

JewishTimes

JANUARY 13, 2012

JEWS: A SUPER RACE?

MOSES
A SUPER
MAN

PHARAOH'S
ASTROLOGERS:
**THEY
REALLY
KNEW?**

what
IS
God?



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People today create fables.
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Judaism's Fundamentals

JEWS: A SUPER RACE?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

God created one human pair: Adam and Eve. Noah and all others descend from this couple. It is baseless to suggest there exists different types of humans. The human race was created once; no humans were created anew any time afterwards. Despite arrogant claims within Jewish circles, no group possesses a different or superior design or nature. Torah does not support the notion of a superior "Jewish soul."

Jew and gentile are identical in design. Where we differ is not in our design or potential, but in our Torah obligations. God's words are vital to our understanding of reality. Let us follow what He writes, not what Jews boastfully suggest. Last week on the Tenth of Teves we read the Haftorah for public fasts, Isaiah 55:6-56:8. A friend commented that Isaiah appears to suggest that a gentile must observe the Sabbath. While we know Sabbath observance is prohibited for gentiles, how do we understand this? This portion indicates that without Sabbath observance and following all Torah laws, the gentile cannot share in the future good granted to the Jew on the same level. Is this so? And if it is, why isn't the gentile obligated in all of Torah? Is God playing favorites with the Jew, purposely

excluding gentile from living the greatest possible life? Let's review the text, then offer an explanation:

Chap. 55

"6. Seek God when He can be found; call Him when He is near. 7. Let the wicked person forsake his path and the man of sin [forsake] his thoughts and return to God and He will have mercy on him, [return] unto our God for He is abundant in forgiveness. 8. 'For My thoughts are not like your thoughts and your ways are not like My ways,' says God. 9. As the heaven as are higher than the land, so are My ways higher than yours and My thoughts from your thoughts. 10. For as the rain and snow descend from the heavens and to there [heaven] they do not return; rather they moisten the land giving birth and sprouting, giving seed to the planter and food to eat. 11. So will be the word that leaves My mouth, it will not return to Me empty: for it will do that which I desire, and it will be successful where I sent it. 12. For in joy you will go out and in peace you will arrive; the mountains and valleys will break forth before you in

song and the trees of the field will clap hands. 13. In the place of the thorn bush a cypress will rise; and in the place of the nettle a myrtle will rise and this will be a monument to God, an eternal sign never to cease.

Chap. 56

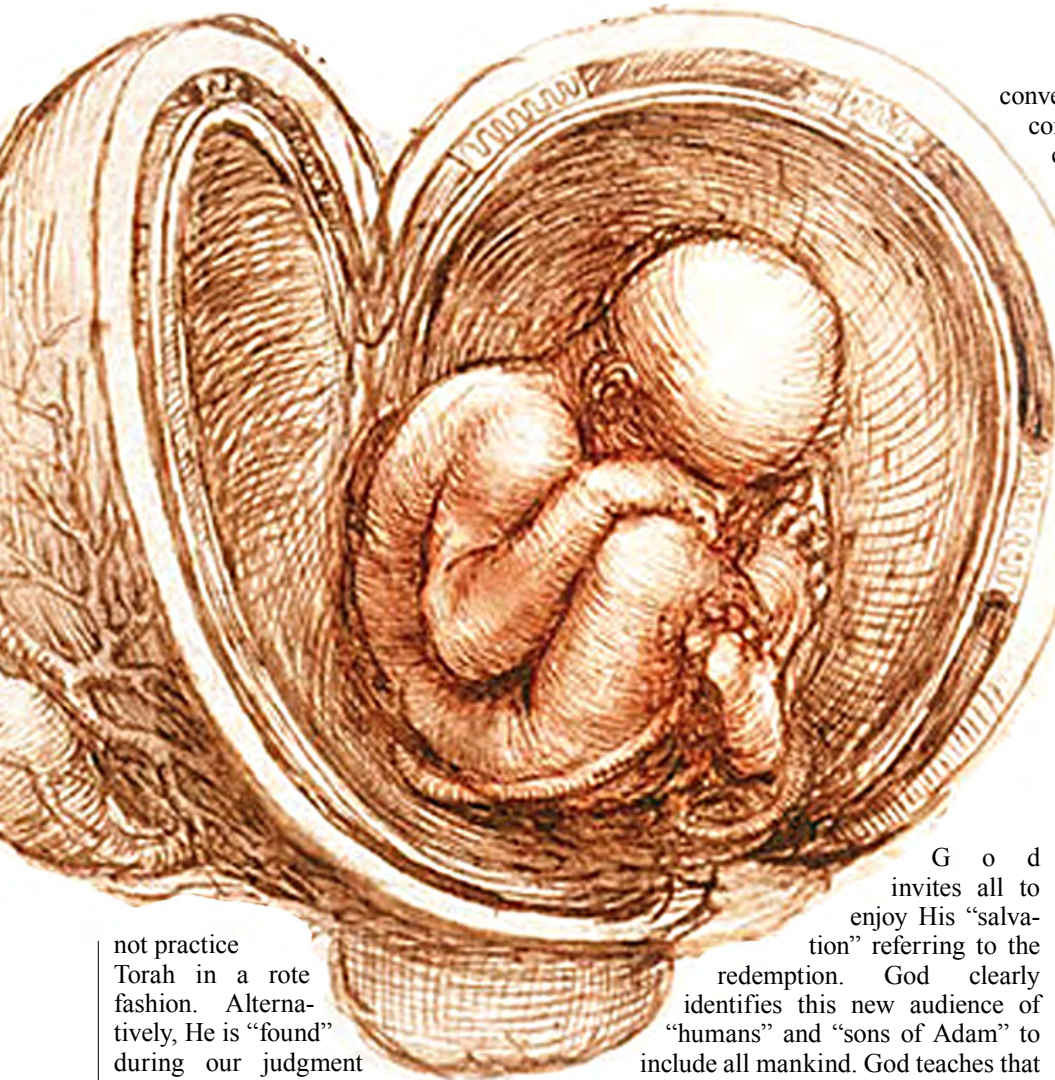
1. Thus says God; observe justice and perform righteousness for My salvation is soon to come and My righteousness to be revealed. 2. Happy is the human who does this, and the son of Adam who seizes it; observing the Sabbath rather than profaning it and guarding his hand from doing all evil. 3. And let not the son of the stranger who attached himself to God say, 'God will surely separate me from His people and let not the barren one say 'Behold, I am a dry tree'. 4. For so says God to the barren who guard My Sabbaths and select which I desire and seize My covenant. 5. And I will give them a place and fame within My house and within My walls, better than sons and daughters and an eternal name I will give them that will never cease. 6. And the son of the stranger that attaches to God to serve Him and to love the name of God and to be to Him servants; all who observe the Sabbath instead of profaning it and seize My covenant. 7. And I will bring them to My holy mountain and I will gladden them in My house of prayer, their elevation offerings and peace offerings will find favor on My altar for My house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples. 8. The word of God, Who gathers the dispersed of Israel; 'I shall gather to him even more than those gathered to him'."

