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OVER ANYONE ELSE TODAY? IF SO, LET US
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STUDY TORAH TO KNOW WHAT IS TRUE.**

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Weekly Parsha

Matot

RABBI BERNIE FOX

“And Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes saying, “This is the matter that Hashem commanded.” (BeMidbar 30:2)

This pasuk introduces the most

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Justice



God has no

FAVORITE

IN THE JEW

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

When Jacob came before his father Isaac to receive the blessings he purchased from Esav and rightfully deserved, Isaac commences by saying “Elokim should give you from the dew of the heavens.” Rashi asks why Isaac used Elokim, the name of God that refers to “justice”. To what matter of

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(Matot cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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comprehensive discussion in the Torah of the laws governing vows. What is a vow? A vow is a means by which a person creates a personal obligation or restriction. One reason a person makes a vow is to obligate oneself to offer a sacrifice. This person would verbalize a commitment to bring an Olah sacrifice. Once this commitment is verbalized as a vow, the person is obligated to bring the offering. Failure to bring the offering is a violation of a binding Torah obligation.

A person might also make a vow to donate a certain sum to charity. However, vows can also relate to issues that are more mundane. A person eager to control one's diet might make a vow to eat at least one vegetable each day.

A vow can also take the form of a restriction. A person can vow to refrain from eating ice cream for a specific period of time. This person is not permitted to eat ice cream. In fact, for this person, ice cream is no different than the other foods prohibited by the Torah. Just as we are prohibited from eating forbidden fats, this person is subject to an additional restriction. This individual, because of the vow, cannot consume ice cream.

A vow is a serious commitment. The Torah requires strict adherence to vows. Therefore, the Sages discouraged making frivolous vows. This is because the Sages were concerned that a person may violate a vow. The best way to assure that a vow is not violated is not to make the vow in the first instance.

Our parasha focuses on a specific aspect of the laws governing vows. The Torah explains that the vows of certain individuals are subject to reversal. In other words, if one of these individuals makes a vow, this vow can be reversed by another party. Who are these individuals? Who is empowered with the authority to overturn their vows? Under what circumstances can this authority be exercised?

The Torah explains that a father can reverse his unwed daughter's vow. A husband can overturn the vow of his wife. This authority does not extend to all vows. The husband can only overturn vows that affect him. However, if the wife makes a vow that affects no person other than herself, the husband cannot reverse the vow. He does not have authority over such vows.[1]

Our parasha delineates various perimeters of this authority. For example, the father or husband can only overturn a vow by acting on the same day that he becomes aware of the vow. Another restriction on this authority is that a father can only nullify the vow of a daughter that has not completely reached her majority. However, once the daughter is a complete adult, the father's authority lapses.

Our pasuk indicates that Moshe explained these laws to the heads of the tribes – the shevatim. Why did Moshe address the heads of the shevatim and not all the nation? There are various responses to this question. Rashi rejects the very premise of the question. He explains that Moshe actually announced the material concerning vows to the entire nation. The intent of the pasuk is to indicate that Moshe first taught the material to the princes of the shevatim. After instructing the leaders, he taught the material to the nation. Rashi also



contends that this process was not specific to this material. Moshe followed this process in teaching all portions of the Torah. First, he addressed the princes and, afterwards, he again taught the material to the nation.[2] This does leave one question. Why does the Torah, in this instance, mention the preferential treatment afforded the princes? According to Rashi, these leaders were consistently provided with the initial communication of the laws. However, specifically in this instance the Torah reveals this process!

Nachmanides disagrees with Rashi. He maintains that the Torah is describing an unique event. In general, Moshe taught the mitzvot to the entire nation. However, this mitzvah was revealed to the princes. It was not initially revealed to the entire nation. Why is this mitzvah special? Nachmanides offers a number of possibilities. One is that the princes have a unique role in regard to vows. The laws of vows were revealed to the princes as an indication of their special role and responsibility in this regard. What is this singular role and responsibility?

As has been explained, the Torah requires that we adhere to our vows. A person cannot make a vow, then decide that it was ill considered, and disregard it. Perhaps, this person should not have made the vow. Nonetheless, the vow must be respected. However, there is a means of release from a vow. An expert scholar or a court can release a person from a vow. The person must

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show cause. Halacha delineates the criteria for such a release.

