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Volume VIII, No. 25...June 5, 2009

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IN THIS ISSUE

PARSHA: NASO	I-5
LETTERS	I,6,7
PRIESTLY BLESSINGS	8
CULTURE PHENOMENON	9

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Weekly Parsha

Naso

RABBI BERNIE FOX

The Association of the Convert to the Kohanim

If there is no relative to whom to return the dishonest gain, it must be returned to Hashem and given to the Kohen. This is in addition to

(continued on next page)

Letters

Chassidism & DEIFYING MAN

Reader: I just finished reading your article on Chassidim. First let me say that I agree fully with your comments on the origins of Chassidus, the Besht and the importance of not embracing such a movement. I also find such calls of tolerance very dangerous and think they are partially what Avtaliyon was warning of in Pirkei Avos ("Chachamim HizHaru..."). I have a few thoughts and issues:

1) Putting aside the argument of if magic exists or not, these "miracles" that people claim various Rabbis have performed sound like they would be the textbook case of magic. In theory they are breaking the laws of physics by pure will, not by asking Hashem to do it for them, and therefore would be prohibited. Of course a more in depth discussion would be needed into exactly what magic is.

2) The possibility of someone having an "ability" Moshe and others did not. You wrote in the article "Against Chassidic opinion,

(continued on page 6)

the Phenomenon of Groups, Religion &
Cultures



(Naso cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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the atonement offering through which he atones for the sin. (BeMidbar 5:8)

The meaning of our pasuk is not readily apparent. Our Sages discuss the passage. They explain that the section in which the passage appears deals with a person who has been accused of owing money to another individual. The accused has taken an oath that he does not owe the money. Based on this oath, the court released the accused of any liability. Subsequently, the accused admits that he does owe the money. He is required to restore the dishonest gain, add an additional 20%, and offer a sacrifice[1].

Our passage discusses a special application of this law. The law is predicated on the assumption that the wronged party or his heir is available to receive restitution. If the wronged party has died without heirs, how does the accused make restitution? To whom does the accused give the dishonest gain and the 20% fine?

Before we consider our passage's solution to this dilemma, we must consider another issue. How is it possible for a person to die without any heir? Certainly, through tracing the victim's ancestry, we can find some distant heir! Our Sages respond that the passage deals with a victim who is a convert and dies without children.[2] Those non-Jews who were related to the convert prior to conversion are no longer regarded as heirs. Conversion severs the familial tie between the convert and the non-Jewish community. Therefore, the childless convert truly has no heirs!

Now, let us return to our passage's response. Who receives the money? Our pasuk answers that both the principle amount of the wrongful gain and the 20% fine are given to the kohen.

Why does the kohen receive the money? Gershonides offers a very important answer. He explains that the Torah apparently wishes to associate the convert with the kohen. In effect, the Torah makes the kohen the heir of the convert. The kohanim are the most honored group within the nation. Creating an association between the convert and the kohen elevates the status of the convert.

Why does the Torah wish to elevate the status of the convert? Gershonides proposes that the

Torah is concerned with the welfare of the convert. The convert does not have extensive family ties within Bnai Yisrael. This might mark the convert as an attractive victim for the unscrupulous. In order to protect the convert from such scheming, the Torah assigns to the convert the most respected relatives in the nation. In short, the message communicated by this law is that one who steals from this lonely convert will have to answer to the honorary relatives – the kohanim![3]

The "Bitter" Mixture Given to the Sotah

And the kohen shall stand the woman before Hashem. And he shall uncover the woman's head. And he shall place on her hands the reminder offering, the jealousy offering. And in the hand of the kohen shall be the bitter, curse-bearing water. (BeMidbar 5:18)

This pasuk discusses the test of the sotah. This test culminates in the woman drinking a special mixture. This test is based on a miracle. If the woman is guilty of the suspected crime, then she dies. If she is innocent the mixture does not harm her.

The Torah describes the drink given to the sotah as "bitter". There are various explanations

for this characterization. The simplest interpretation is offered by the Talmud in Tractate Sotah. The Talmud explains that a bitter ingredient is added to the water. This water actually tastes bitter.[4] The Midrash Sifri offers an alternative interpretation. The water is referred to as bitter because of its effect. If the woman is guilty of adultery, then the mixture will cause the woman to die. This is a "bitter" outcome.[5] Nachmanides offers another interpretation. He explains that the term "bitter" refers to an aspect of the miracle. When the woman drinks the water, it initially tastes sweet. However, if she is guilty, the water's initial sweetness is followed by a bitter taste.[6] The most obvious interpretation of the term "bitter" is offered by the Talmud. Why do Sifri and Nachmanides insist upon alternative explanations?

