

(Ezekiel 8 & 9)

## Tisha B'Av & Failed Leaders

At the era of the Temple's destruction, Jewish leaders were killed first for not rebuking the Jews' idolatry and other sins. Those leaders feared the people. Today's Jewish communities follow their own idolatrous beliefs. Will today's Jewish leaders heed Ezekiel's lesson and lead, or again cower to the masses to protect their positions?

5757  
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14  
YEARS

# JewishTimes

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of Authentic Jewish Beliefs and Practices

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### Tisha B'Av

TISHA  
B'AV  
*the*  
Torah's  
Message

**RABBI DR. DARRELL GINSBERG**

We all are familiar with the tragic and despondent themes that present themselves in the megillah of Eichah – even the tone in which it is read evokes a tremendous sense of despair. And while it may be difficult to focus on the kinos, as their poetic style is complicated, we are still cognizant that they too are evocative of similar concepts. Much attention is paid both Eichah and the kinos and rightly so. But garnering a lesser degree of attention is the reading from the Torah, read at Shacharis on Tisha B'Av, that also contains many ideas to help shed light on our current state and how we got here. The sequence of events, as well as the nature of our sins and how we can begin to recover, are

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## Tisha B'Av Leaders: Punished for "Our" Sins

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

On Tisha B'Av we mourn the loss of the two Temples and other tragedies. The first Temple was destroyed on account of the Jews' idolatry. God killed many in that generation and He actually commenced with the elders. Talmud Sabbath 54b-55a conveys some surprising details:

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Chicago	7:47	New York	7:51
Cleveland	8:23	Paris	9:07
Detroit	8:31	Philadelphia	7:53
Houston	7:54	Phoenix	7:08
Jerusalem	7:59	Pittsburgh	8:14
Johannesburg	5:25	Seattle	8:22
Los Angeles	7:33	Sydney	5:02
London	8:25	Tokyo	6:25
Miami	7:47	Toronto	8:19
Montreal	8:00	Washington DC	7:59

### Weekly Parsha

# Devarim

**RABBI BERNIE FOX**

### Torah & the Land of Israel

These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Yisrael, on the far-side of the Jordan, in the wilderness, on the plain opposite Suf, between Tofel, Laval, Chatzerot and Di Zahav. (Devarim 1:1)

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(Devarim cont. from pg. 1)

## Weekly Parsha

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## Divergent interpretation of Sefer Devarim's first passage

Sefer Devarim is a record of Moshe's final message to Bnai Yisrael. In his message, Moshe urges Bnai Yisrael to remain faithful to the Torah. He describes the rewards that will be secured through observance and the consequences of abandoning the Torah. Also, Moshe elaborates on various commandments. Some have been previously discussed and now Moshe adds more detail. Some of these commandments are now first communicated to the nation as it prepares to pass into the Land of Israel.

The above passage introduces Sefer Davarim. The apparent intent of the passage is to provide a detailed geographic description of the location at which the address was delivered. Rashi and many others rejected this interpretation. They questioned the purpose of describing in such minute detail the location at which the address was delivered. Rashi reinterprets the passage. According to his interpretation, the passage begins by describing the location at which the address was delivered but then it continues and provides a list of the sins and failings of the nation. Moshe is reminding the nation of these past wrongdoings and their consequences in order to motivate them to be more scrupulous in their obedience to Hashem. Beginning with the term "wilderness", each term in the passage that seemingly refers to the location of the address is actually a reference to an event. For example, "Suf" refers to the people's panic upon arriving at the Reed Sea – the Yam Suf – with the Egyptians in pursuit.

However, Rashbam understands the passage in its simple sense – as a description of the location at which Moshe addressed the nation. He argues that although it is true that the description is very detailed, this is not the only instance in which the Torah provides a detailed description of the location of an event. In these other instances, the description is not as elaborate as this one. Nonetheless, in these numerous instances, the Torah provides a level of detail that, from Rashi's perspective, should be regarded as superfluous. Rashi does not feel compelled to reinterpret these various passages. So, he should not be troubled by this instance!

## The first passage's geographic confusion

Both Rashi and Rashbam agree that the term "the far-side of the Jordan" is a geographic description of the location at which Moshe delivered his address. The term refers to the eastern bank of the Jordan River. The nation will begin its conquest of the Land of Canaan by crossing the Jordan to its western bank. The reference to the eastern bank as the "far-side of the Jordan" is appropriate for someone who has already crossed the river and is on its western bank. At the time Moshe delivered his address, the eastern bank on which he stood was not the far-side of the river. The western bank was the far-side. Yet, Moshe referred to the side on which he stood when he spoke and recorded his words as the "far-side" of the Jordan. In other words, Moshe described his location as if he

were standing in the Land of Canaan and was referring to a past event!

And Hashem planted a garden in Eden in the East. And He placed there the man He had formed. And He caused to grow from the land every tree that is pleasant to look upon and good to eat and the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And a river went forth from Eden to water the garden, and from there, it separated into four parts. The name of one is Pishon. It is the one that surrounds the entire Land of Chavilah where there is gold ... The name of the second river is Gichon. It surrounds the

entire Land of Kush. The name of the third river is Chidekel. It flows to the east of Ashur. And the fourth river is Perat. (Sefer Beresheit 8-14)

## Time and geographic perspective in the Torah's narrative

There are other instances in which the Torah records events in similar manner. In fact, the second chapter of Sefer Beresheit provides an example. The passages above record a detailed description of the location of Garden of Eden. Most of the references in the passage are to rivers or geographic territories. The Talmud notes that there is one exception. "Ashur" refers to a city that did not exist when the Garden was created. In other words, whereas most of the terms refer to rivers or territories that were contemporary to the event described by the

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passages – the creation of the Garden, one term is not contemporary. Ashur is a city that was not built until humanity left the Garden and settled the Earth. Based on this observation, the Talmud concludes that the terms used in the Torah in describing events are not necessarily contemporary to the events.