Nachmanides explains that this unique role and responsibility afforded the scholars and courts is not explicitly stated anywhere in the Torah. However, it is alluded to in our pasuk. The princes represented the scholars and judges. In speaking to the princes, Moshe communicated that these princes and the scholars and courts that would exist in the future have responsibility for vows. What is this responsibility? They are empowered to release a person from a vow.[3]

Rashi utilizes this same concept to resolve the difficulty engendered by his explanation of our passage. Rashi explains that Moshe regularly revealed the commandments to the princes prior to the nation. This detail is mentioned in our parasha as an allusion to the unique role of the judges and scholars in regard to vows. They are endowed with the right to release a person from a vow.

In summary, there are two means by which the binding power of a vow can be nullified. A husband or father can reverse the vow. The court can release the person from the vow.

There are many differences between these two processes. However, there is one distinction that the commentaries note is particularly significant. The father or husband does not require the consent of the wife or daughter. He can act unilaterally. In other words, even if the daughter wishes the vow to be binding, the father may reverse it. The same is true of the husband's authority in regard to his wife's vow. The courts do not have this ability. The court cannot act unilaterally. The court does not even initiate the process. Instead, a person wishing release from a vow must petition the court. The court can only act in response to the request of the person seeking release.

This seems to be an odd arrangement. We would expect the opposite. We would expect a court of law to have greater authority than a lay person would. Yet, the opposite is true. A father or husband has greater authority over vows than the most elevated court of the nation! What is the reason for this paradoxical arrangement? More importantly, what does this arrangement reveal about the natures of these processes?

The commentaries suggest an important concept that explains this distinction. What is the legal basis for the authority of the father and husband? Sforno contends that the Torah actually

endows the father and husband with authority over the vows of a daughter or wife. As head of the household, the father or husband has the authority to reverse these vows.[4]

What is the legal basis for the license of the courts? Nachmanides addresses this issue. His comments are not completely clear. He seems to maintain that the Torah does not require our unqualified adherence to our vows. However, we are required to treat a vow as a serious commitment. It cannot be regarded lightly. This means that, given sufficient grounds, a vow can be rescinded. If these grounds exist and the vow is rescinded after careful analysis of these grounds, then the vow has not been disregarded. It has not been treated lightly. The role of the court is to conduct this analysis. The court validates the cause presented by the petitioner for nullification of the vow.[5]

This distinction explains the paradox outlined above. Why does the father or husband have greater authority over vows than the courts? The father or husband actually has authority over a daughter or wife's vow. As a result, he can unilaterally overturn these vows. The courts do not have actual authority. They cannot unilaterally release a person from a vow. Instead, the court merely evaluates the credibility of the reasons provided by the petitioner for release from a vow. The person who made the vow presents an argument for release from the vow. The court analyzes this argument and validates its credibility. This process can only take place through the person who made the vow petitioning the court. It is impossible for the court to act without the initiation of the person who made the vow.

“Command Bnai Yisrael and say to them, “When you come to the land of Canaan, this is the land within the borders of the land of Canaan that shall be your hereditary territory.” (BeMidbar 34:2)

Hashem describes to Moshe the borders of the land of Israel. This land will be divided into portions and distributed among the tribes. Rashi explains that these boundaries are very important in halacha. Various mitzvot only apply in the land of Israel. Therefore, any territory outside of the borders is exempt from these commandments.[6]

It must be noted this description of the boundaries indicates that the eastern border is the Jordan River. This is difficult to explain. The tribes of Reuven, Gad, and half of the tribe of Menashe settled in the territory conquered from Sichon and

Og. In general, any land conquered by the nation is considered, in halacha, to be part of the land of Israel.[7] This land was situated on the eastern side of the Jordan. The proper eastern border should be the eastern boundary of this territory!

Rav Moshe Feinstein Ztl explains that there is a basic difference between the land of Israel west of the Jordan and the territory to the east. The land to the west was promised to Avraham and the forefathers. It was destined to be conquered and become the land of Israel. The land of Sichon and Og was not included in this covenant. It was not predetermined that this land should become part of the land of Israel.[8]

This distinction can provide a possible answer to our question. Moshe had awarded the land of Sichon and Og to Reuven, Gad, and half of Menashe. However, he had stipulated a condition. This land would become their portion after they had conquered the territory west of the Jordan. Moshe had required that first the land of the covenant must be captured. Then, this additional land could become part of the land of Israel. The sanctity of the land of Sichon and Og was suspended until the land of the covenant was possessed.