Radak and others who understand the "son of the stranger" (56:3) to be Israelites, do not address the distinction between Jew and Noahide. Rashi and Metsudas David understand "son of the stranger" to be the gentile. Following these two Rabbis let us proceed to understand these verses.

Isaiah's Message

We are first told to seek God when He is near and can be found. This is a call to Jews sinning in action and in thought, to return to God...to reestablish a relationship with Him. Repentance is thereby defined as not simply ceasing from sin, but reconnecting with God. The Rabbis teach that God is "found" only when we are earnest in our desire to draw close and do

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convert?” the gentile feels. (Rashi) Therefore God corrects the gentiles’ false assumption as He corrected the Jews, promising the identical reward! “And I will give them a place and fame within My house and within My walls, better than sons and daughters and an eternal name I will give them that will never cease.”

God concludes, “their [the gentile’s] elevation offerings and peace offerings will find favor on My altar for My house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples. The word of God, Who gathers the dispersed of Israel; ‘I shall gather to him even more than those gathered to him’. God refers to His house as a house of “all people”, and further, He says he will gather to Him peoples, in addition to the Jews.

God created all members of mankind with the same potential. The only difference is that the Jew was not given the choice to observe the 613 commands, while the gentile has this option. As the gentiles’ Noahide system is not a system of perfection, but an entitlement to his right to life, he must abide by a bare minimum of laws. But the 613 is a system that enables any man and woman to achieve complete perfection.

The gentile has the opportunity that equals that of the Jew. Both Jew and gentile require actions to ensure their identical reward; the Jew must forsake sin and follow his obligation of 613 commands, and the gentile too can select this life. These two addresses in this portion teach the absolute equality of all people.

Why is the Sabbath singled out, if the entire 613 commands must be followed? This is because Sabbath recalls Creation, and it is Creation that bestowed equality on all men and women, who God created as descendants of a single couple. Isaiah’s words underscore a theme of human equality throughout all of these verses.

As this portion is read on public fasts, its intent is to assist in repentance, so we learn of God’s appreciation of the hurdles blocking man’s repentance, and how He assists our return to Him by assuaging our concerns: the same concerns shared by Jew and gentile, and assuring our success.

God’s “equation” here of the Jew and the gentile is evidenced not only in the identical rewards enjoyed by both, but also in the identical concerns for the hurdles to repentance we both share, seeking to reestablish our relationship with God.

not practice Torah in a rote fashion. Alternatively, He is “found” during our judgment (Rosh Hashanna or before death). For in these times reality hits us most, and we are genuine. God is also found (He responds) and we can repent, only during life, for we are taught that after life we cannot repent.

But man has a hurdle: he feels that perhaps his sins are not worthy of forgiveness. Therefore God tells us that His ways are different than man’s ways. For man will at times guard his hatred for others and never forgive. We incorrectly project this onto God. But God assures us here that He is far above our ways and He fully forgives, recalling nothing of our sins, if we are sincere. His promise is secure, as the falling rains and snow never return upwards, but successfully descend and water the Earth. So too, God’s word is fulfilled, assuring us success in our repentance. Not only success, but also God says we become “an eternal sign never to cease”.

Isaiah then addresses gentiles. For they too have a chance at the same life as the Jew. A new address is made, “Thus says God...” (56:1) indicating the audience is now shifted from the Jews to the gentiles.

God invites all to enjoy His “salvation” referring to the redemption. God clearly identifies this new audience of “humans” and “sons of Adam” to include all mankind. God teaches that true happiness is only achieved through the adherence to His entire system of 613 commands, termed as Sabbath and covenant.