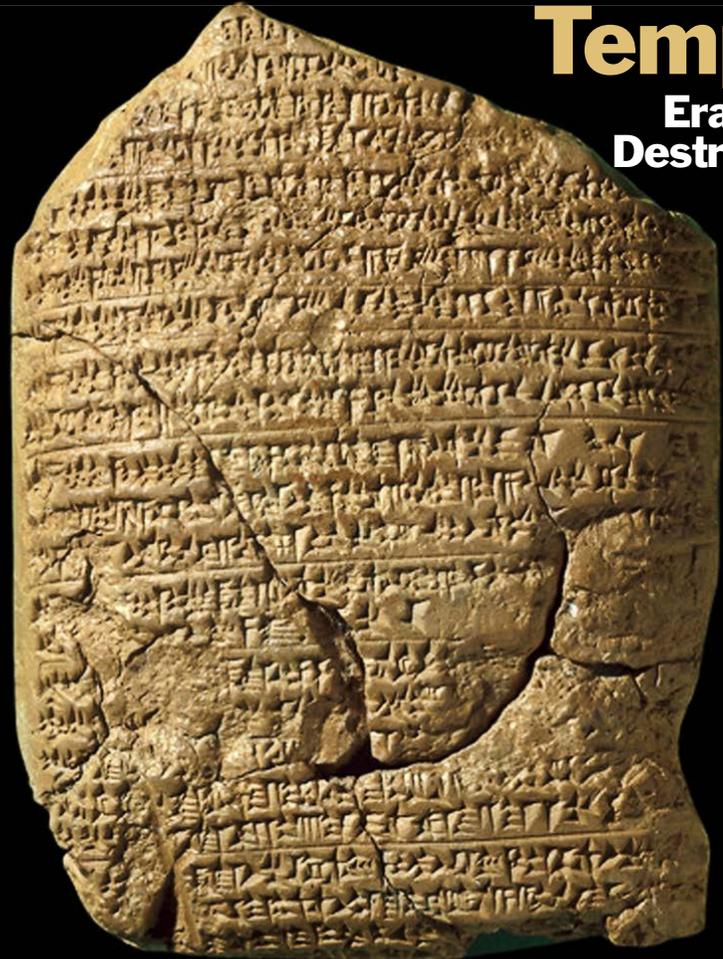
### The Torah addresses the generations that possessed the Land of Israel

Rashbam's comments lead to an important conclusion. The Torah's narrative begins with creation and outlines the development of humanity and then Bnai Yisrael. It concludes with Moshe's last moments as he brings to a close his last words to his nation. He recorded the entire narrative and he delivered it to the nation before his death. But the Torah is not addressed to the people who stood on the eastern bank of the Jordan and received Moshe's Torah. It is addressed to those who will pass over the Jordan and the generation that will inhabit the land to the west of the River. It is addressed to Bnai Yisrael in the Land of Israel. In other words, the Torah speaks to Bnai Yisrael in the Land of Israel – not on the eastern bank of the Jordan and not in exile. Because it addresses the nation in the Land of Israel, it refers to the eastern bank of the Jordan as the "far-side" of the river.

Rashbam interprets the first passage of Sefer Devarim in a different manner than Rashi. However, his comments reflect Rashi's famous comments on the first passage of Sefer Beresheit. Rashi explains that the Torah opens with an account of creation in order to establish that Hashem is creator and the ultimate owner of the Earth. If we are accused of having stolen the Land of Israel from its previous inhabitants, we must respond that we have merely taken possession of the legacy awarded to us by the Land's true and ultimate owner. Rashi's comments are carefully composed. He is explaining that the Torah is speaking to future generations who will possess the Land and be accused of dispossessing more rightful owners. Like Rashbam, Rashi is suggesting that the Torah addresses Bnai Yisrael in the Land of Israel.

### Torah in the Land of Israel and in exile

Rashbam's comments are also reflected in Nachmanides's well-known position that the Torah is only fully observed in the Land of Israel. Nachmanides explains that although most of the Torah's commandments are preformed even in exile, they lack their full meaning and context. We perform the commandments in exile in anticipation of our return to the Land and the restoration of comprehensive observation of the Torah – observation of all of its commandments. ■



## Temple Era of its Destruction

Cuneiform tablet with part of the Babylonian Chronicle (605-594 BC) Neo-Babylonian, about 550-400 BC from Babylon, southern Iraq (British Museum)

## Nebuchadnezzar Campaigns in the West

This tablet is one of a series that summarizes the principal events of each year from 747 BC to at least 280 BC. Each entry is separated by a horizontal line and begins with a reference to the year of reign of the king in question. Following the defeat of the Assyrians (as described in the Chronicle for 616-609 BC), the Egyptians became the greatest threat to the Babylonians. In 605 Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian crown prince, replaced his father Nabopolassar as commander-in-chief and led the army up the Euphrates to the city of Charchemish. There he defeated the Egyptians. Later that year Nabopolassar died and Nebuchadnezzar returned to Babylon to be crowned. Over the next few years he kept his control over Syria and extended it into Palestine. In 601 BC he marched to Egypt, but withdrew on meeting the Egyptian army. After re-equipping his army, Nebuchadnezzar marched to Syria in 599 BC. He marched westwards again, in December 598 BC, as Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, had ceased to pay tribute. Nebuchadnezzar's army besieged Jerusalem and captured it on 15/16th March 597 BC. The new king of Judah, Jehoiachin, was captured and carried off to Babylon. A series of expeditions to Syria brings this Chronicle to an end in 594 BC. ■

*"Whoever can forbid his household [to commit a sin] but does not, is punished for [the sins of] his household; [if he can forbid] his fellow citizens, he is punished for [the sins of] his fellow citizens; if the whole world, he is punished for [the sins of] the whole world. R. Papa observed, "And the members of the Resh Galutha's [household] are punished for the whole world. Even as R. Hanina said, why is it written, 'The Lord will enter into judgement with the elders of his people, and the princes thereof.' If the Princes sinned, how did the elders sin? But say, [He will bring punishment] upon the elders because they do not forbid the princes.*

*R. Aha b. R. Hanina said, "Never did a favorable word go forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, of which He retracted for evil, except the following case where it is written: 'And the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set the letter Tav upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof, etc.'" The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Gabriel [Ezek. 9], "Go and set a Tav of ink upon the foreheads of the righteous, that the destroying angels may have no power over them; and a Tav of blood upon the foreheads of the wicked, that the destroying angels may have power over them." Said the Attribute of Justice before the Holy One, blessed be He, "Sovereign of the Universe! Wherein are these different from those?" God replied, "Those are completely righteous men, while these are completely wicked." The Attribute of Justice replied, "Sovereign of the Universe, they had the power to protest but did not." God replied, "It is fully known before Me that had they protested the wicked ones would not have listened to them." The Attribute of Justice replied, "Sovereign of the Universe, if it was revealed to Thee, was it revealed to them?"*

*Hence it is written, "[Slay utterly] the old man, the young and the maiden, and little children and women; but come not near any man upon whom is the mark; and begin at my Sanctuary [mikdash]. Then they began at the elders which were before the house." Rabbi Joseph recited: "Read not mikdash but mekuddashay [my sanctified ones]: this refers to the people who fulfilled the Torah from alef to Tav."*

This last quote states that God instructed His destroyers not to afflict the elders, "but come not near any man upon whom is the mark." This is followed by a statement of elders being killed first, "Then they began with the elders which were before the house." Thus, God appears to have recanted His former decree to spare the elders. But we must understand: God does not change His mind since all is known by Him. Nor does there exist a separate being – the Attribute of Justice –

with whom God converses. This metaphoric portion requires interpretation.