Now, the description of the boundaries can be explained. Hashem specifically described the borders of the land of the covenant. This is the land that must first be sanctified. Once this is accomplished, the land of Sichon and Og can be possessed and sanctified. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Nedarim 12:1. (See Radvaz for other opinions).

[2] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 30:2.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 30:2.

[4] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 30:2

[5] See Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 30:2.

[6] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 34:2

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

[8] Rav Moshe Feinstein, Derash Moshe, Sefer BeMidbar 32:29.

justice does he refer? (Gen. 27:28) Rashi says this justice refers to the ways of God, that He should give Jacob goodness (he thought it was a "righteous" Esav before him) but only when he deserves it. In other words, Isaac was blessing Jacob that God should give him in accordance with his actions. Later, when blessing the real Esav, now knowing that Esav did not turn out as good as Isaac had wished, Isaac omitted the name "Elokim". Meaning, God should grant Esav goodness "unconditionally". The lesser son receives a greater blessing?

Rashi picks up on this distinction, and with his encyclopedic mind, he cites where King Solomon did the same, learning from our case of Isaac's blessings. After building the Temple, King Solomon prays to God that He responds to each Jew's Temple prayers "in accordance with his actions, for you know his heart, for You alone know the ways of all men". (Kings I, 8:39) But when praying that God also responds to the prayers of the 'gentiles' at the Temple, King Solomon says that God should give each gentile "whatever he asks, in order that all nations will know Your name, to fear you like Israel and to know that Your name is called upon this house that I built". (ibid 8:43)

On the surface, both cases seem to favor the individual who is further removed from worshipping God. For both Isaac and King Solomon ask God to grant unconditional goodness on Esav and the gentiles, respectively. How do we resolve this apparent favoritism towards one less deserving? And I only say a gentile is less deserving, since he typically is less knowledgeable of God and His will, since he has no Torah. Of course Abraham was a gentile who didn't need a Torah to perfect himself. But we speak in general terms, not exceptional cases. So what must be our first step to discovering an answer? The first step is always the same: careful analysis of the verses. And Radak did so beautifully here.

King Solomon said God should "give the gentile whatever he asks, in order that all nations will know Your name, to fear you like Israel and to know that Your name is called upon this house that I built." In other words, the gentile does not yet know God's name, or rather, God's ways. The king teaches us a primary lesson, the lesson he learned from Isaac.

The lesson is that people are different, and to reach their objective of recognizing God, there are certain ideas that must precede others. Without a proper sequence of education, one may sacrifice all education. Maimonides too wrote in his opening words of his Guide, "for my object was that the truth should present itself in connected order". I will explain.

Typically, a gentile has a distorted view of God, or no view at all. If he were to hear of the Temple, the house associated with Israel who worships the Creator, it is fundamental to his knowledge of God that he not be suddenly turned off by God's measure-for-measure justice system. That's too much justice for a first lesson. At such an early stage in his development, to attract the gentile in to continued learning, we must start with 'his' current sense of justice. Isaac and King Solomon did this. They both asked God to respond unconditionally whenever the gentile prays.

This will open the gentile to accepting the Torah system. The gentile currently operates with a sense of justice where what he considers good, is identical with obtaining his wishes. If he does not receive what he prays for at the Temple, he might be eternally turned off to the Torah system. Therefore, our prophets asked God to be lenient with those who possess little knowledge. Once they attain an appreciation – even on their terms – for Torah, they will have hearts that are opened to hearing the finer points.

Similarly, when teaching an unaffiliated Jew for the first time, is it wise to enumerate all the specifics of how milk and meat can combine, with fatty substances, with or without a flame, 2 sets of dishes, etc? That would be foolish, and will certainly turn off that Jew. It matters none that the ideas are true, but he is not ready for them. First, teach him the ideas

of a Creator, that He must be One. That He is not physical, and was never preceded by anything else. That He created, sustains and suspends all natural law. That He protects those who follow Him. Now you've got a foundation that attracts that Jew. The same applies to the gentile.