So we answer the question that while it is true that a Noahide (gentile) is not permitted to observe the Sabbath, at the same time, his happiness and ultimate perfection relies on fulfilling all 613 commands. All will agree: with increased Torah observance comes increase perfection.

Jew and gentile are equal. Just as the erring Jew must return, forsaking sinful acts and adhere to the 613 to enjoy “an eternal sign never to cease”, so too a gentile is taught here to observe Sabbath and the covenant (i.e., all of Torah) if he too wishes the identical “eternal name I will give them that will never cease(56:5).”

All Men are Created Equal

Of significance is the parallel: Isaiah teaches that gentile and Jew have the same concern: “God will surely separate me from His people”. Meaning, as Rashi states, the gentile feels he will not enjoy the reward of the Jew, “So why should I

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Following are additional arguments conveying the absolute equality between Jew and gentiles:

1) Converts must observe the "same Torah" as the Jew (Exod. 12:49; Num. 9:14; Num. 15:16). Therefore, the gentile must have the same potential for perfection as the Jew.

2) As God created us all, He is concerned for us all.

3) Those who enjoyed God's prophecy and providence, were gentiles. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the Twelve Tribes...all gentiles. The Jew did not yet exist. And these gentile monotheists received prophecy, thereby rejecting the idea of a "superior" Jew. For what Jew today is a prophet? Thus, former gentiles have surpassed every Jew alive today.

4) Jews are an example for the world. This means God cares about the entire world, using the Jew as the example.

5) God also asks we observe His laws, as the performance will be our "wisdom and understanding in the eyes of all people" who will respond, "What a wise, understanding great nation this is (Deut. 4:6)!" Why does God desire this response from other nations, unless it is due to His concern for their perfection? This must mean that other nations can be imbued by Torah's perfecting laws, just like the Jew.

6) Ruth decided to convert. She had no Jewish ancestry. Yet she was superior to many Jews. Her superiority was based on her intelligence and character. Boaz married Ruth; their descendants became our kings, beloved by God. And the Messiah too descends from Ruth – the convert.

7) "Better is the day of death than the day of birth (Koheles 7:1)." King Solomon says this since at birth, one has no merits. But at

death, he or she has arrived at a life of perfection. This verse also applies to a Jew, thereby rejecting the notion that at birth the Jew has any greater value. The Jew too must wait until death to have his soul assessed as being a value or not. And if he can ruin his soul, it is false to suggest his soul is "better."

8) Man's actions are what merit his reward or punishment – not his birth status. If mere birth status is the reason for reward and we assume a Jew is superior, then God rewards the Jew for something he did not do! Meaning, his supposed superior nature is due to God's act of creation, not the Jew's choices! And that which man does not do, cannot entitle him to reward. Thus, a "birthright to superiority" is internally contradictory. Superiority is earned, not inherited. Therefore, we dismiss the notion that a Jew is inherently superior to others.

9) God punishes Jew and gentile alike. Some violations meet with the loss of one's soul, like idolatry. Now, if we suggest that a Jew possesses a superior soul, of what practical difference is this, if he can sin to the point of losing his soul? The claim of a superior soul makes no practical difference. It is also a claim not found in Torah, but only in the imagination of those without knowledge, or those with arrogance.

10) Maimonides teaches in a number of places the equality of all people. In addition to Hilchos Melachim 10:10, see Laws of Shemita and Yovale 13:13. There, he states that "anyone" who comes to the world; if he separates himself to worship God as He created him, that person becomes Holy of Holies and receives God's providence. Maimonides does not distinguish Jew from gentile, but in fact equates them by saying "anyone." ■

(continued next page with **MOSES: A SUPER MAN**)



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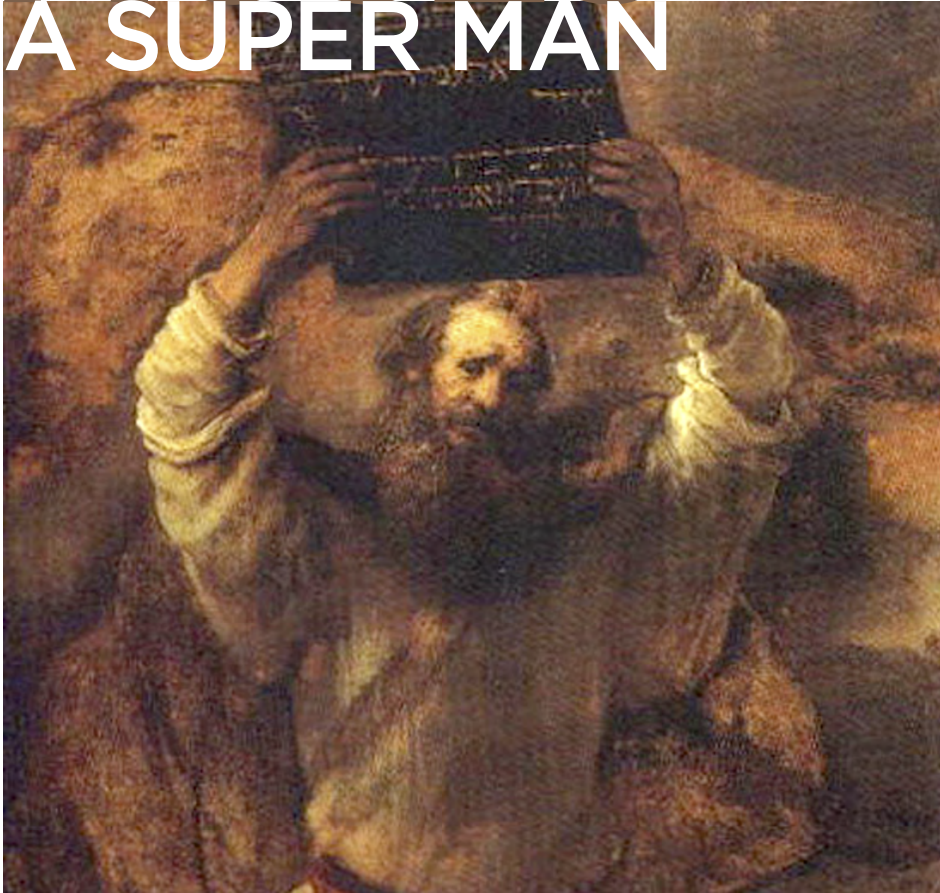