Let us begin by considering more carefully the position of the Talmud. According to the Talmud, an ingredient is added to the water that provides a bitter taste. Why is this ingredient needed? Why

(continued on next page)

should the water have a bitter taste? The ordeal to which the sotah is subjected is not a neutral test. This is because there is no question that the sotah acted promiscuously. The test to which she is subjected – the drinking of the special mixture – is designed to determine whether this promiscuous behavior extended to adultery. This presumption of guilt – in regards to promiscuity – extends to specific details of the test. Essentially, the test is actually formulated as a punishment for adultery. The mixture given to the woman is a potential poison. The sotah vindicates herself through surviving the ordeal. In other words, the sotah subjects herself to an ordeal that is designed as a punishment for adultery. The test has the potential to kill her. She establishes her innocence surviving the ordeal; thus proving that she is not guilty of adultery. This explains the addition of a bitter ingredient to the mixture. This ingredient communicates the message that the drink is not a neutral test. It is a bitter punishment for the adulterous woman.

Sifri and Nachmanides disagree with this simple interpretation of the term "bitter". It seems that both are guided by a shared consideration. The ordeal is designed to stress the miraculous nature of the adjudication. The addition of an extraneous ingredient to the mixture can only detract from this design. If the ingredient is bitter, this is especially true. One might erroneously attribute the lethal effect of the mixture to its ingredients. Therefore, it is important to create the mixture from innocuous ingredients.

We can now understand the dispute between Nachmanides and Sifri. Sifri maintains that the term "bitter" refers to the ultimate fate awaiting a guilty sotah. Nachmanides interprets the term in a more literal sense. The guilty sotah will feel an actual bitter taste. But this sensation only occurs after ingesting the sweet tasting mixture.

Nachmanides apparently maintains that the guilty woman must know that her death is a result of the mixture. She cannot be allowed to believe that her death is coincidental. In order to communicate this message to the woman, she is immediately affected by the water itself. She now knows that the mixture has tested her and found her guilty. She will know that the water has caused her demise.

The Trial of the Sotah and Our Responsibility to Uphold the Laws of the Torah

And the man shall be free of sin and the woman will bear the consequence of her sin. (BeMidbar 5:31)

The test administered to the sotah requires that she drink a mixture prepared by the kohen. The woman drinks the mixture. If she is guilty, both she and the adulterer die. If she is innocent, she is rewarded with offspring.

This entire trial is based upon a miracle. Nachmanides observes that this is the only element of the Torah's judicial system in which justice is dependent upon a miracle.[7] The Talmud explains that this miracle was a blessing from Hashem. However, Hashem only performed this miracle during the period in which the prohibitions against adultery and sexual promiscuity were scrupulously observed. Once the nation became lax regarding these laws, Hashem no longer performed this miracle.[8]

At first glance, this statement from the Talmud seems difficult to understand. It would seem that when the people are devoted to the law, the test of the sotah is less necessary. If there is general observance, what harm is there to society in the failure to detect an occasional deviation? In contrast, if the law is generally disregarded, every opportunity and tool is needed to assure its enforcement.

The Talmud is teaching us an important concept regarding our responsibilities for enforcement of the law. Hashem will not perform our duties for us. We are responsible for enforcement of the Torah's mitzvot. We cannot expect Hashem to assume this responsibility, in our place. However, if we demonstrate devotion to the Torah, through careful observance, then Hashem will help us fulfill our desire to enforce the law.

With this principle, we can understand the comments of the Talmud. At the time that the people were devoted to observance of the mitzvot, Hashem assisted the people in enforcing the law. Hashem helped resolve the innocence or guilt of the sotah – the suspected adulterer. The sotah was not able to escape justice. When the people were not devoted to observance, this miracle could not longer be expected. If the people did not care about adultery, they could not turn to Hashem to assume responsibility for enforcement of this prohibition.