First, let the gentile experience the truth that God alone answers prayers, as He alone Created the universe and can direct physical responses to man. This foundation will allow future lessons to be heard. But if the gentile receives no response to his desires, since he is at a low level, he might abandon his approach to Torah.

Radak teaches that this is how we are to decipher the verse: "give the gentile whatever he asks". That is the first step, and the first words on our verse. The verse continues, "In order that all nations will know Your name". This means that this will open the gentiles' hearts to accepting You God. "To fear You like Israel and to know that Your name is called upon this house that I built". This is the ultimate goal, that the gentile should fear God just as the Jews. It is only once a person has the realization of God, that we can then teach finer points of reward

and justice. But if we attempt to teach this in reverse order, what will happen? A gentile will approach the Temple and pray to God for his wishes. If God responds using measure-for-measure, meaning strict justice, the gentile will be dissuaded, since his current sense of reality associates goodness with physical success. Therefore, both Isaac and King Solomon wished for the good for all people, and that God should respond to certain individuals differently, "in order that all nations will know Your name, to fear you like Israel."

Our greatest leaders saw all members of mankind as equal. They wished that God would respond to them in a way that will eventuate in them "fearing You like Israel". That is, our leaders saw the gentiles as possessing the same potential as the Jew. This must be the case, as all mankind emanates from the same couple...we all possess the identical design, and potential.

If we live this way, imagine the reputation Torah will have, and how many others will be attracted to God's will for all mankind. ■



Noachides

Introduction

It's important that you understand that I have a bias. I'm interested in the truth.

There are those who will say that there is no truth, or that there is no reality, or that everyone makes up their own reality, or that we can't know the truth, and so forth.

The problem with this is that we live in a practical world. We can spout theoretical platitudes all day, and maybe even sound intelligent to some (including ourselves), until the day the doctor says, "You have a brain tumor." Suddenly, all of our wonderful theory goes out the window. All of those flowery-sounding statements about not being able to know the truth don't cut it. We want answers from the doctor. How dangerous is it? What can be done? Are treatments available? Has medical science figured out a cure?

And of course, the main underlying question that we don't want to verbalize is: "Am I going to die?"

Should the doctor at that point say, "Well, there really is no truth in the neurosciences. It's whatever you think it is," our formerly pseudo-philosophical self will likely have an apoplectic fit. Posturing is great until you find yourself in a real firefight with real bullets.

There is truth. And in many cases, it can be known. Not always, perhaps, but more than we sometimes think. We all deal with it every day. Someone can argue that we can't really know if we're real or not, but the truth is that we all know what the result will be if you stand on the freeway in front of a Mack truck going 70 miles per hour, or if you're at an amusement park and the bungee cord breaks.

Much of my life has been expended on the search for truth. I do not claim to have all of the answers or necessarily even a significant fraction of them. At the same time, I know what I think (at least today) and why I think it. I reserve the right to change that tomorrow if someone can show me a more sound approach.

A great Jewish sage once said that a person should always think that he is right (for after all, who else are we each going to rely on), and – and this is a very important and – be willing to retract if someone can show us that we're wrong.

I hope to always hold to both of these principles in equal measure.

Chapter 1 – Setting the Foundation

While it would be easy to jump into a study of Torah for Non-Jews, we need to tackle some foundation basics first. In our society, we tend to start well past the beginning. If you've ever

been involved in a so-called religious discussion, you know that these can turn into emotional snowball fights very easily.

Years ago in my town, a pastor of a church wrote an article in the local newspaper expressing his concern about the spread of homosexuality and his concerns about what this might mean for his children growing up in society. From his religious viewpoint, homosexuality was wrong, and he made that point clear in his article. As you might imagine, there was a firestorm of letters to the editor in protest. Sadly, the letters were little more than emotional venting. They raked the pastor over the coals, they called him names, and in general they just stirred up a lot of dust. In only one case did a writer raise a potentially legitimate argument against the pastor's position, and even that writer still included some emotional name-calling in his letter.

Finally, after this went on for a while, I wrote a letter pointing out the uselessness of the discussion. Why was it useless? Because in general, there two kinds of people; those who think that there is a Creator of the universe who gave us rules to live by, and those who don't. The ones who do think that there is a Creator of the universe generally (I know there are exceptions, but bear with me) believe that the rules set down by that Creator forbid homosexuality. For those who don't think there is a Creator of the universe, they will likely find no problem with homosexuality.