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MOSES

A SUPER MAN



Unfortunately we are conditioned to accept that when reading any text, especially those containing stories or historical accounts, that there is nothing more to the story than the surface information. We err when viewing Torah accounts in this superficial manner and forfeit God's intended messages. Maimonides expressed this in his Guide. We must be highly sensitive to all Torah portions. Only then, will the questions leap from the pages to our surprise, and delight.

We are told of Pharaoh's enslavement of the Jews, and then his plan to exterminate all males. The Rabbis teach he feared the idolatrously-predicted birth of the Jewish messiah and therefore wished to kill him. Names are disclosed of the midwives who feared God and saved the newborns, whom the Rabbis teach are Moses' mother and sister. This is followed by Moses' birth, but it describes his father and mother as Levites.

Why do we need to know all of this added information?

We read further, and must ask of what significance it is that Moses was "good". Good in what way? He was yet an infant; an early stage where one is incapable of goodness.

What is so vital in Pharaoh's daughter's coinciding bathing and finding the infant Moses; her pity on him; the information that she took him as a "son" – that Moses ended up raised in Pharaoh's palace?

Subsequent to this, the Torah continues with Moses' "going out" to his brothers; his killing of the Egyptian; a second "going out" and the rebellious Dathan and Aviram; Pharaoh's desire to kill him; and Moses' defense of Yisro's daughters after he fled Egypt.

We just completed Genesis, where we learned of God's command to Abraham that he leave his home town. We learned of Joseph's dreams which forced his sale and eventual rise to viceroy status. Whether it is an outright,

Divine decree to Abraham, Joseph's prophetic dreams, or a series of ostensibly "natural" events surrounding Moses, the Torah's record of these accounts intends to communicate important lessons. Not history lessons, but lessons of God's providence and human perfection.

It appears from the sequence that due to needs of that era, God created Moses. Yes, God "created" him Divinely, with his high level of intelligence, like no other man. Maimonides states, "Due to God's love for us and to guard His promise to Abraham our father, God made Moses, the leader of all prophets and sent him... (Laws of Idolatry 1:3 — last words of that chapter)". Moses was necessary at this precise historical moment to function as God's emissary. His timed birth, prematurely, saved him from the Egyptian murderers. And his keen intellect was demanded that he perform the miracles. The fact that he was "good" must refer to his unusually beautiful appearance, also indicating Divine intervention. His parents were of the house of Levi, those immersed in the study of God. This too may have contributed to Moses' development in God's path.

Moses' striking form may have been necessary to appeal to Pharaoh's daughter, that she pitied him and took him in as a son. His beauty could also bolster her ability to violate her father's decree on infant males. I did not see a source, but I wonder if God kept her barren, as the verse indicates to me, taking him in as a son might suggest she had no son prior. Being barren would add to her desire for a child, even a Hebrew.

What demanded Moses be raised among royalty? The following acts of his "going out" to care for his brothers may answer this. For one who is raised with a level of social superiority might be better groomed for his eventual leadership role, and greater ability to confer with kings, as Moses eventually required in connection with Pharaoh. Despite this, Moses did tell God later "Who am I to speak with Pharaoh?" However, this does not mean Moses was not better prepared to do so, through his upbringing. This only refers to his great humility, a perfection. But one can be perfected and humble, yet possess the ability to stand before kings.

"Going out to his brothers" immediately follows the account of Pharaoh's daughter, teaching that one is related, or due, to the other. Moses' "going out" may serve to substantiate that his upbringing successfully offered him leadership abilities. Moses also went out on two occasions, teaching that his concern and ability to lead was not an isolated case. And following this account, we learn of Moses' defense of Yisro's daughters, a third case of Moses' expressed abilities. ■

(continued next page with PHARAOH'S ASTROLOGERS)

PHARAOH'S ASTROLOGERS

In Exodus 1:22, Rashi states that the day Moses was born, Pharaoh's astrologers told him that the Jewish messiah had been born, but they weren't sure whether this messiah was of the Jews or of the Egyptians.

Later in Exod. 2:3, Rashi states that the reason why Moses' mother Yocheved could not hide him anymore, was because the Egyptians counted the months from when Yocheved and her husband remarried, to determine when a new baby would be born, in order to slay him. Since Moses was born three months premature, his mother was able to hide him that length of time. But at the ninth month, she knew that the Egyptians would be visiting to kill Moses.

