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Weekly Parsha

Lech Lecha

RABBI BERNIE FOX

Avraham's Decision to Flee the Land of Israel and Descend to Egypt

"Say that you are my sister. Then they will be good to me for your sake. And through you, I will be spared." (Beresheit 12:13)

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THE TORAH'S FUNDAMENTALS



A TRAGIC OMISSION

(page 9)

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Introduction

If someone as great as Maimonides (Hilchos Teshuva, chap. 3) warns us not to violate certain prohibitions, where violators lose their souls, we are wise to heed his words. If we then learn that the Talmud (Sanhderin 90a) and others agree with this threat, then we must study those laws and grasp the severity of the sins involved.

We live once. We can select a path of lusts, wealth, power and fame...and forfeit our souls. Or, we can follow Moses' teaching to "choose life", and ensure that we not only live the most joyous existence here, but also inherit the World to Come. Had the Torah made the World to Come a prominent topic, many would focus on it alone and they would abandon the search for wisdom and its enjoyments here – thereby sacrificing both worlds. For when one lives in imagination (imagining the unknown reward of the Afterlife) one is not living in reality, and forfeits it. But we are guaranteed that by living a life of

(continued on page 9)



(Lech Lecha cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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Parshat Lech Lecha deals with the life of the first of our forefathers – Avram. In the beginning of the parasha, he and his wife are referred to by their original names – Avram and Sari. The end of the parasha tells us that Hashem directed that their names should be changed to Avraham and Sarah.

At the opening of the parasha, Avram is commanded to travel to the Land of Israel. Once there, a severe famine plagues the land. Avram decides that in order to sustain himself and his family, he must temporarily leave the Land of Israel. He travels to Egypt. As he approaches the Land of Egypt, he realizes that he is in danger. His wife, Sari, is a woman of uncommon beauty. Avram suspects that the Egyptians will covet her. He does not trust the morality of the Egyptians. He fears that a determined suitor might kill him. With his elimination, the suitor would be free to pursue Sari's affections. Therefore, Avram asks Sari to disguise her true relationship with him. She is not to reveal that Avram is her husband. Instead, she is to pretend that they are brother and sister.

According to Nachmanides, Avram acted incorrectly. He committed two errors. First, he should not have deserted the Land of Israel. Instead, he should have had greater trust in Hashem. Hashem had told him to settle in the Land of Israel. Confronted with famine, Avram should have relied on Hashem's support and recognized that He would not abandon him. Second, he should not have hidden Sari's true identity. Again, this scheme indicated a failing in his trust in Hashem. He should have realized that Hashem would protect him. The subterfuge of disguising his relationship with Sari was not necessary or appropriate.

Nachmanides continues and explains that the subsequent exile of Bnai Yisrael to Egypt and the subjugation of Avram's descendants were consequences of this wrongdoing. Nachmanides reasons that the exile and suffering of Bnai Yisrael were clearly a punishment. A punishment implies a sin.[1] He also notes numerous parallels between the experiences of Avram in Egypt and those of his descendants. These similarities support his contention that the exile of his descendants was a punishment for his failings and that these similarities were intended to demonstrate this relationship.

Nachmanides' comments are difficult to understand. The Talmud teaches us in Tractate Taanit that it is prohibited to rely upon miracles. Each individual is required to exercise common sense. We may not endanger ourselves needlessly with the expectation or hope of being saved by a miracle.[2] Why, then, did Avram sin by traveling to Egypt and claiming that Sari was his sister? Both of these decisions seemed proper and reflect Avram's determination to act responsibly and provide for his own safety rather than rely on divine intervention.

Avram reintroduced to humanity two truths that had been long forgotten or discarded. First, he taught that Hashem is the Creator and that the universe exists only through His will. Second, he taught that Hashem is aware of all events in the universe that He formed and intervenes in nature – performing miracles – on behalf of humanity or those who are worthy. It seems that



Hashem intended to demonstrate through Avram the truth of these two assertions. Towards this end, commanded Avram to travel to a foreign land – the Land of Israel. There, Avram was stranger in a closed tribal society. But Hashem not only protected him from all harm. He also made Avram into a wealthy and mighty leader. Avram's success and prosperity were intended to demonstrate that he enjoyed the protection of the deity that he promoted and

worshipped. The famine was intended to contribute to this demonstration. Avram should have stayed in the Land of Israel. Hashem would have protected him, and his emergence unharmed from this horrible famine, would have provided further evidence of Hashem's existence and providence. Similarly, upon entering Egypt, had Avram acknowledged Sari as his wife, his confidence in Hashem's providence would have been rewarded. It is likely that some Egyptians would have coveted his beautiful wife and tried to eliminate him and seize her. However, Hashem's intervention would have reaffirmed His providence and the truth of Avram's teachings.

In short, it is prohibited for a person to rely upon a miracle. However, Avram had a unique mission. Hashem wished to demonstrate His providence through Avram. By abandoning the Land of Israel and concealing his relationship with Sari, he denied Hashem the opportunity to demonstrate His influence over nature on behalf of Avram.

(continued on next page)

Don Yitzchak Abravanel agrees that Nachmanides' basic reasoning is valid. The experience in Egypt is a punishment. This implies that a sin was committed. However, he objects to ascribing this sin to Avram. He points out that the Torah does not state or clearly imply that Avram sinned in descending to Egypt or concealing his relationship with Sari. Therefore, it is inappropriate for Nachmanides to ascribe wrongdoing to Avram. Instead, he maintains that we should attribute the exile to a behavior or event that the Torah unequivocally condemns. He suggests that the incident that precipitated the exile and bondage of Bnai Yisrael was committed by Yosef's brothers. His brothers sold Yosef into bondage. The Torah does identify their behavior as sinful; therefore, it is completely appropriate to place upon the brothers the blame for the exile and bondage of their descendants.