Idolatry is the worst sin. In a vision, God took Ezekiel to Jerusalem and showed him just how rampant idolatry had become. They worshipped the sun and idols even within the Temple. The Jews deserved death.

### God Does Not Recant

However, there were elders who "sighed and cried" concerning the sins of the Jewish idolaters. Thus, they did not sin. How do we understand what appears to be a "change" in God's mind regarding those elders? Why were they killed too?

The Talmud's dialogue must be understood in human terms. The Rabbis – the authors of the Talmud – constructed this Talmudic portion as a metaphor. Their lesson is that although division is absent in regards to God, as are attributes; at times people are saved, punished or killed. Thereby, man perceives God as "merciful" and at times, purely "just."

In this historical instance many Jews deserved death. But some elders did not sin at all and actually fulfilled the entire Torah. God's preference is not that man dies, but that he repents: "Do I truly desire the death of the sinner, says God Elohim. Is it not his repentance from his ways [that I seek] and that he lives (Ezek. 18:23)?" This is what is meant by God marking the elders for life with a Tav, the letter commencing the word "tichyeh", to live. It refers to God's "preference," as if God "did this first." But in this sin, God could not exempt the elders from the fate of death received by their brothers and sisters since the elders failed to rebuke the Jews. Thus, Ezekiel says "Then they began with the elders which were before the house." Meaning, God commenced the killing with these elders. This is the one case where God's preference of His mercy bows out to His justice. What is unique in this sin?

### Failed Leaders is a Failed Nation

We have none others than our leaders to instruct Israel in Torah – God's primary concern for mankind. The responsibility of all of Israel is on their shoulders. Although they did not sin but failed to rebuke others, they expressed a fear of man instead a fear of God. Even though God knew the sinners would not heed the elders, the elders did not know this. Failure to rebuke the nation will lead to the Torah's end. There is nothing worse. Thus, they were punished together with the sinning nation. When the loss is the Torah and the nation of Israel, God does not show His mercy.

Maimonides teaches[1] that if God were to recant on positive prophecies, prophecy would have no means of validation. By a prophet's positive forecast coming true at all times, proph-

ecy is thereby validated. But in this one case where leaders fail to rebuke, God will recant His positive prophecy.

These elders should have admonished their brothers and sisters. Despite God's foreknowledge that it would have been useless in this case, the elders did not know that outcome. They should have rebuked the nation. But they failed to show greater concern for the Torah's continuation and for the people. They were also killed, and the killing even commenced with them. There cannot be a concern that outweighs the guarding of Torah for the next generation. These elders placed some other concern as weightier, and thereby are to blame.

God did not say one thing and then change His mind. This Talmudic portion means that God has a preference for mercy, but not in a case where the sin is failed leaders. This dialogue between God and his attribute of justice illustrates this point.

### What are Our Sins?

The greatest mitzvahs are accurate knowledge of God, denial of other powers and superstitions, and Torah study. If we do not learn and teach, we commit the worst crimes. The Talmud says any house wherein Torah study is not heard at night will be burned[2]. This refers to our more relaxed hours; nighttime. How do we spend our evenings? Free time is when man's values are expressed most. Torah study is why we were created. If Torah study is not our main focus, if it is not studied at night, our leaders must urge the nation to return to study. "And you shall accustom yourselves in it day and night (Joshua 1:8)." For it is only through study that we might arrive at Torah truths and values. If we were studying, the foolish beliefs of the masses would be openly rejected as Torah violations.

And what of our ideas of God? Do our leaders confront the many falsehoods plaguing the Jewish communities today? Torah teaches us that God rewards and punishes based on our merit. Nothing else can prevent God from doing so. "Let us search and examine our ways and return to Hashem (Megillas Eicha 3:40)." Eicha is read on Tisha B'Av. Will our leaders teach Eicha's message, that it is our own flaws that cause our problems, or will they dismiss people from introspection and blame? Allowing segulos, keys in challas and Amen and Tehillim groups to be accepted as effective practices is a lie. Communities believe these acts ensure certain outcomes so their leaders must correct this falsehood. In fact, it is "Teshuva, Tefilla u'Tzedaka" – our repentance, prayers and charity – that have any value before God. Wearing red strings cannot secure success, health or marriage. Repentance from false notions and our sins finds God's favor. An honest Rabbi

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will teach his congregants these are all idolatrous practices.

We just read of a Rabbi who was murdered when his guaranteed blessings failed to materialize. Shamefully, a few Rabbis did not ridicule the murdered Rabbi's deception through selling his blessings. They showed more pity for him, than those he deceived and robbed. But an intelligent leader who is honest and God-fearing will use this case to educate others that Rabbis are unnecessary: we are to pray to God, who alone can answer our needs. How unforgivable are leaders who cower to the masses and fail to address these unopposed and destructive beliefs in God. God's blessings cannot be purchased from humans. Rachel desired children and asked Jacob to give them to her. Jacob responded (with anger), "Am I in God's stead (Gen. 30:2)?"

If our nation imagines a god who is weaker than man made amulets and idolatrous superstitions; where leaders endorse Rabbis' blessings, and a god who cannot hear our prayers... then we are in a sorrowful state. Leaders will be punished for failing to try and correct the sins of the nation. Leaders can either maintain the ignorance of our nation by failing to rebuke, or they can teach truth, rebuke falsehood, and urge Torah study so Israel realizes God's Torah truths and abandon foolishness.

When leaders are punished for "our" sins, it is because as the Talmud teaches, "The Attribute of Justice said to God, 'What difference is there between those wholly righteous and those who only sin?'" Meaning, since those righteous elders did not rebuke the sinners, they were viewed as sinning on par with the idolaters, and were killed.

I look forward to the Messiah who will stand for truth and have no concern for what is popular. He will surpass Solomon's wisdom and be close to Moses in prophecy[3]. He will teach the unparalleled beauty of God's truth and unveil the stupidities Israel has adopted from others. May this day arrive now. ■

[1] Maimonides' Introduction to the Commentary on the Mishnah

[2] Sanhedrin 92a

[3] Maimonides' Laws of Teshuva 9:2

# Religious Leadership

## — and/or — Mis-leadership

RABBI MARC ANGEL



"Who knows what kind of decree G-d's people was under? And [Rabbi Abuhatzzeira] was strong for us, and he bore the atonement for our generation," Rabbi Amar said.