A number of questions surface:

1) Did or did not the Egyptians know when Moses was born? From the first Rashi, they seemed to know based on astrology, but from the second Rashi, we learn they miscalculated by three months, as they did not include Moses' premature birth in their calculations. If they felt Moses' true birthday was the day the messiah was born, they should have searched Yocheved's home three months earlier than they actually did, on Moses' actual day of birth. Additionally, they should have ceased killing males from that day forward, satisfied in their knowledge that they killed the messiah on that day. The fact that they continued to kill males even after their calculated day of the messiah's birth demonstrated their

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own doubt in their prediction.

2) How can humans know something outside of their sense perception? Is astrology fact or fiction?

3) Why were these astrologers only “certain” about one aspect (that he was born) but they were ignorant of his nationality?

On the one hand, one could side with the Egyptians and state that when they predicted Moses’ birth, it was indeed his birthday. But since he was born three months premature, they didn’t bother searching his mother’s tent, as they assumed whoever was born, was born at nine months. This still shows ignorance. On the other hand it seems more correct to state that the Egyptians really didn’t know anything, and when they stated that the messiah was born, it was a guess, perhaps to maintain their position. Previously, they suggested that Pharaoh’s dreams of the 7 cows represented 7 daughters who would be born and then die. They were wrong here, and in many other cases. But it wasn’t objectively proven that their theory was impossible, so they remained at their posts.

A Rabbi suggested that this might not have been the first time the Egyptian astrologers predicted the birth of a messiah. The astrologers, as in the past, had to produce information to make them credulous, and to keep their positions. If they never inform Pharaoh of news, Pharaoh might dismiss, or even kill them. Thus, they were always under pressure to provide information to Pharaoh. They also had to be sure that any information couldn’t be proved 100% wrong. So when they would make predictions, they would do so either in generalities, or in areas that one can never prove impossible. Alternatively, the astrologers saw that Pharaoh was now subjugating the Jews, as the Jews were more numerous, and possibly could pose a threat to the Egyptians. The astrologers surmised the possibility of an uprising, and weren’t sure whether it would be spearheaded by a Jew or an Egyptian sympathizer. They therefore used rational deduction in their forecast to Pharaoh and told him that it could be either a Jew or Egyptian savior.

The fact that the astrologers could not determine Moses’ nationality, and that the second Rashi implies miscalculation, uncovers their ignorance, and removes any credibility of their astrology. Perhaps this is why Rashi recorded these two stories, to teach that their astrology is a farce. Just as people today cannot read palms, or foretell events, so too was the case in Egypt. Pharaoh positioned astrologers as a source of security to placate him at times when he was in doubt. All that was needed was that Pharaoh believed them. When objective reality could not be ascertained, emotional security filled the gap.

The Radak, as well as the Rabbis, dismiss any truth to the Baales Ov (the witch) in Samuel I, 28:7-19. They deny any reality to this story, and call it all “futility, void, lies, and mockery”. King Saul had visited the Baales Ov to bring up Samuel from the dead. The story on the surface says she did, and that King Saul talked with Samuel. The Radak however quotes the Rabbis and states, “the

Rabbis said three things in regards to conjurers, 1) the one who brings up the dead sees but doesn’t hear the dead person, 2) the one who is in need hears, but sees not the dead, and 3) the ones who do not care either way, neither see nor hear anything.”

Such was the case with King Saul, he was in need, so he imagined hearing Samuel talking. The Baales Ov out of fear of King Saul said she saw Samuel, but didn’t hear, and the two who Saul traveled with, Avner and Amasa, neither saw nor heard a thing.”

What does this prove? It proves that King Saul’s discussion with Samuel was a daydream, a fantasy. Just as sometimes we think we hear someone talking to us or calling our name, all but to turn and see nobody there, so too according to Radak and the Rabbis was this case with King Saul and the Baales Ov. Saul was in such

emotional need and distress, that he thought he heard Samuel. His two men didn’t care, so they heard nothing. And the Baales Ov needed to keep her status, so she feigned seeing him.

As Jews, a rational people, we do not believe knowledge emanates from sorcerers. They are all false. Knowledge emanates from God, and there are specific ways of uncovering this knowledge; careful analysis and rational thinking. Just as the study of physics and all other sciences which are based on principles embedded in the tangible universe require methodology to arrive at concepts, so much more so, the abstract world of ideas disclosed to us through the Torah requires a refined, trained, and rational approach.

It is relatively easy to detect when something is an accurate science. If it follows rational principles, it can be a science. If however, we hear statements such as, “This crease in your palm is long therefore you will live long”, “Wear this red string and you will ward off the evil eye”, or, “There is holiness in one’s beard” – claims with no connection between the causes and suggested effect – these types of statements should be immediately identified as outside the rational

sphere. Blind faith is not an acceptable Torah lifestyle. Even when reading a Rashi, we should look into it and see if it is as clear as rational ideas should be. If not, perhaps he is teaching us something beyond the surface. It is crucial to dismiss any person – gentile or Jew – who makes mystical, unproven claims. I say this, since so many orthodox Jews accept and spread nonsensical notions that are Torah violations. An intelligent person must not look upon one’s exterior, title or his reputation and assume this alone endorses his words as Torah truths. Too many men of authority know how to attract others with phony warmth, and then feed them lies about infallible Rebbes and Tzaddikim, amazing powers, Kabbalistic heresy or that God is found inside each of us. Ideas that please our emotions are typically false. To learn God’s true teachings, refer to the Torah and our leaders like the Prophets and great minds like Maimonides. But in no way is it wise to blindly accept anyone today based on externals, certain when he violates Torah verses. ■

Baseless respect for all things ancient teamed with a desire for fantasy, dupe today’s Jews into believing Pharaoh’s astrologers possessed powers. Yet, all science and Torah teaches otherwise: there exists only God and His natural laws. Astrology has never been proven, for it claims methods that conflict with nature. Just as we do not risk our income based on astrological or mystical beliefs, we must equally not treat our Judaism with such carelessness.