Abravanel supports his thesis with a proof. There are a number of uncanny parallels between the sin of the brothers and the punishment experienced by Bnai Yisrael in Egypt. First, the brothers sold Yosef into bondage in Egypt. Their descendants experienced bondage in Egypt. Second, they threw Yosef into a pit. Their male descendants were thrown into the river. Third, they caused Yosef to enter bondage. Yosef persuaded them to descend to Egypt and, eventually, their descendants entered bondage. Fourth, they devised and executed their plot while they were caring for flocks. They descended to Egypt in order to provide their flocks with pasture.[3]

Abravanel's fundamental objection to Nachmanides' thesis is that we should not ascribe a sin to the forefathers – the Avot – based upon circumstantial evidence. Instead, our Avot's behaviors and attitudes should be regarded as models that we must strive to emulate. Only the Torah – through a clear statement – has the authority to attribute sin to these role-models. Obviously, Nachmanides disagrees. He argues that we should be open to strong and convincing evidence of misdeed by one of the Avot. We can attribute wrongdoing to the Avot based on an analysis of the evidence. An explicit statement of condemnation by the Torah is not required.

What is the basis of this dispute? It seems that Abravanel and Nachmanides disagree over the objectives of the Torah's narrative of the lives of the Avot. According to Abravanel, one of these objectives is to provide us with models of behavior and conviction. Once this premise is accepted, Abravanel's position follows. Obviously, the Torah wishes to provide clear and unambiguous instruction. In presenting the

lives of the Avot as models for emulation, the Torah will take care to clearly identify any behaviors or attitudes that are exceptions. Incidents of wrongdoing will be clearly identified in order to assure that the reader does not adopt these flaws. In other words, it makes no sense to provide models for emulation and include within the biographies of these role models errors, sins, and mistakes without identifying these flaws.

Nachmanides does not agree that the narrative of the lives of our Avot is written in the form of an instructional model. This does not mean that we cannot learn important lessons from the Torah's narrative of their lives. But this is not the objective that determines the design of the narrative. Instead, the Torah describes Hashem's providence over Bnai Yisrael. This description requires a thorough treatment of many elements of the Avot's lives. However, the Torah's description of the lives of the Avot is not guided by the pedagogical objective of providing a clear, unambiguous model for emulation. This leaves us with some freedom to interpret their behaviors. We must recognize that the Avot were among the most righteous individuals to ever live. We cannot judge them superficially, and gratuitously ascribe fault to them. However, confronted with convincing evidence, we can conclude that a wrongdoing was committed.



Hashem Compares Avraham's Descendants to the Stars

"And He took him outside and He said, 'Look now towards the heavens and count the stars – if you can count them.' And He said, 'So will be your descendants.'" (Beresheit 15:5)

Hashem promises Avram that his children will be as numerous as the stars. Just as the stars cannot be counted, so Avram's progeny will be beyond counting. Rabbaynu Nissim – a 14th century scholar – asks an interesting question on this pasuk. The stars can be counted! Astronomers can calculate the number of stars in the sky! Yet, Hashem indicated to Avram that the stars cannot be counted.

Rabbaynu Nissim offers two answers. In the first answer, he explains that there are many stars we cannot see. We observe a portion of the stars. Other stars fill the heavens. But their light does not reach us. Hashem compared Avram's progeny to all the stars. This includes the visible and those we do not observe. We can count the visible stars but not all of the stars that fill the heavens.

In his second answer, Rabbaynu Nissim explains that we can calculate the number of visible stars. However, we cannot count them. This is an important distinction. Imagine we wanted to determine the number of kernels of grain in a thirty-gallon container. We would not want to count the kernels. Instead, we would perform a calculation. We would count the number of kernels in a small measure – perhaps an ounce. We would then extrapolate and calculate the number of grains in the container. Astronomers calculate the number of stars in a similar fashion. They do not attempt to count the stars. This is an impossible task.[4]

These two explanations provide slightly different interpretations of the blessing Hashem bestowed on Avram. According to the first interpretation, Hashem promised Avram that it will be impossible to quantify the number of Avram's descendants. It will not be possible to assign a number to them. According to the second interpretation, the descendants will be too numerous to count. However, some estimate of their quantity will be possible. ■

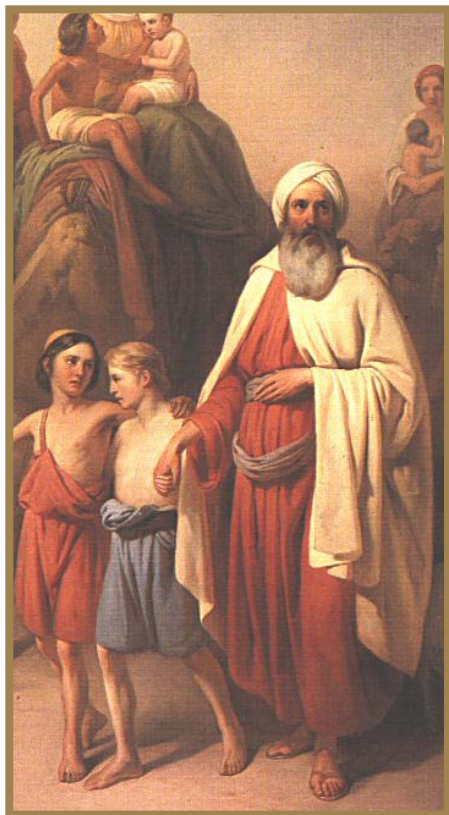
[1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban/Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 12:10.

[2] Meseket Taanit 20b.

[3] Don Yitzchak Abravanel, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit p 212.

[4] Rabbaynu Nissim ben Reuven Gerondi (Ran), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 15:1-7.

