred soul after death, why does the Torah promise material rewards?

Maimonides explains that the Almighty assists us in achieving our aims. If we pursue a spiritual existence, Hashem will help us achieve this goal. He will remove the distractions that deter us from achieving our objective. He will assist us in meeting our material needs. We will be able to devote more of our time and energy to spiritual development.

Similarly, one who is immersed in a material existence will be frustrated by Hashem. The material pleasures have seduced this individual. These pleasures will be taken away. Maimonides further explains that in

submerging oneself in the material world, a person chooses the passing physical existence over the eternal spiritual existence. Through denying this person the blessings of material success, the individual will be forced to concentrate on the necessities of physical existence. This individual will be deprived of the opportunity to develop spiritually. The individual is condemned to the consequences of his or her decision. The opportunity to develop spiritually has been abandoned and lost.[2]

Nonetheless, every person has the opportunity to repent. Through reasserting ones' desire to develop spiritually, the individual can reclaim the Almighty's blessings. Hashem will help the repentant person achieve ones' spiritual aims.[3]



“And I will destroy your idols and your sun gods. I will let your corpses rot on the remains of your idols. I will grow tired of you.” (VaYikra 26:30)

The parasha describes the curses that the nation will experience if it abandons the Torah. The Torah deals with the extreme case. It describes the terrible curses that will befall Bnai Yisrael if they adopt the heathen practices and pagan worship of the surrounding nations. Our pasuk is included in the account of these curses. It is obvious that our passage is difficult to understand. The passage foretells the destruction of the pagan idols worshipped by the people. This is not a curse! Why is this included among the curses for abandoning the Torah?

Chizkuni acknowledges that this passage is not part of the curse. The pasuk describes the destruction of idolatry! However, he does not explain the actual intent of the pasuk and the reason for its inclusion within the narrative of the curses.[4]

Gershonides responds to this issue. He also begins with the premise that the destruction of idols is not a curse. He explains that the passage is making two points. First, the Torah is telling Bnai Yisrael that ultimately the

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(Bechukotai continued from page 2)

Weekly Parsha

nation's association with idolatry will end. Ideally, this will occur because the nation will heed the warnings provided by Hashem. However, if the fascination with idolatry does not end through repentance, it will be forcibly terminated. Mighty enemies will invade the land. These armies will destroy the idols and pagan temples cherished by the nation. The message is that the nation will abandon idolatry. However, Bnai Yisrael must make a choice. The people can repent and voluntarily reject their idols. The alternative is invasion and the destruction of these idols and temples through the devastation of the land.

Second, the pasuk describes the death of the idol worshippers in the presence of the very idols they adulated. What is the message in this terrible image?

The Torah describes a graduated series of punishments. Abandonment of the Torah and adoption of idolatrous practices will result in consequences that progress in severity. Hopefully, early in the process, the nation will realize that its sufferings are a chastisement for its iniquity. However, it is possible that the nation will attribute its suffering to the vagaries of nature and continue to turn to

idolatry as a source of rescue and protection. The Torah forewarns that this reaction can only result in a single outcome. The idolaters that refuse to recognize the authenticity of the Almighty's rebuke will be destroyed in the presence of the very idols they relied upon. This will demonstrate the falsity and impotence of these idols.[5]

“And I will remember, on their behalf, the covenant I made with the original ancestors whom I brought forth from the land of Egypt before the eyes of the nations to be a Lord to them. I am Hashem.” (VaYikra 26:45)

Parshat Bechukotai discusses the rewards that Bnai Yisrael will receive through observance of the Torah. The Parasha also discusses the consequences of ignoring the commandments. These consequences include exile and suffering. This section ends with a promise from the Almighty. Hashem will never forget His children. Even if Bnai Yisrael is exiled to a strange land, Hashem will not abandon His people. Eventually redemption will come. The people will be brought back to the Holy Land. This promise ends

with the phrase, “I am Hashem.”

Sforno comments on this closing phrase that Hashem does not change. The suffering of Bnai Yisrael is not caused by an alteration of the Creator's ways. Instead, we endure affliction as a result of our own degeneration. With our repentance, the Meshiach will come. Then G-d's design will be fulfilled.[6]

Sforno is responding to a very basic issue. How can Hashem allow His chosen people to endure tragic suffering and exile? Does this suffering represent abandonment by Hashem of His nation? Sforno responds that the Creator's essence and will are constant. However, our attitudes and behaviors change. Our iniquity requires a response and consequence. Our suffering is not a result of abandonment. It is an expression of Divine chastisement.