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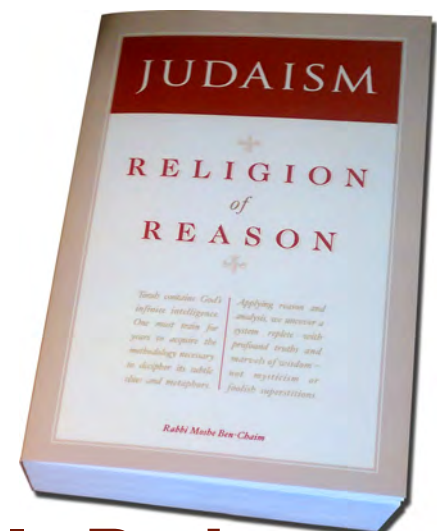
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**Is Bashert
a truth?**

What is GOD?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Moses wished to know God's true nature. God responded, "For man cannot know me and live (Exod. 33:20)." However, we must be capable of knowing something concerning God, since the first of His Ten Commandments is to accept that He is our God (Exod. 20:2).

This command refers to knowing that God is the sole cause of the universe. It refers to knowing His 'role', not His incomprehensible essence. Man is naturally perplexed by the fact that God always existed. This perplexity must be understood before we approach an answer.

By nature, people assume there exists only that, which they can fully explain. Thus, if something is incomprehensible, it is viewed as impossible. This assumption is easily removed. For we know what color is. Yet a blind person cannot fathom it. We do not say that colors do not exist since the blind person cannot fathom this concept. Similarly, we must not assume God required a creator before Him, simply because we cannot grasp His not having a beginning. All existences except God are restricted in this manner: nothing can create itself, and therefore, everything requires creation. However, God's existence is not accidental. Creation does not warrant existence, until God decided to create. And even after its creation, the universe cannot endure without God's 'continued' will. This dependence upon God for creation and continued existence is what we mean by accidental existence. Nothing exists of its own. It continually requires God's external will.

In contrast, God's existence is essential. Meaning, His nature is such, that He always existed. God expressed this to Moses upon his request to identify God when relating his mission to the Jews in Egypt. God said My name is "I am that I am (Exod. 3:14)." A wise Rabbi explained this to mean "I am the One who exists by My very nature; I did not need to be created like all else". The Rabbi explained this would be evidence that Moses truly received prophecy from the Creator. For no man would arrive at such an idea of an eternal being based on the natural operation of the universe; nothing in creation indicates such an idea. Therefore, when Moses related this new concept; this explanation of God's nature and His "name", Moses was accepted as having truly received prophecy. The Jews confirmed he must have been taught this idea from a source outside of nature: by God Himself.

It is only due to our natures and based on all that we see, that we find it troublesome to accept that God had no beginning. Everything else does!

God addresses this: "I am the first and I am the last and aside from Me there is no other god (Isaiah 44:6)." Based on Revelation at Sinai, we know the entire Torah including Prophets and Writings to be

true. Thus, God did in fact precede all else: He has no beginning. But we can also answer this based on reason, not only God's authority.

If we assume God to have a creator, we must be consistent and believe that creator also required yet another, previous creator. We must then say God was created by "Z", and "Z" was created by "Y", and "Y" by "X", in an infinite series traveling back in time without a beginning. The problem is, we thereby suggest there never was a first cause. And without a first cause, the process never started. Stop and think about that.

It follows that nothing could exist. For if something never started, if we never arrive at a first, if there was never a "first cause" for all else...there would be absolute nothingness.

However, reason forces us to accept a First Cause, what we call God. Although a being without a beginning is incomprehensible, reality cannot be otherwise.

We cannot understand "what" God is, and therefore, we cannot understand "how" He exists. Nonetheless, we know that He must exist, and that He is the sole cause of all that we witness. We say a "sole" cause, because the concept of something being "first" is synonymous with exclusivity. This explains why our morning prayers refer to God as the Creator: "Baruch Sh'Amar", "Blessed [is the one] who spoke and the world came into existence." Understanding and accepting this truth, we fulfill the first of the Ten Commandments, to know that God – the Creator – exists.

And as He alone gave each creation existence and its various properties, we know that Revelation at Sinai was His act. Since nothing else controls the universe, nothing but God is responsible for that miraculous event. God is the Creator, and the author of the Torah.

What is God? He is the sole cause of the universe and the One who gave us the Torah. Knowing this, we will find complete harmony between the natural world and Torah ideas. It is for this reason that our greatest Rabbis taught us to use the universe as a means for accepting religious ideas. If something is not witnessed by our senses, or reasonable to our minds, then it cannot be part of Torah. This demands that we do not accept other religions' and many Jews' beliefs in powers and forces other than God; this being the second of the Ten Commandments, not to accept other powers and gods. We do not accept such beliefs precisely because the universe has no evidence of such powers. The Torah instructs man in this fashion, to view the natural world and Torah in harmony: "For God is the Governor of heaven above and the Earth below; there is nothing else (Deut. 4:39)." ■

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by Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim, Founder Mesora.org

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He is absolutely opposed to all forms of "mysticism" and seeks to debunk all practices and beliefs which are rooted in superstition or are contrary to reason. This collection of writings covers a wide variety of topics that are of interest to contemporary Jews. It also contains insightful analyses of Biblical narratives as well as the underlying significance and relevance of many mitzvot.