Placing the Hair of the Nazir on the Fire under His Shelamim Sacrifice

And the nazir shall shave his crown of hair from his head. And he shall take the hair of his crown and place it upon the fire that is under the Shelamim sacrifice. (BeMidbar 6:18)

The nazir is an individual who takes a vow to separate himself from the material world. The nazir may not drink wine, cut his hair or come into contact with a dead body. The ultimate purpose of this abandonment of material affairs is to encourage greater devotion to Hashem and the Torah.

Upon completion of the period of the vow, the nazir performs a series of activities in the Temple. These include bringing a number of sacrifices. As part of the process of offering his sacrifices, the nazir shaves his head and throws the hair upon the fire under the Shelamim sacrifice. What is the meaning of this unusual requirement?

It is possible for a person to undertake the vow of the nazir for various reasons. A person may wish to demonstrate religious superiority over others. This is a misuse of the institution of nazir. The only acceptable motivation is to improve one's devotion to Hashem. This concept is demonstrated through the throwing of the nazir's hair under the sacrifice. The hair represents the nazir's vow and subsequent abstention from the material world. The sacrifice represents service to Hashem. If the nazir has undertaken the vow in order to "fuel" service to Hashem, then the vow was proper. However, if the vow was merely an expression of religious elitism, then it did not serve its true purpose.

The Nazir Status of Shimshon

And the messenger of Hashem appeared unto the woman, and said to her: Behold now, you are barren, and have not borne; but you will conceive, and bear a son. Now, beware, I pray thee, and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat not any unclean thing. For it will be that you will conceive, and bear a son. And no razor shall come upon his head. For the child shall be a Nazir unto G-d from the womb. And he shall begin to save Yisrael from of the hand of the Pelishtim. (Shoftim 13:3-5)

These passages are taken from the haftarah of Parshat Naso. They introduce the birth of the

(Naso cont. from previous page)

Weekly Parsha

shofet – the judge – Shimshon. A messenger appears to Shimshon's mother before his birth. He tells her that she will give birth to a son. This son is destined to save Bnai Yisrael from the oppression of the Pelishtim. However, the messenger also tells her that Shimshon must be raised as a nazir and he must observe the nazir restrictions for his entire life.

Why was it necessary for Shimshon to conduct himself as a nazir? According to Ribbe Eliezer HaKafar, this is not an ideal mode of behavior. It is odd that Shimshon should be required to conduct himself in a manner that seems at odds with the Torah's values.

Gershonides offers an interesting response to this question. He explains that Shimshon was destined for greatness. He was destined to lead Bnai Yisrael and rescue the nation from oppression. However, Shimshon's potential to achieve greatness was coupled with another characteristic that could threaten his development. Shimshon also possessed very intense material desires. These desires eventually proved overwhelming. But Hashem provided Shimshon – through this message to his mother – with a strategy for combating his intense material urges. Hashem commanded Shimshon's mother that her son should be a nazir.[9] In other words, for most people, this behavior would not be appropriate. But because of Shimshon's unusually strong urges, special measures were necessary.

abandon the pleasure of drinking wine. The sin of the nazir is the self-affliction and denial that he has accepted upon himself. The Talmud further comments that we learn an important lesson from this law. The nazir is obligated to bring a Chatat because of a vow not to drink wine. A person who, as a general practice, abandons the material pleasures is even more guilty.[11]

This explanation of the Chatat is clearly supported by another law. A nazir who successfully completed the vow must also bring a Chatat.[12] In this case, the vow has not been violated. Why is a Chatat required? Rebbe Eliezer HaKafar's explanation resolves this issue. Even the successful nazir requires atonement. The nazir must atone for the self-affliction and deprivation.

According to Rebbe Eliezer HaKafar, the nazir has acted improperly. Yet, the Torah created the mitzvah of nazir! This interpretation raises an obvious question. How can the Torah define an inappropriate behavior as a mitzvah?

Maimonides deals with this question in his introduction to Perikai Avot. He explains the Torah is designed to help us achieve moderation in all of our attitudes. But what constitutes moderation? The term "moderation" assumes that the moderate attitude is balanced between extremes. In other words, every attitude occupies a midpoint along a

continuum of possible attitudes. An example helps illustrate Maimonides' position. A person who has a moderate attitude towards personal wealth is able to use his wealth in order to secure a meaningful improvement in his condition. This attitude is balanced between the extreme attitudes demonstrated by the spendthrift and the miserly person. The miser cannot part with his wealth even when circumstances dictate that the expenditure is worthwhile. The spendthrift expends his wealth with abandon, unable to consider the true value of the items he purchases. According to Maimonides, we should strive for to conduct ourselves in a manner that is balanced between the two extremes. A person should not be a spendthrift. Neither should one be stingy. Similarly, we are not permitted to act cowardly. We also may not endanger ourselves unnecessarily. Instead, our attitude towards risk should reflect moderation. We should be willing and able to subject ourselves to a reasonable risk if the circumstances so demand. The same pattern applies to all behaviors and attitudes. We must seek the middle road.