A terrible crime recently made the headlines in Israel. A well-known rabbi, reputed to be a wonder-worker, had a large following of supporters who sought his prayers and blessings. One such follower came to him to seek a prayer/blessing so that a certain result would ensue. The rabbi offered his prayer/blessing and assured the man that the requested miracle would occur.

The miracle did not occur.

The man became enraged that the rabbi had misled him and had not delivered on his promise of a miracle. Apparently the man had made a contribution to the rabbi to ensure the effectiveness of the prayer. In a fit of fury, the man went to the rabbi and stabbed him to death!

Faced with such a tragedy, one would have hoped and expected rabbinic leadership to offer proper guidance to the horrified public. They might have reminded people of the importance of personal prayer and piety; of the advisability of not going to wonder-workers in expectation of miracles; of the fact that murder and violence are the wrong ways to deal with frustration.

In the press, though, rabbinic statements were reported that pointed in a very different direction. One leading rabbi, very close to the murder victim, assured the public that the rabbi had been murdered to save the people of Israel from evil decrees. "Harsh punishments were decreed on the people of Israel and he wanted to nullify them." That is, this rabbi died for our sins, as an atonement

that would deflect an evil decree against us. The Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel made comments to Arutz Sheva: "Who knows what kind of decree God's people was under? And [this rabbi] was strong for us and he bore the atonement for our generation."

These rabbinic proclamations are highly distressing. They reflect a simplistic religious worldview that degrades and impoverishes true religion, that plays into the hands of the most primitive and gullible approaches to religion. Such statements push thinking people away from Torah, and re-enforce stereotypes of religion as an opiate for the ignorant masses.

How do these rabbis—who are not prophets—know that God had intended an evil decree against us? How do they dare take it upon themselves to speak as though they have a direct line to God's intentions? How can they be so sure that the murdered rabbi died for our sins (a concept with Christian, rather than Jewish, overtones)? Why did they ignore the obvious fact that the rabbi was murdered because he let on that he could pray for miracles, and that the miracle didn't happen; that a foolish and violent man murdered the rabbi in cold blood? Why try to offer theological explanations when these explanations are not warranted, and when there is no way that such explanations can be verified?

It is of utmost importance for all thinking religious people to stand up against this unsophisticated and spiritually warped view of Judaism. We need to work together to foster an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive Judaism that stresses the need for individual spiritual exertion. We each must take responsibility for our relationship with the Almighty. We must encourage a dignified and intelligent religiosity which eschews going to supposed wonder workers and shamans. We each have direct access to God. ■

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# MOSHE'S Final Message



RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week's sedra, Devarim, is the first parsha in the fifth and final Book of the Torah. It consists of Moshe's last teachings and exhortations to the people he had elevated from the degradation of slavery to one which had been charged by the Hashem to become a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." He had led them through the travails of the wilderness, an experience which had taken its toll on the people and their leaders. This was a crucial and auspicious moment. The forty years of wandering were over all those who had partaken of the sin of the spies had passed away. A new generation had arisen whose first assignment would be to invade and conquer the land, a task which their parents had not found the courage to perform. Moshe found himself in a most difficult position. It is clear from his many petitions that he wanted very much to participate in the conquest of the land. He kept praying to be forgiven for his sin and allowed the privilege of taking possession of the "inheritance of the Lord." The Rabbis discuss the reasons for Moshe's powerful desire to be allowed to dwell alongside of his brethren in the land of Israel. In rhetorical fashion they ask: "was it because he desired to taste the fruits of the

land?" They reject the notion that Moshe was interested in enjoying any of the material pleasures that are to be obtained in the "land which flows with milk and honey." Rather, they conclude, his motives were purely idealistic. They depict him as saying "there are many mitzvot that are bound up with the land, let them be performed through me." Moshe knew how challenging it would be to conquer the land and establish the Torah way of life in it. He believed that his personal participation in this endeavor would be a great source of inspiration and strength for the people. That is another reason why he prayed so hard for Hashem to rescind His decree. However He had other plans.

Moshe was, first and foremost, the great teacher who taught G-d's Torah to His nation, Israel. That is why in spite of all his political achievements he is known to Jews throughout the ages as Moshe Rabbenu (our teacher). This insight provides the key to understanding the essence of the Book of Devarim. It consists of the talks that Moshe conveyed to the Jews in the final days of his life. We can see the tremendous love and concern which he had for his people. He reminded them of the great challenge of conquest which lay before them and asserted that while their parents had

failed in this task, they would find the courage to fulfill it. He told them how much he wanted to join with them in this journey but that Hashem had decreed that he would not "pass over this Jordan." The Jews would go on without him as Jewish life is never dependent on any particular individual, no matter how awesome. Judaism is eternal because our great teachers remain alive through their teachings which we study, preserve and transmit to the next generation. At this point in his life Moshe's political activities were complete. He now focused exclusively on his true mission, to be the teacher of Klal Yisrael.

Thus he finalized the system of mitzvot, reviewed certain laws and elucidated the "Hashkafa" (value system and outlook) of Judaism which is incorporated into the commandments. His final message to the Jews was that we should study the Torah carefully, not "add to or detract from it" or distort it in any manner. In addition, we should not just observe the letter of the law in a mechanical and perfunctory fashion, but implement its values and live according to its philosophy of life so that all who observe us will declare "What a wise and discerning people is this great nation."