Rabbi Ben-Chaim demonstrates that Judaism can be harmonized with human reason. Indeed he asserts that one can only understand and appreciate Judaism by analyzing it in a logical manner in order to elucidate its deeper ideas. He is not afraid to ask the most penetrating and challenging questions because he is absolutely convinced that Torah is the Word of God and thus based on the highest form of wisdom.

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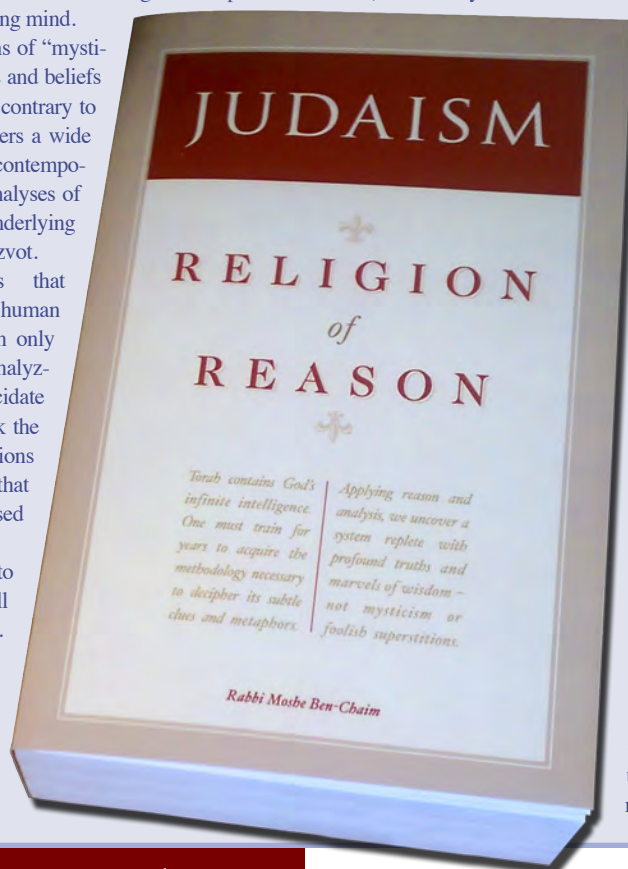


RABBI STEVEN WEIL

Executive Vice President, The Orthodox Union

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim has followed in the footsteps of the great Medieval Rishonim (Rambam, R. Avraham ben HaRambam, etc.) in trying to explain, define and lay out the world outlook of Torah and the philosophy of Judaism in rational, logical terms. Rabbi Ben-Chaim asks critical, crucial and defining questions that any thinking Jew needs to ask. He is extremely critical of approaches to Judaism that superimpose external methodologies (such as mysticism, other religions) and project primitive emotions onto the

Almighty. Although one can disagree with some of the conclusions; his approach, his questions and method enable the reader to explore and engage our theology in a meaningful and serious way. When Chazal employ certain terms and convey certain images, the student is forced to conceptualize, extract and deduce profound psychological and philosophical principles. Unfortunately, many take Chazal at face value or project onto Chazal, motives and rationalizations they never meant. Rabbi Ben-Chaim following the method of the Rishonim, forces us to define, weigh and analyze each word and phrase of Chazal. Rabbi Ben-Chaim shows there is no contradiction between a serious investigation of Science and a serious investigation of Judaism. Rabbi Ben-Chaim has written a work that addresses the thinking, seeking person of all faiths. This work speaks to the scholar and lay person alike. Once again, one may not agree with specifics within the book but at the same time will appreciate it and gain insight into how the great Rishonim define how we view the world. Rabbi Ben-Chaim's website, Mesora.org is a very serious tool and resource for thinking human beings who want to engage and explore the Almighty, the Almighty's universe and do so within the realm of wisdom, rationality and intellectual honesty.



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SHEMOT

RABBI BERNIE FOX

Avraham's prophecy of his descendants' exile and oppression

And the children of Israel were fruitful and had many children. And they multiplied and became very mighty. And the land was filled with them. (Shemot 1:7)

The opening pesukim of Sefer Shemot list the sons of Yaakov. The Chumash explains that Yosef and his brothers died in Egypt and that in Egypt in exile, Bnai Yisrael grew into a large and mighty nation.

Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno explains that during the lifetime of Yosef and his brothers, Bnai Yisrael emulated the example of these tzadikim – righteous individuals. The people were committed to lives of truth and morality and their descendants emulated them. However, with the passing of these inspirational characters, the behavior of their descendants began to deteriorate. This moral corruption was responsible for their bondage. In other words, Bnai Yisrael became enslaved to the Egyptians as a consequence of their abandonment of the values of their ancestors.

Sforno does acknowledge that the exile of Bnai Yisrael was the realization of a Divine decree upon the Jewish people. It was predetermined. However, this decree did not include bondage and suffering. The suffering of Bnai Yisrael in Egypt was a punishment for the sinful behavior of the people.