Inevitably, we all have attitudes that are not moderate but instead somewhat extreme. Some of us may be overly shy. Others may be egotistical. How does one correct a flaw? Maimonides explains that the Torah suggests that we temporarily force ourselves to adopt the behavior and attitude of the opposite extreme. The stingy person practices being a spendthrift. The glutton adopts a very

(continued on next page)

The Sin Offering to the Nazir

The priest shall prepare one as a Chatat and one as Olah to atone for his inadvertent defilement by the dead. (BeMidbar 6:11)

Parshat Naso describes the laws governing the nazir. The nazir is a person who takes a vow to separate oneself from material pleasures. The nazir may not drink wine or cut his hair. The nazir is also prohibited from defilement through contact with a dead body.

A nazir who does come in contact with a dead body is defiled. This defiled nazir must bring a series of sacrifices as atonement. One of these sacrifices is a Chatat – a sin offering. Rashi explains that this sin offering is required because the nazir did not exercise adequate care in keeping the vow.[10]

Rashi offers a second interpretation of the Chatat offering. He quotes the comments of the Talmud in Tractate Nazir. Rebbe Eliezer HaKafar explains that the sin of the nazir is not merely unintentional contact with a dead body. The nazir vowed to

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(Naso cont. from previous page)

Weekly Parsha

restricted diet. With time, this practice will enable the person to break the original attachment. One will be able to adopt the moderate behavior and attitude required by the Torah.

Maimonides explains that the mitzvah of the nazir should be understood in this context. The nazir is a person who was overly attached to the material pleasures. The nazir makes a vow to adopt the behavior associated with the opposite extreme. He embraces self-denial for a period of time. The ultimate goal is to free the personality from his inordinate attachment to material pleasures. This will allow him to ultimately achieve an attitude of moderation.

However, the Torah did not want us to mistakenly view the nazir's behavior of self-denial as an ideal. We must recognize that the nazir's vow is intended as a corrective measure for an extreme attitude and behavior. How was this message communicated? This was accomplished through the Chatat of the nazir. The Chatat teaches that the lifestyle of self-denial adopted by the nazir is not inherently proper. The measures adopted by the nazir are necessary in order to help him achieve moderation. The ultimate goal is balanced conduct, not the extreme behavior of the nazir.[13]

Maimonides seemingly contradicts this interpretation of the nazir and the Chatat in his Moreh Nevuchim. There, Maimonides explains that one of the goals of the Torah is to completely distance oneself from the material desires. Furthermore, Maimonides asserts that the nazir is considered a

sanctified individual. How does the nazir earn this status? Maimonides responds that the nazir has given up wine![14]

These comments seem to contradict completely the position Maimonides outlined in his introduction to Perikot Avot. In the Moreh Nevuchim, Maimonides endorses extreme behavior of the nazir as an ideal. He also asserts that the nazir's abandonment of wine is laudable! How can these two positions be reconciled?

In these two texts Maimonides is dealing with two completely separate issues. In his introduction to Perikot Avot, he is discussing the basis for a healthy personality. He explains that psychological health requires, and is manifested, in moderation in behavior and attitudes.

However, the objective of the Torah is to guide an individual to truth and spiritual perfection. As a person grows spiritually and embraces truth, the individual begins to re-evaluate the meaning of life. Material pleasures lose their glamour and attraction. This abandonment is not the result of vows of self-denial. The tzadik – the righteous person – simply loses interest in material affairs. This tzadik is the individual Maimonides describes in the Moreh Nevuchim. The tzadik is a truly spiritual person guided solely by his appraisal of reality and his assessment of what is truly important. In other words, the Torah views moderation in one's attitude towards material pleasures as the ideal attitude to most people. However, the Torah also acknowledges that as a person grows intellectually and spiritually, his interest with and attachment to material pleasures declines. With this re-

orientation, he naturally abandons material pleasures that were previously far more significant to him.