Maimonides outlines the thirteen basic principles of the Torah. He explains that one of these fundamental principles is conviction in the ultimate advent of a Messianic era.[7] Why does Maimonides consider this conviction to be a foundation of Judaism?

Based on Sforno's comments, Maimonides' position can be understood. The concept of the Messianic era implies a Divine unchanging design regarding the affairs of the world. The Jewish people and humanity will experience periods of affliction and suffering. This does not mean that Hashem has abandoned humanity or that His will changes. Instead, we proceed upon a path to a predetermined end. This end is the coming of the Meshiach. Our decisions to do good or evil influences the pace of our adventure. Nonetheless, the Meshiach will arrive.

“These are the commandments that Hashem commanded Bnai Yisrael through Moshe at Mount Sinai.” (VaYikra 27:34)

Our Sages learn an important lesson from this passage. The Torah states that these are the mitzvot. Only Moshe was empowered to reveal the Torah through prophecy. Other prophets cannot alter the Torah through prophecy.

Maimonides discusses this restriction at length in his Mishne Torah. He explains that the Torah is permanent. It cannot be augmented or revised through prophecy. [8] He adds that prophecy cannot be used to

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decide legal questions. Instead, the rules of Halacha must be applied to solve any legal question. For example, there is a famous dispute between Rashi and Rabbaynu Tam regarding the sections of the Torah in the tefillin. If a prophet would claim that the Almighty revealed to him that Rashi's opinion is correct, we would reject this ruling. Furthermore, we assume that this person is a false prophet.[9]

It is interesting that Maimonides does not quote our passage. Instead, he cites various other passages. The pasuk he most often quotes is found in Sefer Devarim. That pasuk tells us that the Torah is no longer in the heavens.[10] The Sages understood the pasuk to teach that the heavens or Hashem are no longer a valid source for Halacha. Only the Sages, through the rules of Halacha, can resolve issues of law.

Lechem Mishne notes that Maimonides does not cite our passage. He explains that Maimonides will often quote the passage that best reflects the position he is discussing. He does not always refer to the passage most often cited by the Sages. In our case, Maimonides maintained that the passage he quotes – that the Torah is no longer in the heavens – better reflects his position.[11] However, Lechem Mishne does not explain the reason Maimonides preferred this passage.

Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel, in translating our passage, inserts a phrase. "These are the commandments that Hashem commanded to Moshe. It is not possible to add anything new to them." This addition reflects the comments of our Sages on this passage. However, there is a significant difference. Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel does not say that a prophet cannot add to the Torah. Instead, he explains the Torah cannot be augmented – by anyone. It should be noted that even the Sages must adhere to this rule. All laws created by the Sages must relate to a mitzvah in the Torah.

We can now understand Maimonides' reasoning. Our passage essentially asserts that the Torah cannot be altered. The passage does not expressly deal with prophecy. Let us assume a prophet decides a legal matter on the basis of prophecy. This issue is not clearly discussed by our passage. Nonetheless,



Maimonides maintains that prophecy cannot be used in this manner. In order to support this principle, Maimonides quotes the passage that the Torah is no longer in the heavens. This passage indicates that prophecy is not a valid tool in deciding Halacha. The passage includes any application of prophecy to Halacha. The prophet cannot reveal a new mitzvah. Neither can the prophet use prophecy to decide legal matters.[12] ■

[1] Mesechet Kiddushin 39b.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 9:1.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 7:6-7.

[4] Rabbaynu Chizkiya ben Manoach (Chizkuni), Commentary on Sefer Vakikra, 26:30.

[5] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer VaYikra, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1997), p 389.

[6] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer VaYikra, 26:45.

[7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Commentary on the Mishne, Mesechet Sanhedrin 10:1.

[8] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 9:1.

[9] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 9:4.

[10] Sefer Devarim 30:11.

[11] Rav Avraham di Boton, Lechem Mishne, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 9:1.

[12] See Rav Tzvi Hirsch Chajes, Torat Neveim, chapter 1.