Weekly Parsha



LECH

*Abraham's
Perfection*

LECHA

Rabbi Israel Chait

Transcribed by student

Lech Lecha 12/1-2: "Hashem said to Abram, 'Go for yourself from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.' At first glance all seems well; Abram is to venture forth on a journey that will bring him to a land where his destiny is to be fulfilled. And indeed the first Rashi in Lech Lecha seems to support this theme. Regarding the words "Go for yourself", Rashi comments: "For your pleasure, and for your benefit. There I will make of you a great nation, whereas here you do not merit children. And furthermore, you will benefit by going, for thereby I will make your name known in the world."

We see in the Torah, however, that Abram's life is far from the dream one might imagine for themselves; Abram is always on the move, never truly settling down, continually journeying while constantly undergoing various trials and tribulations. This is born out from the very command G-d told Abram; namely, what does G-d mean when he tells Abram to go "to the land that I will show you"? Where is Abram to go right now? And so the Ramban comments on the words "to the land that I will show you" that Abram was a wayfaring nomad wandering like a lost sheep. (See also Rashi, 20:13).

Another question arises on closer inspection of the text. There is a factual inconsistency in the pasuk (verse). G-d tells Abram to go from his land, his birthplace, and from his father's house; however, at the end of parshas Noach, Abram already left his birthplace and settled in Haran. Rashi observes the question and offers an answer: "Had he not already left there with his father and come to Haran? But [G-d] said to him as follows: Go yet further from there, and leave the house of your father." Nevertheless, the pasuk should have written the chronological sequence of such events, namely, first to leave his father's house and then his birthplace and his land?

Regarding the land that G-d will show Abram Rashi comments: "He did not reveal the land to him immediately, in order to make it precious in his eyes, and to give him reward for each and every statement..." How does not knowing such information make the land more loving in Abram's eyes? If Abram does not know where he is going, there exists no love-object for Abram to imagine.

If we take a brief look into Abram's spiritual journeys thus far we can better understand the

"Lech Lecha" command. Abram's perception of G-d and religious convictions came about, not through emotional religious feelings or perceptions about G-d, but rather, as the Rambam explains, through an intellectual journey of the mind; Abram was truly the first great investigator who established the proper religious methodology for future generations, namely, one arrives at the truth through investigation, knowledge, and understanding, not emotional religious perceptions. The E'tz Yosef in the sidur O'tzer Tephilos explains that the reason why the Amidah specifies the "G-d of Abraham", "G-d of Isaac", and "G-d of Jacob" (joining G-d's name with each patriarch) rather than saying collectively, the "G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob", is so that one should not think that the reason why Isaac and Jacob believed in G-d was because they were simply following their great father's traditions. Rather, each of them was an investigator (following the methodology of their father) regarding their spiritual life.

Abram's religious investigations led not only to philosophical knowledge regarding G-d but psychological knowledge regarding idolatry. The primitive idolater assumes that his emotions are the baseline of the mind and proceeds from there. Abram said that these feelings, drives, and powerful emotions are no different than phenomena that exist in the external world, except that they exist in the internal world. When one then proceeds to analyze these internal phenomena just as one would use their mind to investigate external phenomena it becomes evident that the primitive religious emotions are not a determinant of reality.

The Lech Lecha command was now an opportunity for Abram to continue his religious journey by undergoing a physical journey. Abram discovered that a person's emotions and what he might believe in so strongly are nothing more than phenomena that can be analyzed and broken down.

In Lech Lecha, G-d tells Abram that there is another group of powerful feelings that now must be analyzed and understood using this same methodology, namely, the emotional sense of security and attachment to Abram's county, birthplace and father's home. Hence, the order of G-d's command was not in terms of the physical events of leaving but rather the psychological. Abram first had to attack the periphery of the emotion, his attachments to his country, his land, and his birthplace and then could proceed to analyze his attachment and sense of security derived from the family, specifically his father.

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Furthermore, we can now understand why G-d did not identify to Abram his destination; if Abram knew which land was his final address he would have simply transferred his emotions to that location. Abram had to be a nomadic wanderer to truly appreciate the sense of assurance one derives from a permanent home. And once Abram understood this emotion he could break free from its domain. These emotions, it should be noted, are by no means against the ways of the Torah; the stability of a permanent home and family are important and necessary for most people to grow and mature. But it is important to recognize just how powerful these emotions can be and not to let them interfere with one's spiritual development. For Abram, however, the only security and emotional fulfillment could be from his relationship to G-d.

The Torah, recognizing the powerful and sensitive emotional attachments to family, hid the fact that when Abram left his fathers house Terah was still alive. Rashi comments at the end of parshas Noach that "when Abram left Haran many years of Terah's lifetime still remained at the time if Abram's departure. Why then did Scripture put

the death of Terah ahead of the departure of Abram? So that the matter should not be publicized to everyone, so they would say, 'Abram did not fulfill the precept of honoring his father for he abandoned him when aged, and went off.' But for Abram the only true relationship could be with G-d.

In conclusion, we can now understand why G-d's not revealing the land to Abram would make it precious in his eyes. By removing his emotional security from the idea of country, birthplace and home, Abram could now realize that his true security could only come from that which would bring him closer to G-d, namely, mitzvos ha'aretz, adhering to G-d's commandment to live in Eretz Yisroel. By breaking down the false concepts of a homeland, the true concept of Eretz Yisroel emerges, and hence, this land could now be truly precious in Abram's eyes; Abram's love could now be attached to the true concept of Eretz Yisroel, to the status of a commandment emanating from G-d, the adherence to which would ultimately bring Abram closer to G-d. ■

LECH

God's Providence: Two Arenas

LECHA

Rabbi Israel Chait

Transcribed by student

Maimonides states in his Laws of Idolatry that Abraham was quite young (some suggest three years of age) when he started recognizing God, and pondering His existence. Having worshipped idols himself, but then realizing the contradictions in such practices, Abraham was yet a youth, considering these matters day and night. Over time, he realized the idolaters were gravely mistaken.