As explained above, the nazir is not the tzadik described in the Moreh Nevuchim. This tzadik does not require a vow to moderate his interaction with the material world. Instead, the nazir is a person attempting to move away from an extreme attachment to material pleasure. The nazir is striving to achieve the middle road. The Torah constructed a mitzvah to help this person – the mitzvah of nazir. However, this mitzvah is not merely a set of arbitrary restrictions. The nazir adopts the behaviors of the tzadik. He experiments with living the life and adopting the attitudes of a truly spiritual individual. He learns that although he is not nearly ready to be this exalted person, he can live without the material pleasure to which he previously regarded as necessities. In short, the nazir is not the perfected individual described in the Moreh Nevuchim. However, he does adopt the behaviors associated with the tzadik. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 5:6.

[2] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 5:8.

[3] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar, 5:5.

[4] Mesechet Sotah 20a.

[5] Sifrei Parshat Naso, Chapter 11.

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 5:18.

[7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 5:20.

[8] Mesechet Sotah 47a.

[9] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Shoftim 13:3.

[10] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer BeMidbar 6:11.

[11] Mesechet Nazir 19a.

[12] Sefer BeMidbar 6:7.

[13] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Ramban / Maimonides) Commentary on the Mishne, Introduction to Perikot Avot, Chapter 4.

[14] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Ramban / Maimonides) Moreh Nevuchim, Volume 3, Chapter 34.

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(cont. from page 1)

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



the Besht could not read minds. Moshe didn't read minds, so to say the Besht did, actually denies the stature the Torah speaks of in regards to Moshe, and makes Moshe less than the Besht. Another impossibility."

And in one of your Q&As you wrote, "In fact it is impossible that workings of the mind have any effect on physical objects or events."

We know for sure the mind can indeed have an effect on physical reality, such as the mind over body effect of placebos. Scientists even think they can generate thought by mixing chemicals in the brain they observe when a person has a thought, an idea I think they have backwards and that it is actually the thought causing the chemical reaction. Even a person's emotions can have an affect on another person close by, without any physical contact. The connection between the mind and physical world exists. That being said, on a purely hypothetical level, it would possible within the constraints of our physical reality for one's mind to use this same interface to affect the physical world beyond the body. All it would take is the body's ability to translate the minds commands. More specifically when you wrote it would show a

lacking in Moshe if the Besht did have the ability to read minds, you are making a connection between that ability and Moshe's greatness that I don't think is necessary. We don't have any proof of Moshe being able to do a headstand, but I can. Also we know Moshe had a lisp, but I don't. These do not mean I am better than Moshe, just that I have a physical ability that he may not have had. It didn't impede his perfection in any way. If it is possible to read minds it would just be another physical ability, but would have nothing to do with Moshe's perfection, his connection to Hashem, or his intellect.

Rabbi: Thank you for writing. I wish to make 2 comments:

1) One's mind cannot affect anything outside his own body. I agree: our mind does affect our body, such as stress causing stomach cramps. This is because a physical connection exists between the mind/brain link, and the following brain/body link. But the mind's affects stop there. Mind reading does not occur as no physical link exists between my mind, and anyone else.

2) When I suggest that Moshe was greater than all others, I do not refer to head stands, but to the sphere of intelligence and prophecy. Mind reading – if it were true – would fall into one of these. Moshe

Reader: Referring to your numbers 1 and 2 above, I ask the following:

1) If we know there is a point where mind and physical reality meet, why assume it's impossible for the mind to affect reality 'outside' the body? Is there any logic to back up the assumption? I'm not saying that it does occur, but that there is no inherent reason it couldn't.

2) Why would the ability to hear someone's thoughts be any more of an intelligence or prophecy issue than communicating without a lisp? In theory, we're not talking reading Hashem's mind, and it wouldn't affect His intelligence.

Rabbi: The "logic" you request that rejects the theory that one's mind – a metaphysical phenomenon – affects the physical world, is called "nature". Natural law rejects your assumption. When no proof exists for any assumption – like this one – we do not say it is possible. We say it is not a truism. Once a law is witnessed, "only then" do we say it is so.

Reader: Why would the ability to hear someone's thoughts be any more of an 'intelligence' or 'prophecy' issue, than communicating without a lisp?