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People

I am thinking about Exodus 20 in the Torah, the 10 commandments. Let's see how good you are. Have you ever lied? Even just once? What does that make you? A liar of course! Have you ever stolen anything? Even one tiny thing? Then what are you? A thief! Have you ever dishonored your parents, or neglected to love the Lord with all your strength? And I have only mentioned four of the ten commandments! And the Bible says the soul that sins shall die!

That's why Leviticus 17:11 says, "The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement." So you see that God did make a provision for our sin through "Blood Atonement".

My dear, you are deceived by false doctrine. Don't let anyone steal your salvation from you. You don't want to die and pay for your own sins against God. You have probably lied and broken many commandments more than once!"

I wrote my friend back as follows: Let's call a spade here. To you and your friend I say as follows: missionaries resort to scare tactics, since reason is not a weapon in their arsenal. Error # 1. Error # 2: missionaries also have no idea that the Torah has two parts: written and oral. They are ignorant of the Oral Law, so they arrive at foolish notions of the Written Law.

This missionary said "The soul that sins shall die". Error #3: this does not refer to all sins....just capital and fundamental crimes. One is not killed for lying, dishonor, or stealing.

He also said, "The life of the flesh is in the blood..." to support the Christian notion of Blood Atonement. Error # 4: this is referring to why one should not eat blood. See the very next verse 17:12 where blood-eating is prohibited. It is not referring to the false Christian doctrine. This verse prohibits the expression of the psychological belief that the soul resides in the blood. People ate blood assuming they might be as the animal from which it was drawn. Some believed spirits ate the blood. And I am sure there were many other beliefs associated with blood.

However, God says not to relate to blood in this idolatrous manner, but to recognize it is the source of life, and to use it as atonement

for our lives. By sacrificing an animal, we demonstrate that it is in our place. We kill it to demonstrate our conviction that we are not essentially entitled to life. We exist only due to God's kindness. As soon as Adam was created, he sacrificed to God. He had not yet sinned, and yet he sacrificed. So sacrifice is not Christian Blood Atonement.

There are two fundamentals in sacrifice: 1) the aspect of death causes man to reflect on his created status, since death embodies the removal of life, or rather, the idea that man (life) was not always around. 2) The aspect of sacrificing "to God" demonstrates man's acceptance of a subservient role in relationship to God.

Ibn Ezra teaches Adam was a great mind. Adam immediately recognized he was a creation, and demonstrated his temporal status with the act of killing an animal...showing by proxy that he was temporal.

Judaism's laws are beautiful, sensible, and bear out God's truths. In stark contrast, all other religious views were fabricated from man's imagination, not reality. If the missionary studied Torah under the tutelage of Torah scholars, for decades as is required...he might arrive at truths.

As a rule, do not engage Christians in debating the meaning of verses, since they were not trained in the Oral law, essential for understanding their meanings. This is akin to one without schooling attempting to explain Einsteinian theories.

The above is all my address to you and your friend. Now to answer your question...

To any missionary I would respond as follows, regardless of what he or she says: "Christianity has no proof, no witnesses to Jesus' supposed miracles, and Christianity contradicts God's Torah fundamentals. Without proof, and with words that contradict God, Christianity is an impostor religion." Then I walk away as there is nothing to discuss.

Remember: we have historical proofs of God's only revelation. We have mass witnesses. No other religion possesses either. And since Revelation at Sinai is incontrovertible, Islam and Christianity cannibalized Judaism, and then altered it. Be secure in this fundamental, and the twisted words of others will have no affect.

Note to yeshiva Rebbes and educators: if this friend was perplexed by a missionary's foolish words, it is clear that Jewish education is failing in a big way. You must include mandatory classes on Torah fundamentals. Jewish history & language, Gemara, Tnach and Chumash are insufficient. The philosophy of why Judaism alone is true, is still sorely lacking from your curriculums. No doubt this contributes to a 50%+ intermarriage rate, and apathetic Jews.

If our greatest minds like Maimonides took the time to address the fundamentals, please take that seriously, and take your time to teach them. Make sure your Jewish students, remain Jewish.



Jewish Thievery

I sent the following letter to a Jewish newspaper in response to a recently published ad.

"Dear Editor;

Last week, a friend showed me an ad that offered prayers by Gedolim on behalf of those seeking shidduchim. However, there existed a qualification: one must donate to their cause, so as to be included in the prayer on behalf of single Jews.