So to argue the issue of homosexuality is a pointless venture, because each side of the argument is starting from different premises.

No discussion about homosexuality will ever go anywhere if the people involved in the discussion are arguing from different foundational assumptions. It's the differences in those assumptions that they must tackle first. Only then does the discussion of homosexuality have any hope of proceeding constructively.

When you study geometry in school, one of the axioms that you begin with is the idea that two parallel lines in a plane never intersect. This can't be proven, but it is accepted as a given in Euclidean geometry. From that axiom, you can derive all kinds of other things. But there is also non-Euclidean geometry that doesn't necessarily accept the axiom that two parallel lines in a plane never intersect. You can derive a number of things in that system as well.

If someone were to argue a "downstream" conclusion from one system against a corresponding idea from the other system, the argument would be pointless. Why? Again, the two sides would be arguing from different

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Fundamentals of Torah for Non-Jews

Part I of II

BY DOUG TAYLOR

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Noachides

premises. They are starting from a different place. What is needed is to back way up and discuss the differences in the underlying assumptions first. Then, once those differences in assumptions are dealt with, a person is in a position to discuss the downstream conclusion.

So, before we launch into the details about Torah for non-Jews, let's back way up and discuss some foundational questions, the first of which is: How do we know what is true?

In my experience, this question is almost universally overlooked in our society. Yet knowing the answer to this question is fundamental to our knowledge of virtually anything.

Think about it for a moment. Just how do you know what's true?

Is something true because you read it in a book? Because someone older than you said so? Because it's posted on the Internet? Because a so-called religious leader said so?

This is a question that is worth chewing on for a while. I'm going to offer an answer, but before I do, if you want to get the most out of this material, I invite you to think seriously about this. It's just about the most fundamental question that one can ask.

My answer is on the next paragraph.

Did you take the time to think about the question? Do you have a clear answer? One that makes sense to you?

Maimonides, one of the great Jewish scholars, suggested that there are three ways to know what is true:

- (1) Direct observation or experience
 - (2) Reasoning, such as a logical deduction or proof, or a preponderance of evidence
 - (3) Prophecy from a known prophet
- Let's look at each of these in detail.

Direct Observation or Experience

Direct observation or experience is exactly that. We use our five senses to learn and understand what is true. (1) I saw it. (2) I heard it. (3) I tasted it. (4) I touched it. (5) I smelled it.

Almost any knowledge of the physical world starts with these. Someone, somewhere, experienced something directly.

Note that there are some limitations here. First, we can't directly observe or experience everything. For example, I wasn't alive during World War II, yet I hold that it occurred. We'll talk about that in a moment.

Second, our senses can be fooled. Movie-makers and magicians do it all the time. The art of special effects has become an amazingly complex discipline. Photographs are so easily modified today that any given photograph



cannot necessarily be taken as real. We need to be on the lookout for these types of things.

Reasoning, such as a logical deduction or proof, or a preponderance of evidence

Let's start with logical deductions or proofs. These, of course, require a knowledge of logic.

(Ironically, in the days of the ancients, logic was considered a prerequisite to the study of any other subject matter. For how could one know whether he is reaching a proper conclusion without a knowledge of logic and deduction? Yet today, logic is an elective course. Consider how you would feel being diagnosed with a serious disease or medical condition by a doctor who had never been taught how to reach a proper conclusion.)

As an example, logic dictates that a statement cannot be simultaneously true and not true. If A equals B, then it is not true that A is not equal to B. If I'm in Los Angeles at a given moment in time, then I cannot be in Venice at the same moment.

Then there is preponderance of evidence. Consider this. Suppose that a stranger approaches me on the street and explains that he was abducted by aliens earlier that day, they took him up in their space ship, and he had a nice lunch of grilled cheese sandwiches with Elvis Presley. Would we believe him? After all, we weren't there, so we have no direct experience. It could be true, but then again...

Now consider World War II. Many of us didn't experience that event directly either. Yet we believe that it happened. Why?