Rabbi: Since it is impossible to read minds based on my first answer above, the only method to learn someone else's thoughts is prophecy – i.e., not a natural attainment of knowledge, but a divine means. This approach is actually used by Rabbi Eliezer (Tal. Megilla 7a) to demonstrate the Megilla is prophetic. The Megilla's verse "And Haman said in his heart" could not be known to Mordechai without prophecy. That is, the Talmud admits that Mordechai who authored the Megilla, could not know Haman's thoughts without prophecy. ■

Chassidic Garb

Reader: If the Jews were distinct in their clothing, names and language in Egypt in order to preserve their identity in a foreign land, wouldn't that justify the dress of the chassid, since those outside of Israel are in foreign lands, and, moreover, in a state of exile?

Rabbi: The Jew today in almost any land is not under attack or forced into slavery to an idolatrous people, as was so in Egypt. Our enemies are of national opposition, not so much of religious opposition. Nor are we coerced into alien religious doctrine and practice as was so during Channukah. Thus, when no opposition is present, there is no need to "shield" one's self...for there exists nothing from which to shield ourselves. So in New York City today, the Jew need not dress different than anyone else. Based on this, the chassid has no grounds to differentiate himself from others.

But is the chassid 'wrong' to dress as he does? If he dresses as he does out of personal preference, he is free to do so. But we can immediately discount this as true, for a "personal" preference is not something that permeates all members of a group. "Group" phenomena indicate ideologies are the cause. And if the chassidic dress is a religious phenomenon, it violates Torah, for one feels he is fulfilling some Torah value in such dress, whereas Torah never says this. Torah law prohibits the alteration of itself (adding/subtracting), and Torah says the only types of dress that are prohibited, are forms of dress used in idolatrous practice, immodest dress, or cross-dressing. Nothing else. This means that the Pope's garments or those of a cardinal or priest are prohibited, as are short skirts, or women wearing men's clothes and vice versa. But if the Pope wore t-shirts or blue jeans while playing golf, such garments are not prohibited since he is not wearing them for "religious" reasons and we are in violation of Torah to suggest they are prohibited.

(continued on next page)

(cont. from page 6)

Letters

The question is: is the chassid seeking to dress different than the other nations...or other Jews? We have shown that no basis exists to dress different than other nations, unless they dress that way for religious reasons. So, is there a basis to dress differently than other Jews? Radak on Tzafania 1:8 actually prohibits this and calls it "evil". And this makes perfect sense, for dress cannot improve one's soul, and differentiating one's self from other Jews is purely egotistical...and the Torah says we are to be humble. (Micha 6:8) Furthermore, wearing completely black suits may even violate dressing like a priest.

The Jew represents God. He must dress with respect for God, and "respectable" dress is defined by the time and place in which one lives. Looking like an outcast, or odd, does not honor God and His Torah. Chassidim should keep their beards well-kept, and wear suits and ties. Deuteronomy 16:22 prohibits the erecting of monuments. Rashi says that although the patriarchs erected monuments, however, once idolatrous peoples did so for religious reasons, monuments then became prohibited and "hated" by God as that verse says. Similarly, chassidic garb may have been the forerunner, but now that the Amish and priests wear black and white as ideological expression and even religious practice, it make sense that chassidim should not copy them. ■

No Truth in Popularity or Reputation

(A gentile reader asked that I comment on some e-mails she has received from this "Writer")

Writer: I am sorry but I must protest. You simply cannot say that so many religious Jews, rabbis included, are doing something that the Torah forbids. It is arrogant for you to assume that you know better than so many great rabbis. Now, I offer a caveat: I personally do not endorse the wearing of red bracelets, or lucky charms such as the hamsa (hands) or eyes. I would not allow my children to wear them as I believe that they were introduced from alien sources. By the same token, I cut my son's hair before he turned three because I believe that the custom some have to not cut a boy's hair until he is three also comes from outside sources (and the explanations offered are post facto.) BUT, I would never accuse those who follow these practices as doing something sinful. Far too many great rabbis have endorsed these practices so it is not for me to say they were all mistaken.

Rabbi: Tosefta Shabbos (chap 7) says red bendels ARE sinful and are referred to as "Darkay Emori", heathen practices which the Torah commands we do not commit. Rabbinic endorsements do NOT make these practices permitted. Your fear of calling a Rabbi wrong is causing you to err. The truth is that man errs and many men can err – Rabbi or not.