There are at least two fundamental conflicts with Torah Hashkafa that I see in this ad:

1) Those who exclude anyone in need of assistance - for any reason - harbor favoritism, and perhaps sinas chinam. But our Torah says, "Kol Yisrael Aravim". Money is not to be a dividing factor. Personally, I would, and do pray for all Jews, without qualification.

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*The Torah
commands us to
follow the Rabbis
– "Know it" –
but not to stop there.
We must ultimately
"place it on our
hearts". Meaning to
arrive at 100%
intellectual conviction
in the ideas of
the Torah.*

*A lesson worth
repeating.*

2) There is no Torah basis to suggest that one's prayer is effective. For we see our Matriarchs were barren for decades. Certainly, they, and their husbands - the Avos - prayed to Hashem during those childless years. But even their prayers could not produce results. And our Matriarchs and Patriarchs were Navios and Neveeim, prophetesses and prophets...on a much higher level than any gadol today, since the Gemara says Navuah has ceased. Our great prophets did not claim their prayers would be effective. It is therefore misleading to take money in exchange for empty promises, when no guarantee exists that one's prayer will produce the claimed results.

I hope as time marches on, more and more Jews will not fall prey to empty claims, regardless of the popularity of movements, or people's reputations.

We are to follow Hashem's word...exclusively. And Torah disagrees with that ad."

Neighborly Advice

I attend a mincha minyan across the street each day. This week I got into a discussion with a new friend as to why we did not say Tachnun on the 14th of Iyar, as opposed to the 15th. Pesach Sheni, I thought, should be the same calendar date – the 15th – as the first Pesach. (Pesach sheni – the second Passover – was instituted to allow those who could not, to bring the Passover sacrifice)

The next day my friend had a fine answer: the Passover sacrifice was in fact sacrificed on the 14th, so we don't recite Tachnun on that day. I agreed, and realized that although those who missed the sacrifice in its proper time, nonetheless observed the Passover holiday. So all they missed was the sacrifice, which is brought on the 14th of the next month. As that 14th day of Iyar is designated as Pesach Sheni, we don't recite Tachnun. But there is no second 8-day "holiday", only a second sacrifice date.

A day later I reflected on how fortunate it is to have friends with whom even casual conversation yields new Torah insights. But then, a saying of the Rabbis struck me:

"Better to live in Israel among gentiles, than outside Israel among Jews". So I hesitated about how happy I should be that my friends outside Israel are Jews! But what do the Rabbis mean? I saw what I feel is another insight...

Although living among Jews is beneficial, it does not compare to living in Israel. Why? It would appear that a Jewish, social environment is not preferred by the Rabbis, in place of Israel. I believe the Rabbis are saying that it is far more important that our convictions stem from our intellects, than from social reasons. Living among gentiles – in Israel – in a far greater measure brings to our consciousness the realities that permeate Torah history and law. It also enables more mitzvahs. While living among Jews only offers social support for our actions.

Rabbi Bachya, author of Duties of the Heart cites the verse in Alaynu: "And you shall know it (the Law) today; and you shall place it on your heart". The great Rabbi teaches that this verse commands us to follow the Rabbis – "Know it" - but not to stop there. We must ultimately "place it on our hearts". Meaning to arrive at 100% intellectual conviction in the ideas of the Torah.

To live in Israel even among gentiles, we live Torah lives not based on social reasons, but on intellectual conviction.

The lesson: knowledge far surpasses good neighbors. ■

Letters

Mesora invites your questions, letters in response to articles, your own thoughts, or your suggestions for the JewishTimes.

*"The only poor question
is the one not asked."*

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God's will? Free will.



Why don't Jews act as Christians, become missionaries and seek Christian converts? This is due to the fundamental difference between Judaism and Christianity.

Judaism accepts God's design of humans as possessing free will and reason. We agree with God's will that all mankind arrive at truths on their own, using intelligence alone. God does not desire that any person be coerced or scared into his or her beliefs. So we don't missionize. In contrast, missionaries are blindly allegiant to doctrine, not reason. In the face of disproof, they bombard Jews with twisted verses. Mormons go so far as to convert the Jewish dead.

As Jews, we follow what reason dictates to be true. As Christians, they are disturbed by those truths and must seek alternative measures to defend their fallacy. They feel conversions win their arguments. Yet another demonstration that Christianity is not only a blind faith, but it is blind to reason.

Don't help the missionaries convert our youth by failing to act: make certain your schools include mandatory classes on our fundamentals.