Then, Abraham wrote responses to the idolaters and debated with them, but not until he was 40. Although possessing far greater knowledge than they had possessed, for decades, Abraham abstained from entering into debates with others until he fully concluded his thinking process, and attained clarity on the issues he pondered. Maimonides teaches that a poor answer is worse than no answer at all. Influencing people thru truth requires the educator to give over an entire subject matter: a conclusive series of arguments. To effectively present a "system" of truths, an incomplete or poor presentation mars the appreciation intended for the student – the goal is forfeited, and even worse, the student assumes the teacher to possess a flawed system. This would greatly decrease or perhaps even remove the student's ability to ever recognize this system at a later date. The student would thereby suffer the greatest loss: he would never come to an appreciation for the Creator, and His system of knowledge and providence over mankind. Therefore, Abraham patiently studied all matters until he attained

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crystallized concepts. Only then did he venture out into society, and take on the idolatrous cultures with well-formulated responses, only attained over decades of analysis driven by his yearning to know truth.

Two times in his life, did Abraham engage in debate: 1) in Ur Kasdim, and 2) in Charan. Charan was a major platform. He went from kingdom to kingdom, and called in God's name in many cities. Abraham dealt with others on an individual basis, offering them arguments against their corrupt philosophies: each person according to his own, subjective level. He also wrote many books addressing the flawed views these cultures defended.

However, Abraham's real success was not in Ur or even in Charan. He only succeeded in attracting his 10,000's of followers once God's providence stepped in. Abraham's philosophy continued thru Isaac, until it was almost lost by the time the Jews left Egypt.

Each morning we recite the blessing of "Sanctifying God's name":

"You are the one (who existed) while the world was not yet created. You are the one from when the world was created. You are the one in this world, and You are the one in the world to come. Sanctify Your name by those who sanctify Your name, and sanctify Your name in Your world. And with Your salvation, raise up, and exalt our horn. Blessed are You, God, who sanctifies His name publicly."

This blessing reiterates the truth, that the Jews are the people given the task to sanctify God's great name. But it is only through His providence that we may do so. We learn this from the Torah's omission of Abraham's initial successes prior to God's intervention, and we learn this from Revelation at Sinai. It was this Sinaic event where God's providence intervened in human affairs, directing the descendants of Abraham to study and observe His Torah, and educate the world on His existence, His Oneness, and His truths.

Maimonides: Only Certain Individuals Knew God

Noah's son Shem recognized and taught about God. Shem established a house of study in B'aire L'chai Roh-ee. We learn when the twins (Jacob and Esau) violently wrestled within Rebecca, that Rebecca went to the study hall of Shem to gain some insight as to why her pregnancy deviated from the norm. What was Rebecca intent on learning? Why did she go here specifically? Upon Eliezer's successful return from locating a wife for Isaac, the Torah tells us that Isaac too was returning from B'aire L'chai Roh-ee. What Isaac was doing there?

Previously, when Hagar fled from before Sarah, she named the well where the angel appeared, "B'aire L'chai Roh-ee". We now arrive at the initial event, from which we may derive the significance attributed to this place. What is this significance?

B'aire L'chai Roh-ee – God's Providence over Individuals

Rashi states that Hagar had witnessed God's providence while in Abraham's house. But now exiled, she never expected to see providence outside of Abraham's house. Hagar, as an individual, no longer comprised Abraham's mission and was surprised to witness an angel of God, i.e., God's providence. (Gen. 16:7) Hagar named that God who spoke to her at the well, "The God Who sees." (Gen. 16:13) The Torah explains why she gave this name, "[13] ...for she said, 'for also further I see, after I have seen'. [14] Therefore the well was named, 'The Well of the Living One Who is Seen.'" Hagar states that she saw God's providence "again". After having seen it Abraham's house, Hagar again witnessed God's providence via His angels. What is the lesson?

Yonasan ben Uzziel explained the name of this place as, "One Who sees, but is not seen." What does this name mean? Hagar's naming of this place on account of a new providential event teach this: "You are the One who has true existence. Here was revealed the providence of God." Hagar praised God. She admitted of the idea that no human knows when providence will take place. She assumed providence was limited to Abraham's mission. But now, Hagar recognized that His providence provides for every "individual". She experienced God's intervention, His providence, even away from Abraham's house. Providence for God's mission for Abraham to establish the Jewish nation was not the only type of providence. Thus, Hagar identified two distinct roles in which God's providence relates to man, 1) providence for mankind (Abraham establishing a nation, and 2) providence for individuals. The idea Hagar spoke of, "He sees but isn't seen", refers to providence outside Abraham's mission, that is, "How God's providence extends to every individual."

Simultaneously, Hagar demonstrated through her very surprise at God's intervention that man cannot know when and where God's providence will step in. In contrast, most people incorrectly feel they "know" when God is in their lives. But as Yonasan ben Uzziel explained, the name means "One Who sees, but is not seen." "Is not seen" means that man cannot predict God's methods of providence.

Isaac too came from B'aire L'chai Roh-ee, where Shem was. Shem's house of study was established precisely in this location, as this was the goal of Shem's study hall: to study God's providence for individuals. Shem's study hall embodied the truth uttered by Hagar. Therefore he established his study hall in the very place where Hagar had expressed this very truth.

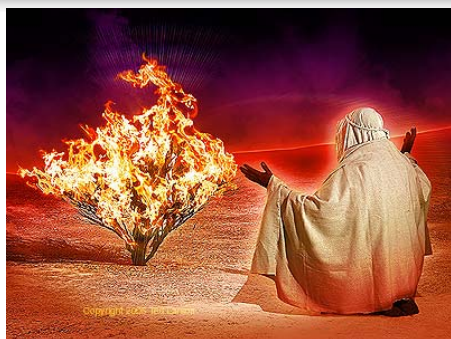
Why did Rebecca go to Shem's study hall? As we stated, Shem taught about God's providence for individuals. Rebecca didn't think her pregnancy was anything more than a personal crisis, not on par with God's mission for Abraham and Isaac to establish the Jewish nation. Therefore she sought understanding about her "individual" case: she felt it was a personal and private problem. However, it was then revealed to her through prophecy that her pregnancy was not a personal matter. Her abnormal pregnancy was an act of God's providence over the nation, not the individual.