Writer: If the Ari and the Ramban, amongst many others, subscribed to a belief in reincarnation, it is mindbogglingly out of line for you to say their belief is not a part of Judaism. As I have said before, this belief is not required and those who do not believe in reincarnation are no less spiritual and observant than those who do believe in reincarnation. For some reason, you seem determined to do all you can to eradicate this belief and I must stand up to defend the honor of the great and saintly rabbis against your attack.

Rabbi: And Saadia Gaon said reincarnation is foolish. Thus, both opinions cannot be correct. What must we do when faced with two reputable Rabbis who dispute each other? We can no longer abide by the method of "respecting a reputation". This would force a contradiction. In fact, we must NEVER follow reputation, but instead, we must follow what makes sense to our minds. And since in the arena of philosophy (hashkafa) there is no such thing as Psak, (ruling) each person is left to decide for him and herself.

We arrive at truth in only one manner, and this is how it has been since the beginning of humanity: our mind says so. No Rabbi or number of people can convince me it is day, when it is night. ■

Letters

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

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Priestly Blessings

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

6:24. “God shall bless you and watch you.”

6:25. “God should shine upon you favorably and show you grace.”

6:26. “God should lift His face towards you and place peace before you.”

Ibn Ezra explains: 6:24: God should assist in your monetary needs, 6:25: God should answer your prayers, and 6:26: No evils should befall you. Why were these blessings bestowed on the Jews via the priests? We read in 6:27, “and place My name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them”. It is not in the hands of the priests: God bestows blessings without the priests’ declaration. What need is there for the priests to utter these blessings? This last question forces the Torah student to think into the relationship between the Jews and the priests.

The first step in answering this question is to properly categorize the role of the priests in these blessings. They are acting as ‘benefactors’ of some sort. They are blessing the Jews. Our next question is, “What is the purpose in priests as benefactors of the Jews?”

By analyzing at the dynamics between the Jews and the priests, perhaps their relationship affords some insight. The priests receive gifts from the Jews. The priests also serve in the Temple. The Jews do not. What attitude might be generated from such a relationship where one party receives gifts from the other, and where they also have exclusive rights to Temple service, not granted to Jews? Would the Jew feel justified in his resentment, because he toils for his possessions while the priests receive them from the Jew for free? The Jew might also resent the priests “closer” proximity to God, since they alone serve in the Temple.

Perhaps this is exactly what the blessings address. They preempt the strife, which might occur based on the Jews’ resentment of priestly gifts, and the exclusion of the Jew from Temple service. I suggest that precisely to rid Jewish society of such resentment, God commanded the priests publicly bless the Jews in these two areas - monetary needs, and concern that God pays attention to Jews, the desired result of prayer. By doing so, any ill feelings will be addressed before they become an issue.

God developed Birchat Kohanim so that Jews regularly heard the priests wishing their monetary success, and that God would respond to their prayers. As the priests show concern that the Jews be blessed by God in those very matters in which the Jew is excluded, the priests create a harmonious state for all Jews, preempting Jewish resentment towards the priests, necessary for the Torah system to operate.

Since the goal is harmony between Jews of both roles, I believe the final blessing is appropriate, that is, the blessing of peace. ■



the Phenomenon of Groups, Religion & Cultures

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



Why is it that most people are not converts? Why do most people defend family members, dress like their peers, and form groups? Could it be that all members of a group came to the identical systems after rigorous analysis? Or is it that people simply accept what their elders, peers and parents teach, without question?

It is clearly the latter. But as Jews, we are truth seekers. Our Rabbis teach that we should not listen to them, without subsequent analysis of their words to determine if they are truths.

The group phenomenon reveals that man is insecure. He seeks acceptance, so he does not go against the tide. In contrast, Judaism was founded on Abraham's independence: a lifestyle God endorsed by creating a nation from Abraham.

Do not fear man. Do not fear opposition. If you have arrived at your views based on thought when others have not, it is you who lives based on truth, not them. Human applause does not outweigh the satisfaction and joy you will experience when you act in accord with ideals that appeal to your mind. When we seek, find, and follow truth, we are at ease, we experience no conflict. We are perfectly in line with God's world, and happiness is bountiful.

When we abandon the wasteful life of copying others so to be accepted, only then do we finally start living. ■

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