Shabbat Shalom ■

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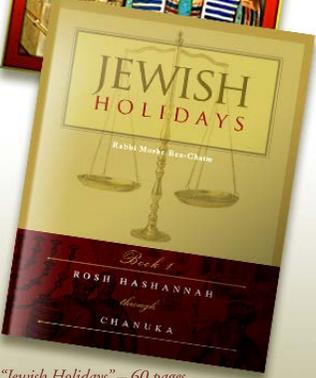
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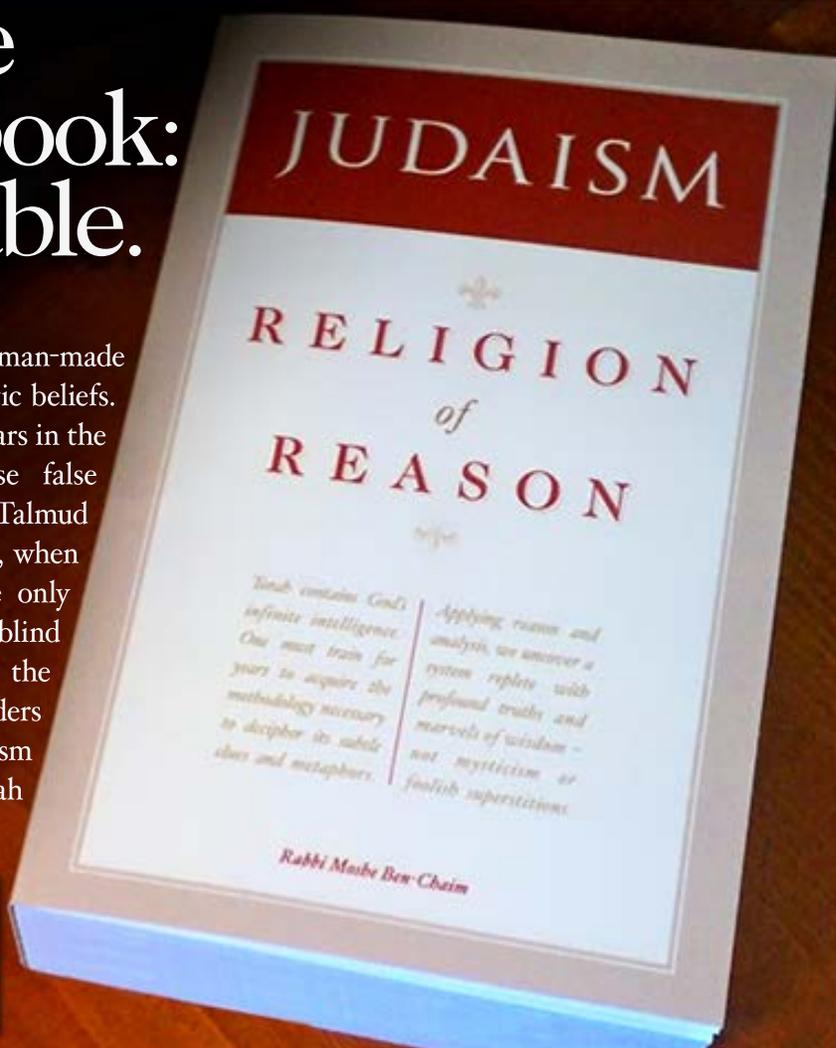



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laid out pretty clearly in this portion.

We see the chronology unfold as follows (Devarim 4:25-29):

*"(25) When you have children and grandchildren, and have grown old in the land; and you will be corrupt and make a statue—an image of anything—and do what is evil in the eyes of Hashem, your Hashem, to anger Him. (26) I bring as witness against you today heaven and earth, that you will be completely and swiftly removed from upon the land, that you are crossing the Yardein there to inherit; you will not live long upon it, but will be completely destroyed. (27) God will disperse you among the peoples, and you will remain few in number among the nations that God leads you to. (28) There you will serve man-made gods of wood and stone that do not see, do not hear, do not eat, and do not smell. (29) You will seek from there Hashem, your God, and you will find [Him], when you seek Him wholeheartedly and with your whole being."*

Looking at verse 25 and 28, one might notice the fact that Bnai Yisrael engage in the prohibition of avoda zara twice. The first, in verse 25, relates how Bnai Yisrael will commit idolatry, as well as other evils, "lebachiso", to anger Him. In verse 28, with Bnai Yisrael exiled amongst the other nations, the same prohibition seems to be in play, albeit with some descriptive differences (more on that in a second). This appears to be superfluous, as Bnai Yisrael already succumbed to this type of thinking. What changed here? Furthermore, as related in verse 29, it seems that the idol worship they engaged in while amongst the non-Jews is somehow the impetus to return to God. How so?

Another issue that needs to be analyzed involves the excessive descriptions in verse 28, how the idol does not see, hear, eat or smell. The Ramban notes these specifications, and offers two explanations. The first is an idea having to do with the honor of man. When he makes the idol, he sees the idol as having a "deficient" existence in relation to man. He first notes how the idol is incapable of seeing into the eyes of his worshippers, or listening to his tefilos, making it a flawed deity. He then notes how, in lacking any ability to eat or smell, the idol possesses "less of an existence" than a human. In the second explanation, the Ramban writes that this refers to the honor afforded to God, as God alone sees the eyes of His worshippers, hears their tefilos, accepts their korbanos ("eat") and "smells" the fragrance of these sacrifices.

As is quite common when analyzing the writings of the Ramban, at first glance things appear to be quite difficult to understand. Firstly, why is there a need for to offer two reasons? Second, what does he mean that the existence of the idol is somehow



deficient in comparison to man? Of course it is! How does the Ramban's second explanation provide a definitive rebuke to the idol worshipper?

The first area to understand involves the seemingly duplicate acts of idolatry. What is the difference between the two? Rashi clues us in, noting (ibid 28) that once we are serving the idol worshippers, it is as if we are serving the idols themselves. What does he mean by this? It is important to note the ending of verse 25, where the act of idolatry is qualified as "lebachiso". This refers to an act of rebellion by Bnai Yisrael against God. Blinded by these emotions, driven by their instincts, the nation chooses to leave God and enter the world of the idolatrous (as indeed took place). The clear and patent falsehood reflected in this system of worship is lost on the nation. This is the first type of idolatry described, and as God relates, we then become scattered amongst the other nations. This is where Rashi's idea becomes so enlightening. We develop a dependent existence with the nations of the world, subject to their whims. Without the redemption, this dependency is a fixture of our present existence. As such, our dependency allows us to become more permeable to the surrounding ideologies. It is a natural by-product of the state of exile, a phenomenon that effortlessly takes hold. Since these ideas are not actively pursued, but rather slowly work their way into the mindset of the nation, we have the means of breaking away and returning to God. It is at this point that the Ramban's explanations become pivotal.

The Ramban is actually pointing out two ways that the irrationality of the world of idolatry is demonstrable. At first, the Ramban focuses on the superiority of man's existence over that of the idol. It seems quite obvious what the difference is, as the idol is not alive! However, the root of idolatry, on a psychological level, always involves expressions of human projections. The different idols and religions merely serve to satisfy man's personal

needs and insecurities. As such, once man sees no general response from the idol, and comes to see how these are all projections, he recognizes how absurd the whole pursuit actually is. This is the sequence from hearing and seeing, where the idol is the projection, to the eating and talking, where the truth becomes clear. However, it is important to note that these are not easy steps to take. People gain tremendous comfort and security from these distorted beliefs. Pointing out the absurdity of different idolatrous practices is the simple part. Getting people to accept that their beliefs are fallacious is much more difficult.