Both Isaac and Jacob learned at Shem's study hall. Why? To fulfill their roles as forefathers of the Jewish nation, they required knowledge of God's providence for the individual. To pass on to Israel the traditions and teachings of Abraham, this "individual providence" was required learning. Abraham's knowledge concerned providence for mankind, while Shem's knowledge centered on individual providence.

We learn that on his journey from his home to his uncle Laban, Jacob lodged at Shem's study hall for 14 years. This teaches that Jacob required 14 years of knowledge of God's providence over individuals, so as to become the establisher of the tribes. This level of knowledge was acquired at Shem. Only then, did the providence relate to Jacob to establish the tribes. Such a long duration of study teaches that God's methods of providence require long and deep study. The patriarchs all required a level of in-depth study, in order to accomplish their goals: this study was "God's Providence to individuals."

It was asked, "Why did Isaac have to spend so many years in blindness?" The answer was "to give the blessing to Jacob" So why could he not be temporarily blind? We must appreciate that God's providence is not a simple matter. For some reason, Isaac required this degree of blindness. If Isaac had a condition that led to his blindness, and God did not remove it, it was necessary for God's plan. It was not a punishment, as it says, "To give the blessing to Jacob". But we may investigate this matter further.

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Moses did not lose his vision. (Deut. 34:7) He knew that beyond a certain point, he could not know. This is the meaning of "...and Moses hid his face" (Exod. 3:6) stated in connection with his encounter with the burning bush. Because of this, Moses merited to attain the highest level of prophecy ever experienced. Moses understood when a matter that was greater than his abilities. However, Isaac tried to understand that which was beyond his abilities. When Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac pondered how God could first tell Abraham "For in Isaac will your seed be called", and then Abraham should be commanded to kill Isaac. Isaac sought an understanding for this contradiction in God's words.

The Medrash states that Isaac's blindness was due to the angel's tears falling into Isaac's eyes as he was bound on the altar. How do we understand this Medrash? The angels represent "ultimate knowledge". Their "tears falling into Isaac's eyes" metaphorically alludes to something greater than Isaac (angels) causing a negative (blindness) in Isaac. Thus, Isaac's very attempt to overextend his inquiry into areas greater than his abilities had a negative effect on him. He became blinded. God's initial promise of Isaac being a successor would not come to be. This knowledge affected Isaac, i.e., blindness. However, this very blindness helped direct Isaac to review his act, and repent from trying to gain knowledge, which surpassed his abilities. Another Medrash also teaches that Isaac lacked the knowledge concerning how the providence over Abraham works.

We learn that God designed two types of providence, 1) providence over mankind, and 2) providence over the individual. Hagar understood that God granted His providence over Abraham for the sake of mankind. But Hagar was then exiled from Abraham's house. She did not assume she would experience providence, unless connected somehow with God's influence over mankind. After experiencing God's intervention at the well, Hagar now learned of this second type of providence. ■

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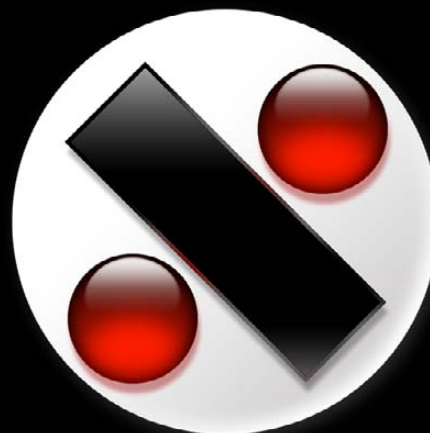


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Torah we will earn the Afterlife. This is because entitlement to the Afterlife is in proportion to one's knowledge of fundamentals and Torah fulfillment, based on a genuine value of both.

There are just a handful of fundamental laws we must observe to retain the Afterlife. It is therefore inexcusable that the study of these few laws is almost totally absent from most yeshiva curriculums. Not only are these laws essential, but with a firm, rational understanding of them, students would be far less attracted to other religions – being armed with refutations; intermarriage would decline as would resorting to substance abuse, since students would find satisfaction in their Jewish lifestyle, and reality, and would therefore need no escape.

With a clear appreciation of the truths that only Judaism offers and which Torah study provides, students would find pride in their religion, as their observance would make sense. It is the lack of a clear, pleasing philosophy and rational explanations that drives students away. Studying Hebrew language, Talmudic cases of cows goring others, and the obligation to attend Shul for hours weekly will not retain a student's sense of obligation, if not grounded in a system that appeals to his or her mind. Questions starting with "Why should I be observant? What's in it for me? Why is Judaism different than any other religion?" must be answered at the outset. This must progress to lesson after lesson in the beauty and precision of Chumash and Navi. They must be exposed to the brilliance of the Torah's style: showing them the questions raised from the texts, and how the very text that created the questions, also supplies the answer. We have given many examples over the years in the JewishTimes. Utilize our back issues, articles and audio classes that will best appeal to your students and children. Our attempt has always been to display the remarkable design of the Torah.

Fundamentals

Life has one primary purpose: seeking truth. God granted each and every man and woman intelligence – and no other Earthly being – for the very reason that we use this faculty in all areas. "And it was that [King] David was wise in all his ways, and God was with him". (Sam. I, 18:14) Not only did King David treasure the life of Torah, but this verse teaches that by doing so, "God was with him".