This is where the important concept of the preponderance of evidence comes into play. Thousands upon thousands of people experienced the Second World War. Hundreds of books have been written about it. Movies have been made about it. There is so much direct observational evidence by those who experienced it that we can reasonably rely on their observations and direct experience.

It is possible – and certainly happens – that one or two people make something up or lie about it. But the larger the group that is “in the know”, the harder it becomes to keep a lie a secret. Conspiracies become more difficult – and at some point virtually impossible – the more people are involved. For example, if one person tells me that a bank was robbed in my town earlier today, I may or may not believe him, depending on the person and perhaps other factors. But if 1,000 people report that there was a bank robbery in my town earlier today because they personally watched it happen from

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Noachides

their office buildings (not because they read it on the Internet), then I can be fairly certain that something resembling a bank robbery occurred.

We learn most of history this way. When there is a preponderance of evidence, we can be fairly certain that an event happened. In other historical situations, where we may have the account of only one or a small handful of people, the veracity of the account becomes more open to question.

In fact, much of the knowledge we have comes from a preponderance of evidence based on the direct observations of others. If a doctor gives us a certain medication, we generally trust that it will work, not because we observed the clinical trials, but because there is a preponderance of evidence that the trials were conducted and that they yielded positive results.

Prophecy from a known prophet

A third way we can know something is true is if the information is provided through prophecy by a known prophet. Now, this would require that we establish that prophecy exists, and the criteria by which we can know that someone is a bona fide prophet. We're not going to go into that in this series, but I want to include it just so our list is complete. For our purposes, we're going to focus on the first two: direct observation or experience, and reasoning.

But what about belief?

Ah yes, then there is belief. So let's ask the question, what is belief? I submit that "Belief is a conviction that I have concerning something about which I am ignorant."

Read that again. "Belief is a conviction that I have concerning something about which I am ignorant."

Why am I ignorant about it? Because if I knew – through direct observation or experience, or through reasoning – then I wouldn't need to "believe".

Think about this. Have you ever heard anyone ask, "Do you believe in yogurt?"

Of course not. "Yogurt?" you might say. "You mean that creamy white stuff that comes in small containers at the store? Usually in a variety of fruit flavors? Sure, I'm familiar with it. In fact, I had some this morning."

It wouldn't mean anything to say that you "believe" in yogurt. By contrast, you "know" about yogurt. The only reason you might need to believe in yogurt is if you had no knowledge of it, in which case you'd be ignorant about it.

But, you might ask, that's great for something I can see and touch, but what about something

that I can't see or touch?

Ok, how about electricity. Electricity is a flow of electrons. Which of us has actually seen the flow of electrons through a wire? Yet do we say that we "believe" in electricity? No, because we've worked with the effects of electricity long enough and studied it long enough to know that it actually exists. The only reason I would need belief around this would be if I were ignorant about it; that is, I had no knowledge of it.

I submit to you that belief, in and of itself, means nothing. There are people who believe all kinds of things. Does that make them true? Does it make them not true?

Actually, neither. A belief doesn't tell us anything, and it virtually ends productive discussion.

This point was brought home to me years ago when, as a consulting actuary, I was working on behalf of an organization that was considering giving a cost-of-living adjustment to the pension benefits that the company's plan was paying to retired employees. The company was under no legal obligation to do this. They asked me and others to look into the question of whether they should grant this increase. (The retired employees were on fixed dollar pensions, so that any increase in the cost of

goods and services in that society made it more difficult for them because their pension benefits were fixed at a certain level – determined at the time of retirement – for life.)

After studying the issue, we determined that there was no business reason to grant a cost-of-living increase, but that it was a judgment call on the part of senior management of the company. The decision went all the way to the Board of Directors. All of the Directors agreed not to give the increase, except one. His position was, "Yes, I hear all of the facts. But I believe we have an obligation to these people."

In telling me this later, my manager sagely said, "As soon as someone says, 'Yes, I hear all of the facts, but I believe such and such,' all debate stops. Why? Because you cannot debate a belief."

This is a critical point. It is virtually impossible to debate a belief. If six people are standing around an all-white car, and five of them agree that the car is white, but the sixth person says, "Yes, I see that the car is white and that you all agree, but I believe the car is red," what can you say? How can you argue with such a position? At that point, all discussion stops, because there is no way to continue. ■

To be continued.