The second explanation looks at this from a more philosophical perspective. The different examples offered by the Torah all relate to the idea of hashgacha – providence. It is not a question of probabilities, as one deity being more "responsive" than another. Instead, if one studies the chachma underlying the idea of hashgacha, he will come to see how God is qualitatively different. Normally, we turn to the idea of God being One as the defining feature separating God from all others. Instead, the Ramban is telling us that studying hashgacha can also demonstrate how God is essentially different from all others. Each of the Torah's descriptions is a gateway to this area of knowledge.

This leads us to a clarification of how Bnai Yisrael are able to seek out God in the second scenario. If we collectively decided to reject God outright, then the road to teshuva becomes difficult to find. Being that the exposure to other ideologies, and the subsequent effect, was not a decision by the nation but rather a natural by-product, the ability to reach the correct conclusion becomes simpler. The passive effect of idolatrous influence is unquestionably destructive. However, the method of its intrusion into our mindset creates a less obstructed potential to pull away. As Tisha B'Av approaches, it is imperative we understand our current flawed state, and know as well the avenue that exists to return to God. ■

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



**Reader:** I learned from you that the Creator can never become the created. Thus, He is limited in His abilities. That makes perfect philosophical sense. However, in Numbers, Hashem asks Moses in response to his own concerns about the quail, and I paraphrase, "Is there a limit to The Lord's power?" This sounds as if Hashem CAN do anything as He has no limits.

**Rabbi:** God cannot perform the impossible, like making Himself a created being; making a square a circle at the same moment; or making history the future.

These are all impossibilities, and do not detract from God's greatness and omnipotence. Such impossibilities would be contrary to God's essence as the source of all truth. Now, had He made a circle a square at the same moment, He would contradict what is true. His desire that man attain truths would be thwarted. But in fact, this is impossible.

When God said "Is the Lord's hand short?" as

you paraphrased, it was regarding what is possible. God was not saying He could perform anything imagined. God's point here was to correct Moses. Moses did not think that feeding the Jews meat was the correct approach to the Jew's complaint. But God said He knew how to resolve the issue at hand, saying, "Is God's hand short?" In other words, God's response to Moses was that He can resolve this issue of the quail, despite Moses' inability to grasp how satisfying their request for meat would practically work. But God was not saying He can do the impossible. ■

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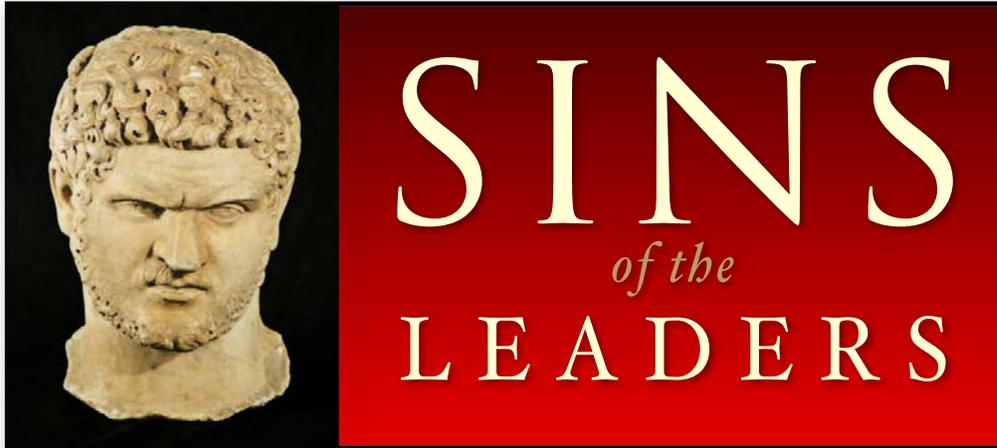
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RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

On the holiday of Shavuot, known as the feast of weeks, based on Exodus 34:22, we read the book of Ruth. The book opens with the story of Elimelech who left the land of Israel due to a famine and subsequently met his demise. The Rabbis tell us that Elimelech was a leader of his people and a wealthy man who abandoned his position in order to avoid the personal conflict that was brought on by the poor people being constantly at his door.

The Rabbis point out that there is an extra word in the very first verse of this book. The verse reads, "And it was in the days the judges judged..." It would have been sufficient to write, "And it was in the days of the judges," a clear reference to the early period of Israel's history after Joshua when Israel was led by a succession of judges. Interestingly enough, in Hebrew this verse as it is written can be translated, without deviating from the rules of Hebrew grammar, "And it was in the days of the judging of the judges," implying that the judges themselves were deserving of judgment. Thus the extra word is not extra at all but is a hint for the more penetrating reader to focus his attention on the shortcomings of Elimelech.

The Torah contains much information both overtly and covertly on the institution of leadership and the shortcomings of the leaders of Israel. God's book is ruthlessly honest and no one is spared. The greatness of leaders and their weaknesses are revealed side by side. The Torah is not a book of hero-worship but of learning. The only real "hero" is God. As Onkelos translates Exodus 15:1, "I will sing unto God for he has raised himself above the great and greatness is truly His."

The Torah demands of man that he give up

one of his most cherished institutions, hero worship. Belief in messiahs is the more common form of this institution, while its most grotesque form is their complete deification. Torah monotheism and hero worship are mutually exclusive.

No wonder Torah leaders were always impressed with the famous statement of Aristotle, "Dear is Plato, but dearer still is the truth." Here Aristotle the Greek intuited an important Torah truth.

When describing the ascension to leadership of the greatest of all leaders, Moses (Exodus 3), the Torah tells of a strange story. It describes Moses' adamant refusal to accept the mission of leading the Israelites out of bondage and into the land of Israel. Even after God explains in detail the importance of Moses' mission, entreats him, and promises to be with him offering him signs and miracles, Moses continues to turn down God's request. Only after God's wrath is kindled does Moses relent and accept his role which has been reduced and transformed into a sharing with Ahron in order to satisfy Moses' demands.

We are mystified at Moses' response to God's request. What leader today would not jump for joy if God would offer him the opportunity to be the greatest leader of all time, the world's most famous lawgiver, the one whose laws, handed down to him by God are still revered, meticulously studied, and kept by hundreds of thousands even now more than three thousand years after his passing? Is there indeed any greater opportunity for any human being? When Albert Einstein was asked whom he would like to meet after his death his reply was not Galileo, Archimedes, or Newton but

Moses. In explaining his decision he said "I would like to ask him if he thought his laws would be kept so many years after his death." Yet the Torah depicts how Moses turns down God's request more than once. Why?