As recipients of this lofty gift, intelligence, a gift so precious that God assigned His name to it "Tzelem Elokim", we must realize that our employment of intelligence, our pursuit wisdom, and the continued search for new truths must surpass all other endeavors. The Talmud, quoting

King Solomon, teaches that the greatest mitzvah that precedes all others, is Torah study. (Moade Katan 9b) This is not only sensible, as we require knowledge to carry out the rest of the Torah, but Torah study surpasses all else due to the elevated status of the activity. Nothing matches the act of investigating God, which is what we mean by Torah study. When engaged in studying God's creations or Torah, we realize the most satisfaction in life. We are amazed at new concepts. Our highest element – our Tzelem Elokim – is free to soar and think into any area we query. It doesn't tire. It is enabled to detect questions and uncover answers God has hid, to arouse greater interest. New insights permeate our whole self with an enjoyment unmatched in any other area. As we investigate God's universe, we are awed by its immensity, its complexity, its precision and its harmony. We know for certain that such a perfectly functioning cosmos and Earth are not results of accidents. We never seem to end our discoveries of new life forms, laws, planets, and the realization that all creations are "placed" where they function best. All animals seek a mate with their own kind; foods that best match their needs and likes are within reach of each species; all species of plants yield their own products. All that, which is most necessary for life, is most abundant; that which is less needed, is less found: starting with air, water, rain, vegetation, meat, light, and temperatures. Just as the cosmos

was created and is guided by complex design and wisdom, all natural laws on Earth too are highly intricate and display God's brilliance.

That same Divine design and precision found in all corners of heaven and Earth are equally found in the world of Torah wisdom. Torah truths are not found easily: we must think long and intelligently to arrive at them, just as we engage much analysis to discover natural laws. Both are creations of the same Creator – both reflect the same perfection.

Unfortunately, the transmission of Torah which relies on humans – finds itself at a grave disadvantage. Unlike the rest of the universe that is unaffected by human error...human emotions, assimilation, ignorance, schemes and agendas have distorted Torah transmission over time. And the human need for acceptance compounds those distortions in even greater measure: the blind lead the blind where few people oppose what might be flawed reasoning, only to be accepted by others. Many are attracted by mystical and idolatrous notions, although they feel, "it is Judaism". Many rise to positions of authority although unworthy, as it feeds their egos and desire for power, while their untrained minds proliferate fallacy. And the masses accept it, as they respect positions, reputations, the numbers of followers, or simply because it's in print. The real barometers of truth – intelligence and proof – have been tragically sacrificed and replaced with "popularity". Ironically, the same individuals who would never rely on human emotion to select surgeons, do rely on emotions when accepting what Judaism is. While there is no difference in the perspective of the Creator, as the universe and Torah are equally His brilliant masterpieces...humans fail to employ rigorous reasoning when determining Torah truths.

Therefore, it is crucial that we go back to the source to determine Torah truths. In a world where no two Judaism's appear alike, we trust God's promise: "Torah will never leave your mouths, your childrens' mouths or your grandchildren's mouths, says God, from now and forever". (Isaiah 59:21)

Relying on our Torah, the wisdom of our prophets, and Maimonides' teachings, I hope to present the fundamentals that define Judaism. I have categorized four topics: God, The Ten Commandments, Fellow Man, the Self, and Rules. Within each, I will attempt to succinctly highlight what is most crucial to our understanding. We must possess true notions in all areas, and dispel falsehood, as we said, "truth" is the objective of our lives. In each realm, we must engage the Tzelem Elokim, as is God's will, if

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we are to arrive at truth. For it is only through reason alone, that mankind might discover the brilliance God used in crafting reality: our Torah laws. As it is impossible to detect color without the eye, it is equally impossible to detect truth without reason.

We perpetrate a great injustice to our children and students by omitting classes on the Torah's fundamentals and the art of reason and proof. The Torah can be the most enjoyable experience, guaranteeing the best of both worlds. And as our greatest leaders have taught, the fundamentals are vital, as is the method of reason and proof. I will now briefly outline our fundamentals, offering reasoning and rules to guide us.

God

Maimonides organized 13 Principles concerning our understanding of God that are vital to our remaining part of the Jewish people, and entitling us to Olam Haba – the Afterlife. If we fail to understand what God is, and is not, we forfeit our entire purpose in life, and the afterlife. We also pray to something in our imaginations, and not the true God. And imaginations cannot respond to prayer.

First and foremost is our recognition of, and conviction in the Creator. We must understand that creation is to provide mankind with evidence of the Creator; the intricacies in its design display His unfathomable wisdom. God has done this so man might fear Him, and come to be enamored, to the point, that man constantly seeks God. This process of discovery was also a creation, and God made discovery highly pleasurable. It is no accident that we enjoy a good question, and a good answer. All is part of His design.

We must understand that nothing creates itself. That is impossible. Thus, the entire universe did not exist at one time. God exists independent of all else. He created the universe out of nothingness. We don't know 'how' He did this, and we cannot. We cannot ask 'why' He did this, as motive is a human attitude, and God is in no way related to anything human. But it must be so that the universe did not create itself, but was created by the Creator. And as God is the exclusive cause of the universe, there are not two, three or more gods. For "God" means "exclusively" the cause of all. He is the singular existence needed for everything else. No other "god" is required. For if there were two gods, then neither one is truly God, since neither one had the sole capacity to create. And if one created while the other did not, that second god is not God.

As God created the physical universe, He is not physical. Again, as He created the physical for the first time, prior to that moment, there was nothing

physical. Thus, God is not physical. As such, He also possesses no quality at all that is similar to His creations, like happiness, sadness, jealousy, anger or any other emotion. The prophet teaches this: "To what shall you liken Me, and I will be similar, says the Holy One?" (Isaiah, 40:25) God is unlike anything He created, including all created emotions. When the Torah speaks of God as jealous, it means He rejects the view that other gods exist, as if one leader were jealous of another. When the Torah teaches that He loves us, it means He approves of our actions.