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Authentic Torah

Reader: My question is about the Baalei Mesora (eg. Rishonim). Through what methodology am I able to go about validating the authenticity of the transmission of Torah they passed down in their books? How is one able to know that since we accept them "now" as the trusted transmitters, that this is in fact true?

How was it established that they were the holders of the Mesora: by the masses; by the other Rabbis at the time?

So too with the Rabbis in today's world. Is it simply the fact that a Rabbi has smicha or is accepted by masses of people as a great Rabbi that means he holds information that was passed down through the Mesora?

I have often found many Rabbis that fall into this category and still have a very hard time accepting the Mesora they claim to have because a lot of their views contradict logic and understanding. If a Rabbi of today's society is generally accepted as a great Rabbi but his *haskafa* is in much contradiction to the way a rational person thinks, how do we know that this also didn't happen with the Baalei Mesora in the times of the Rishonim, or any time after Moshe rabbeinu?

Also with the books of Prophets, how can I validate the information that is contained there?

*Thanks for your time,
 Sam*

Mesora: Sam, your question is fundamental in nature, and therefore vital that it be shared.

On page one of his *Mishne Torah*, Maimonides lists the 40 successive generations, from Rav Ashi back to Moses, who received the Torah, one Rabbi from the previous Rabbi. There was no break in the chain. That Torah – identical to what Moses received – was disseminated throughout the population and taught publicly. The names of those who wrote the *Mishna* and the *Talmud* are also cited there.

The Rishonim – of whom Maimonides is one of the greatest – have no dispute concerning whether their received Torah was authentic. Furthermore, God promises that the Torah will never be lost from our nation. (Isaiah 59:21)

Regarding current day Rabbis, *smicha* (Rabbinic ordination) or mass acceptance, in no way validates his views as authentic Torah. I too have heard illogic from Rabbis. That which is contrary to reason cannot be part of Torah. Torah is synonymous with "truth". If anyone says a matter which contradicts reason, they are in error. Rabbi or not. But this in no way rejects the truth that we today possess the Torah that Moses received.

You also ask whether earlier Rabbis could have erred as today's Rabbis do. The answer is yes, anyone can err. But their errors would have been detected, as all was taught publicly. No errors would escape the scrutiny of so many learned minds. Today however, no one matches the level of those earlier Rabbis whose days and nights were dedicated to learning, not fortune and fame. Today, the Jewish mindset is diseased by a primary cancer: "reputation and numbers makes right". What's worse, is that today, many educators are being taught by a previous generation whose ideas are flawed. So a new crop of teachers arise that proliferate the falsehood they inherited.

Today, if a "Rabbi" says something, he is blindly accepted. Whereas *Chullin 124a* teaches that no one is infallible. So too King Solomon teaches. Reason also demands this be so. God alone is perfect. What happens is that enough people follow that Rabbi's error, and now all others view this new mass of ignorant Jews as validation for the erroneous notions they maintain. This cycle continues, and larger numbers accept these false ideas.

Thank God we have the writings of the clear-thinking Rabbis of old. God has kept His promise that the Torah has not left the nation. Rather, today's educators don't study Torah, but repeat their teachers instead.

We are fortunate to have a Maimonides, who taught us to make certain an idea makes sense, and Rabbi Bachya ibn Paquda who taught not to accept even a Rabbi on his authority alone, lest we sin against God in doing so. For we have the capacity to verify if that Rabbi is correct. Being lazy and relying on anyone else is a sin. We have a King Solomon and a Abraham ben-Rambam who taught that the Rabbis speak in metaphor. These lessons steer clear the intelligent student from accepting demons cited in *Talmud* as literal. Those who study Ibn Ezra read that the Torah prohibits what is false, not what is true. Therefore, all superstitions and amulets are lies. Red bendels, checking *mezuzas* and *chamsas* are stupid, as the *Shulchan Aruch* states openly. But those who arrogantly say Ibn Ezra and Maimonides were minority opinions, and are wrong, unveil their inability to think. For it is ludicrous to say the masses who serve idols today are right, and the minority of Torah Jews are wrong.

We were each granted intelligence, as God wants us "each" to use intelligence, and not parrot others. This is our tool. This is God's will and His method for insuring we determine what is true and false, for all generations. This is the only method you can, and must use. ■