Rashi mentions an interesting statement of the Rabbis pertaining to Exodus 3 verse 18. The Rabbis state that God told Moses that the elders of Israel will listen to him if he uses the expression *Pakod Pakodti*, which means God will remember them, since this was given to them as a sign from Jacob and Joseph that with these words they will be redeemed. They will then know that Moses is their true redeemer appointed by God. At first sight this idea seems difficult. How could these words act as a proof that Moses is the true savior? If the elders knew this tradition could not Moses also have known of it? Would he not then be able to fool the people by using this phrase?

Upon closer examination we find the words of the Rabbis contain a deep idea. The Patriarch Jacob knew by way of prophecy that his children would be redeemed. He knew that being enslaved many false prophets would arise claiming to be their savior. He taught his children how to distinguish between the false savior and the true one. He gave them insight which would help them differentiate between the real and counterfeit. The false savior is driven by a desire to be a leader which stems from man's most abhorrent trait, his egomania. Jacob taught his children to scrutinize the personality of anyone who presents themselves as a savior for telltale signs of this trait. The true savior will never have traces of self-aggrandizement in his message. He will only proclaim God as the true redeemer. His message will be, "God will remember you." The false prophet, driven by a desire for personal recognition will inevitably somewhere in his message place himself in a role of glory. They will then know that he is a counterfeit. His message will not be exclusively of God but of himself as well. Jacob taught his children not to be influenced by fancy rhetoric but to search carefully, to scrutinize each person who presents himself as a savior for signs of egoistic motivation. The true savior will never lapse into the slightest expression of self-glorification. The message of the false savior will always betray his personal ambition. This message in its most crude form is always, "I am the way." This is the ultimate statement of the megalomaniac who seeks to present himself as a savior and conceal from others his sick delusional mind. In spite of all the rhetoric of such individuals, their true intent always comes through.

God told Moses that the elders of Israel were

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## Leadership

not fools. They had good teachers, the Patriarch Jacob and his son Joseph. They taught them how to scrutinize the personality of those who claim to be leaders. They would not be fooled by attractive speech. They could distinguish between the true and the counterfeit. They would find in Moses no traces of a desire for self-glorification. They would then be willing to listen to his words. They would recognize in Moses, who was not a man of words, the true leader.

How valid and important are the words of Torah! How real and intelligent! Leadership is a strange phenomenon. People need leaders to teach them how to make good decisions. But the most important decision of all, that is, who is a good leader, must be made by the people. It is a logical circle. Just as a good leader is the most valuable thing for mankind, a bad leader is the most horrible thing for mankind. We need not look far in history to confirm this. People are easily deceived by false leaders. Leaders are usually more intelligent and talented than their followers. That is why people look up to them. But this very intelligence and talent permit them to deceive their followers, to use them as a means of their own self-aggrandizement. Again and again people are duped by talented individuals who are adept at concealing their insatiable personal ambition and presenting themselves as selfless saviors of humanity. Only when it is too late is the truth revealed. The old and wise Patriarch Jacob knew this dilemma well. He knew that it required a wise people to choose a true leader. He taught them the one lesson they needed to know in order to make a correct decision. He taught them how to avert the greatest catastrophe that can befall a people, the wrong choice of a leader. He gave them insight into the human personality so that they would be able to detect the tell tale signs of the impostor. The "I am the way" type leader would never fool them. The elders of Israel were well equipped to proceed properly and cautiously in their most important decision. If only modern man had such knowledge, he could say farewell to most of his woes.

In our society today, where the image has replaced the reality, those who rise to the top are those who are most adept at projecting images. This means by definition that they are best capable of deceit and lying. Today's politician is characterized by his ability to look someone in the face and lie without batting an eyelash. He is believed because most people, not having such talents, cannot imagine someone doing such a thing. They therefore conclude that the person must be speaking the truth. Corrupt political figures eventually bring



misfortune to their followers in the form of the destruction of their life and property. The tangible results of their insatiable greed and aggression eventually become realized.

The religious sphere is far more subtle. People are less able to discern the harm done to their souls than to their property and bodies. The harm can go on for centuries. The religion of the false leader disintegrates quickly into a system where belief in the person of the leader becomes its most distinctive mark. Objective systems are subordinated to fanatical belief in a certain leader or person. Salvation becomes not a matter of human growth and perfection but of belief in the mystical power of some individual to be a savior. Such a system is not necessarily put to rest with the demise of the false leader as in the political sphere. Innocent and ignorant followers can go on for centuries in the belief that they are benefiting their souls. Death in this case serves to further the deceit of the leader giving him a surreal existence and making him even less subject to scrutiny than he was during his lifetime. This creates the strange phenomenon the were that person here today he would be less successful than he is having died.

How does Torah characterize the true leader? It begins with the description of Moses' strong reluctance to accept leadership. The Torah

gives us the strange formula that a great leader is he who wishes to lead least. A desire to lead ipso facto renders the person unqualified to be a leader. He who wishes to see his name in print and over the media is by definition a false leader. Such people may pose as altruistic leaders, they may say they are doing it all for the sake of God, but in reality they are using God to gain human recognition. They suffer from the greatest of human weaknesses, the need for approval by man. God's approval is not enough.

But can there not be one whose motives are pure, who is totally imbued with sincere religious fervor for the sake of God and Humanity and therefore desires leadership? The Torah's answer is decidedly no. Moses was the greatest leader and the Torah tells us he did not wish to lead. Those who desire to lead are always fraudulent.

The Torah's formula sounds strange. No doubt people have been fooled throughout the ages precisely because they believed in the ideal of the sincere religious leader who desires to lead for God's sake. When they see someone whom they think satisfies this image they become so overjoyed they fail to investigate further. But Torah states emphatically that no such leader exists. It is an illusion, a mirage of the human spirit based on ignorance. Here is why.

A great leader must be a great person according to Torah. Contrary to popular opinion, a person that can not get his own life in order cannot help others gain perfection. Only a perfected individual can. But what is a perfected individual? An individual who has partaken fully of the good God has given man. But what is that good? That good is Torah. Torah places one immediately in the divine presence. No wonder so many verses in Psalms depict the perfect man as he who is constantly involved in the study of Torah; he who is overjoyed by Torah and is brought by it to states of sublime bliss. The ultimate good God gave man is a most overpowering experience. It Brings man to rapture thrilling his every fiber. It is the ultimate state of mind for which man was created. Those who have experienced it cannot tear themselves away from it. The prophets compare the state to the strongest experience of lovesickness. Is it any wonder that one who has experienced this ultimate existence would never wish to leave it and return to the mundane world of human affairs. Such perfected souls look with disdain at the joys of the ego and human recognition. Being in God's presence and experiencing the reality of His existence they frown upon man and his shallow values. They know full well what

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## Leadership

prompts human approval and look upon it with contempt. As described in Exodus 18:21, they are haters of what humans consider to be gain. For them human affairs offer no thrills, no excitements, and no benefit. It means being torn away from the most enjoyable and most perfect state of human existence. It means being thrown into the responsibilities of leadership and the constant involvement with the pettiness and nonsense of human emotions. It is no wonder that Moses complained so often to God about his plight as a leader. For the truly perfected person leadership is a nightmarish descent from the beatitude and blessedness of God's world to the bleak and ugly world of human affairs. Such a journey is indeed almost humanly impossible. Why does such a person do so? Only one thing can force him to do so - he has no choice. There is no one else that can do it and God demands that it be done. Even to the very end Moses pleaded with God, "Send, I beg you by the hand of whom thou will send (Exodus 4:13)." Moses was hoping against hope that there was someone else who could do the job. When God's anger was kindled at this request he realized he had no way out. There was none other. With all the strength in his character he committed himself to the almost inhuman task of leaving the land of the blessed for a joyless and painful existence because God left him no choice.