And as He is not physical, God does not occupy space or location. As the Rabbis teach, "He is the 'place' of the world, and the world is not His place". The word "place" here means source or "cause". Just as an object requires a location and cannot exist without place, the world too cannot exist without God. Calling God "place" of the world means to call Him the source, or cause of the world. But God, in fact, is not "in" the world. He exists in a manner we cannot understand. "For man cannot know Me while alive", was stated to Moses. (Exod. 33:20) For this reason, we reject the notion "God contracted Himself to make room for the universe to exist". This statement is heresy, as it attributes the physical character of location to God.

And as He created all else, He was the first existence ever to exist. He created time too, so He had no beginning. All this demands that we glorify God and pray to Him alone, and to no other being. For only He controls the universe, since He alone created it. No man, not even Moses, had any control over natural law. This explains why Moses was almost killed as he traveled to Egypt, and why prophets died. No one has power to avoid death, or other natural laws. If we need anything at all, we must direct all our requests to God alone. Not men, not Rabbis, and not prophets.

We must be convinced in Revelation at Sinai. For this is the proof that Torah and Judaism are of a Divine nature, and that all other religions are not. All other religions are based on belief, since there were no masses that witnessed any Divine communication. Whereas 2.5 million Jews witnessed an intelligent voice emanating from the flames on Mount Sinai. Nothing of this world survives fire, therefore, we know that voice was God. The unanimous acceptance of that account today verifies the story occurred, for who could proliferate such a story, and who would accept such a story, had it never occurred? Thereby, we recognize Judaism as possessing proof that Torah was given by God. No other religion possesses this proof.

Sinai also verifies the existence of prophecy – God's communication with man. Moses too is validated as the greatest prophet, since God chose him to receive and teach the Torah. Thus, none can

contradict Moses' Torah. This provides a solid argument against Reformed and Conservative Jews who wish to reduce our laws, and to alter them. For Moses' Torah teaches that man is killed for Sabbath violation, while many Jewish groups today condone Sabbath violations. And the Torah prohibition to not add or subtract from Torah teaches that God gave this system to remain as it is forever.

We must realize from God's many actions, that He is fully aware of man, his actions, and his thoughts. For how could God approach Cain "before" his sin and warn him to abstain, unless He knew his thoughts? And as He punished Cain and many others, and rewarded those who feared Him, like Lote, we learn the fundamental of Reward and Punishment.

From Reward and Punishment, we learn that reincarnation is not a Torah truth, for what type of threat is the Torah's warning of excision – death of our souls – or the punishment of physical death for Sabbath violation...if we are to again be reborn? Such punishments teach that they are final. Life occurs once, unless God wishes that at Resurrection, some of us return. But do not confuse Resurrection which occurs at the Messianic era, with reincarnation. And do not assume Resurrection to be impossible, for as the Talmud argues, "if God can create life from lifeless semen, He can create life from bones that actually once possessed life".

We must accept all 13 Principles: God's existence; He is one; He is not physical; He existed before all else existed; He alone deserves our praises; He gives man prophecy; Moses was the greatest prophet; Torah is from God; Torah will never be changed or removed; God knows man's actions and thoughts; God rewards and punishes; God will bring the Messiah; God will resurrect the dead.

These fundamentals organized by Maimonides address our concept of God.

In addition, we must recognize the elevated status of certain commands, with Torah Study as the greatest. Prayer – Tefila – must also be valued by us, and directed only to God. God is the only force in the universe. Therefore, idolatry in all its forms must be rejected, including all forms of lies concerning "other forces" in the universe. These lies include horoscopes, amulets, belief in mezuzah as protective, and any physical object claimed to have affects on the world inexplicable by natural law, like red bendels, curses, and signs. Even as I write, I just received an email from JPost.com publicizing www.kabbalah72.net which promotes this idolatry of Kabbalistic amulets that offer "health, protection, and success".

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A very popular idolatry are blessings from Kabbalists and Rebbes. Accounts continue to be reported of "Rabbis" and Kabbalistic mystics in Israel and New York taking hundreds of thousands of dollars from many desperate Jews seeking healing, children, spouses, wealth and sustenance. They prey on their fellow Jew, lying about "very certain success" if they pay them exorbitant sums of cash. Belief in these liars has caused many to err and lose their wealth. If you know of such deceptive Rabbis or mystics, please inform us. We will publicize these thieves' names and addresses. Mysticism is not found in the teachings of Moses or any prophet.

Sabbath is equally vital to our belief in God's act of Creation, His exclusive role as Creator, and to make a public display so other nations and religions might learn of the true concept of God, as Maimonides teaches.

The Ten Commandments

These laws are of significance, explaining why they have been set apart from the others. Saadia Gaon explained that these ten matters are the head categories for all other laws. They are also written in an order descending from most vital to least, within each of the two tablets.

Accepting God, is the first. Abstention from idolatry is second. We have explained these. Third is using God's name in vain. This teaches that our attitude towards God must be one where we preserve His honor. Even His name must be treated with great care and respect. And to ensure His fame as Creator be preserved for us and others, Sabbath is the fourth command. To engender the very path towards accepting His authority, the fifth command is honoring our parents. It was not necessary that the institution of parents exist for itself, for God created Adam and Eve without parents, and it is not difficult for God to continue creating humans in this fashion. But in His wisdom God decreed that the phenomenon of birth exist, as this causes children to revere their parents, ultimately to transfer this concept of "authority" onto God and accept His laws. For this reason this law of honoring parents is placed in the first set of the ten Commands, which relegate laws between man and God. Honoring parents is not for them, for why are your parents any more deserving of honor than any other parents? No, this law is to engender our sense of respecting authority...God. For without parents, man might never learn the concept of authority.

The second tablet contains laws not to kill, commit adultery, or kidnap; not to testify falsely, and not to desire (plan methods of) taking what belongs to others. We see how the most damaging

law is first in this set, namely murder, progressing to the least damaging...thought.