All true Torah scholars since Moses have followed in his footsteps. As Maimonides states in the Laws of Sanhedrin, Ch. 3 L. 10, "Such was the manner of the wise men of old. They would run away from appointment [to the Sanhedrin]. They would struggle to their utmost to avoid being judges and only conceded when they knew that there was no one equal to the task and that judgment would be corrupted if they did not participate." The great scholars reacted just as Moses did when God requested of him that he be a leader.

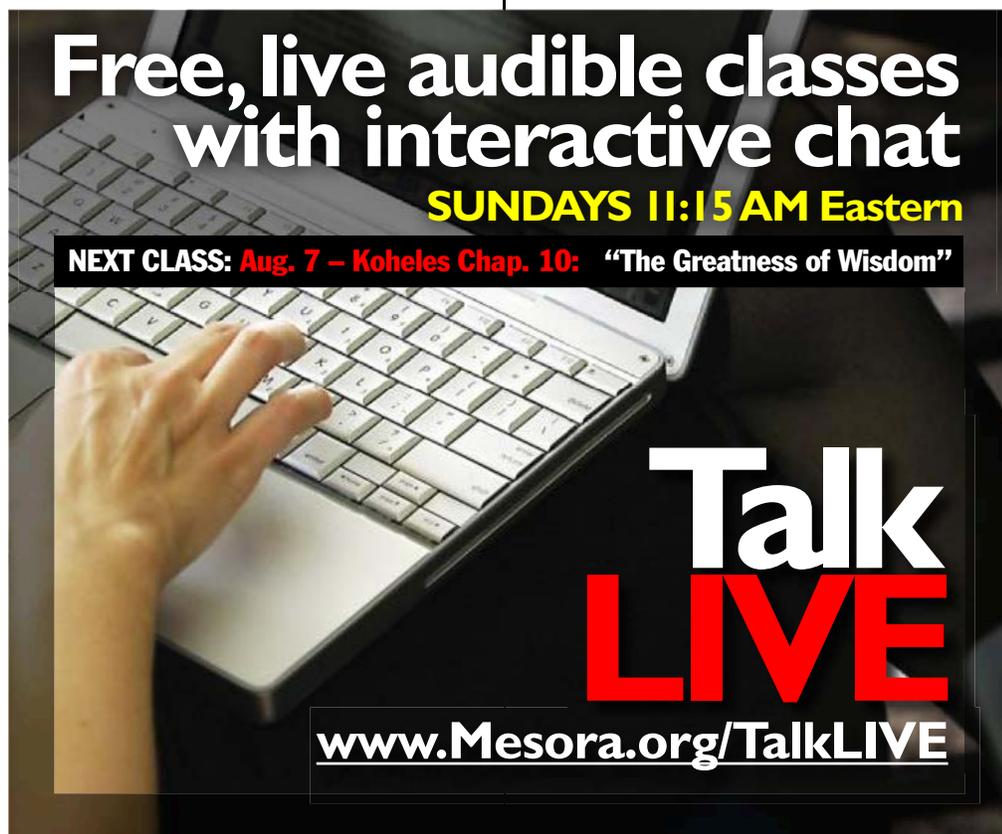
According to Torah, how one views leadership is the very touchstone by which one's perfection may be measured. For the perfected person who constantly lives in the world of Torah and who is not moved by the approval of the masses it is a most distasteful enterprise. The more perfected the person the more distasteful and the more difficult it is for him to engage in leadership. On the other hand, for the distorted personality, the one who has never experienced the true good for man, the one who is riddled with inner turmoil, whose life is in disarray, who is plagued by vacillating emotions of greatness and worthlessness, leadership seems like a haven. He is attracted to

it like a magnet. Being rooted in the value system of man he seeks to turn away from the source of his own imperfection and soothe himself with the thrills of ego satisfaction. Leadership appears as his salvation; his ultimate escape from his unhappy existence. Under the guise of saintliness and in the seeming service of God he can satisfy his base desires for human approval and assuage his guilt with the pretense of righteousness. Such a person would jump at the opportunity to lead and react in the exact opposite manner of the great Moses. Such a person does not know God nor even the good God has given to man. He is a willful deceiver of others and himself.

The Rabbis and true Torah leaders were never impressed by people who desired to save the world. They recognized immediately the true source of this desire, man's egomania. Being astute Torah scholars they knew well the lesson of Jacob and understood the greatness of the true leader, Moses. They were never impressed by rhetoric and claims of individuals who in their shallow world of ideas think they are helping God. Torah scholars have a deep understanding of perfection and human nature. They are not naive purists. They are deep thinkers, trenchant and calculated. The virtue of puristic naiveté is not a Torah concept but a man made religious notion.

The Torah scholar leads only when necessary and even then he never leaves the world of Torah. He is preoccupied with it in his every spare moment tearing himself away only momentarily to engage in the necessary task of leadership. He shuns honors and accolades and despises publicity and renown. He is not plagued by a desire to increase the number of his followers. He loves to be alone or with a few friends studying Torah. He is totally satisfied being in God's presence.

Such is the Torah tradition of leadership. It has produced a succession of true and great leaders the likes of which the world has never known. They were not perfect nor did they try to convey the image of being perfect. Man cannot be perfect. They were able to recognize their shortcomings, repent, and reinstate their relationship with God. Elimelech, on the other hand, was a weak leader. He could not overcome his shortcomings. In failure, he abandoned his position. However, he was not a corrupt leader. He never made use of his subjects for his own self interest. Thus the Torah distinguishes three types of leaders: the great leader, the good leader overcome by weakness, and the corrupt leader. May God send us true leaders and grant us the knowledge to recognize them. ■



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