The purpose of these Ten Commandments is to forge in our minds the main categories of Torah law. Tzedaka, laws of leaving crops for others, returning a pledge and a lost object, rape, and others are subsumed under kidnapping. For this prohibition teaches our bodily concern for others, which also extends to our monetary concerns. Bearing false witness may include Lashon Hara, as this teaches not to use speech as an attack on others. And adultery addresses our lusts: an area in which many stumble. Study these commands and you will see how other laws fit into these categories. God desires we understand these fundamental themes.

Fellow Man

Kindness, charity and justice are vital to society. This serves both a practical and an emotional purpose. Our concern must not be to simply give money or uphold the laws of justice, but to ensure people live with dignity. For it is dignity that empowers a person to strive for a good life and independence. Halacha teaches that the mitzvah of Tzedaka requires us to console and commiserate with the poor. We must therefore respect and uphold Jewish Law, for without it, we learn that man can end up destroyed, as in the Flood. God brought the Flood due to stealing. Therefore, treat halacha seriously.

Less damaging than actions, is speech. One who kills, or regularly speaks Lashon Hara, loses his or her Olam Haba. Another type who loses his Olam Haba are people who instill fear in the community not for Torah's sake, or mislead them to cause sin. This latter category is found more than you think. For if a leader is misguided, and recommends people perform acts that are sins, this leader forfeits his Afterlife. It is therefore so crucial that anyone in a position of authority make certain he or she is clear on what is actual Torah law and philosophy, and teach their followers to reject what is not. Leaders must first reflect, and determine with great honesty if he or she is teaching what is truly found in God's words, or merely popular among the masses.

"Poresch min haTzibur" – one who lives apart from the community even if living a Torah lifestyle – also forfeits Olam Haba. This is because that person does not view the collective Jewish community as a value. This value, is that there exist a phenomenon of a "nation" representing God's will. We must have concern for all peoples, and this is expressed through our joining all other Jews in all Torah activities. Creating a group phenomenon of "God's people", we thereby gain

greater notice, and can more readily impress God's other nations to live as He wills.

The incorrect opposite, is conforming to the behaviors of others not warranted by the Torah, but assumed to be so. Although this is not met with the loss of Olam Haba, such conformity spreads false notions of God's laws.

Finally, those who can, must teach others. If one does not, an opinion in the Talmud severely criticizes such a person.

The Self

Application of truths to ourselves is faced with many hurdles. Mitzvos aim to perfect our convictions. For if we "say" charity is a good, but are never charitable in "action", we are not convinced in this truth. We are designed in a manner that convictions are tested by our actions. Thus, we have numerous mitzvos. We may not follow through in action due to ego, fear of authority, reputations, or wanting acceptance by the masses. We must be on constant guard of our motives and realign them with Torah ideals alone. We must strive to accept our flaws, for this is the path to a righteous life. Truth must be our sole objective. So reflect daily. Take steps to understand where you err, and make changes. As Maimonides teaches, we may uproot poor character traits by going to the other extreme, until we arrive at an equilibrium. Learning and the understanding of why our mitzvos are correct, combined with proper ethics and habits will make self improvement easier. And when appropriate, be kind to your fellow man and inform him or her of their errors.

Train yourself to avoid seeking honor in all its forms. This too will become easier as we immerse ourselves in greater Torah study. We might eventually arrive at an attitude described by King David, "When I view your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You established; what is man that You should remember him, and the son of man that You should visit him?" (Psalms 8:4,5) Here, David views himself – mankind – as unworthy of God's attention, but he arrives at this perfection through the awe he senses as he studies creation.

Rules

There is so much more to discuss; so many laws and Torah examples of human perfection. What rules might we live by to guide us towards truth, until we learn more?

Rule #1: First, always determine whether an idea is sensible. Demand proof, and truth in all areas. God formulated our Torah, so it must follow strict

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reason. When in doubt, consult a wise Rabbi trained in years of Talmud and Torah study. You know how to distinguish between $2+2=4$ from $2+2=5$. Strive to gain that same level of clarity in all areas.

Rule #2: Do not believe stories unless witnessed by masses. For if you do, then you have no argument against Christianity or Islam. I recall a prominent Rabbi who once lectured to hundreds. He expressed his belief in a story of a recently deceased Rabbi who, "not having Shabbos candles, instructed his students to retrieve icicles from the wintery roof to use in place of the candles...and sure enough, they lit." I was astonished that such an influential and acclaimed Rabbi accepted this story, and then taught it. But then, I realized that no human is immune to emotions – any person or Rabbi is subject to allowing his fantasies and deification of man to deter him from God.

Rule #3: Do not allow the person to become more important than the idea. This follows from the example above.

Rule #4: Do not fear man, as the Torah instructs. (Deut. 1:17)

Rule #5: If you have an idea, sound it off intelligent people. Gain feedback. Test it against the Torah you already know.

Rule #6: Ideas that contradict natural law are false. God gave us senses for the primary purpose of knowing what is true and real.

Rule #7: Do not lie, as the Torah commands. (Exod. 23:7) For this will corrupt your thinking in other areas, and it promotes your evaluation of ego as worth lying for.

Rule #8: Fear God, and know that all your actions are recorded, and that He metes out punishment and reward.

Rule #9: Study Pirkey Avos. Benefit from the insightful, ethical and intelligent ideas these great Rabbis have shared with us all.

Rule #10: Seek a source from God's Torah to defend or reject any idea. Then you will know what is absolute truth.

Finally, I would be happy to schedule classes on these areas at your request by phone or online. One article cannot do the Torah the justice it deserves; many examples and lessons are required. You may also access our articles and audio classes as an alternative at www.Mesora.org/Philosophy and www.Mesora.org/Audio. Our recent audio classes on Koheles posted there are examples of how the text unveils God's hidden lessons. If you wish to join us live, we meet online Sundays, 11:15 AM EST at: www.Mesora.org/TalkLIVE

May God and our intelligence guide us always towards truths, and away from fallacy. ■

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