Sforno's position presents an obvious problem. Earlier, in Parshat Lech Lecha, Hashem revealed to Avraham that his descendants would be exiled to a foreign land; they would be oppressed in that land, and finally, they would be redeemed. This prophecy was a reference to the exile in Egypt. This prophecy seems to contradict Sforno's contention that the oppression experienced by Bnai Yisrael was not preordained. If the bondage and oppression was not predetermined, how could Hashem tell Avraham that his children would suffer Egypt?

Sforno explains that Hashem's message to Avraham does not indicate that the fate of the people was preordained. They sinned of their

own volition and this behavior caused the bondage. Hashem knows the future with complete clarity and through means we cannot understand. Hashem's knowledge does not imply preordination.

This explanation reconciles Hashem's message to Avraham with Sforno's contention that bondage and suffering were not preordained. However, the answer gives rise to a further question. Why then did Hashem share this information with Avraham? If the bondage and oppression of Bnai Yisrael were not preordained, why did Hashem include these elements in His description of the nation's future?



Sforno responds that this message was given to Avraham for transmission to his descendants. The prophecy would serve as evidence that the suffering of the people was not merely an arbitrary nuance of fate. Hashem had revealed to Avraham that this punishment would occur. Because of this

revelation, the people would know that their suffering was not the result of chance events. They would know that Hashem was aware of and had foretold their oppression. This would lead them to search for the reason for their suffering and hopefully to the realization that the deterioration in the nation's relationship with G-d was the basis for the bondage. This would suggest a means to end the suffering. Repentance could save the people. Without the message transmitted through Avraham, the people might conclude that they were the victims of political or sociological forces and that repentance could not help. Avraham's prophecy disproved this assumption.

Moshe was the first prophet to act as Hashem's spokesman

And Moshe answered: They will not believe me and they will not obey my voice. For they will say, "Hashem has not appeared to you." (Shemot 4:1)

Hashem directs Moshe to address Bnai Yisrael. He is to reveal to them his mission. He is to tell them that Hashem will redeem them from Egypt. Through Moshe, Hashem will take Bnai Yisrael out of Egypt and lead them to the Land of Israel. Moshe protests. The people will not follow him. They will not believe that Hashem has spoken to him. Certainly, they will not follow him through the wilderness to the Land of Israel.

Moshe's objections are difficult to understand. Moshe was not the first prophet. Hashem had spoken to the forefathers and others. None of these prophets raised Moshe's objections. They did not contend that their prophecies would be denied or that they would be dismissed as madmen. Why did Moshe bring up these issues?

Maimonides deals with this question in his Moreh Nevuchim. He offers an amazing answer. Maimonides begins by explaining that Moshe's objections were completely appropriate. He was to represent himself as Hashem's emissary. The nation should require Moshe to provide credentials. They would be fools if they followed Moshe without proof of his authenticity. Moshe recognized the legitimacy of Bnai Yisrael's suspicions.

Therefore, he asked Hashem to provide him with the means to verify his authenticity.

Based on this analysis, Maimonides reformulates our question. We cannot

(continued next page)

criticize Moshe's concerns. However, we must ask a different question. Why did previous prophets not raise these issues? Why did Avraham not ask Hashem for some means to confirm his authenticity?

Maimonides explains that Moshe was different from previous prophets. Previous prophets received prophecies aimed at guiding them towards their own personal perfection. Alternatively, their prophecies provided knowledge of their destiny or the future of their progeny. The people did not require these prophets to prove their authenticity. They did not speak to the people in the name of Hashem. Maimonides further explains that Avraham did not speak to humanity as Hashem's spokesman. He addressed humankind as a teacher. He provided instruction based upon reason and argument. He presented rational proofs for his theology and philosophy. Therefore, Avraham did not need to prove his prophetic status to the people. He never insisted that he be followed and obeyed as Hashem's spokesman. Moshe was the first prophet instructed to address a nation on behalf of Hashem. Moshe was to reveal Hashem's will and act as His spokesman. Moshe needed proof. He was confronted with a different and new mission. This mission required that he prove his authenticity.

Moshe's bewilderment with Hashem's silence

And Moshe returned to Hashem and he said: G-d, why have you mistreated this nation? Why have you sent me? (Shemot 5:22)

Moshe goes to Paroh. He tells Paroh that Hashem has commanded Bnai Yisrael to go out to the wilderness and worship Him. Paroh refuses to allow Bnai Yisrael to travel into the wilderness or worship Hashem. Furthermore, Paroh increases the burden of Bnai Yisrael. He demands more labor from them. Moshe is troubled by this outcome. In our pasuk, Moshe addresses Hashem. He recounts that Hashem told him that Bnai Yisrael would be redeemed. He sent him to Paroh to demand their freedom. Moshe had dutifully followed Hashem's directions. However, he had failed to achieve any positive result. Instead, Moshe's actions had increased the suffering of the nation! How can this outcome be reconciled with Hashem's promise to redeem His nation?

The commentaries are troubled by Moshe's question. Hashem had revealed to Moshe that Paroh would not acquiesce to his request. Paroh would only relent as a result of overpowering plagues. Moshe should not have been surprised by Paroh's response. The required plagues had not yet begun!

Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra offers an interesting response. The final redemption would be the exodus from Egypt. Moshe understood that this ultimate step would require overwhelming force. Moshe understood that this final stage of rescue had not yet arrived. However, Moshe expected some immediate improvement in the condition of Bnai Yisrael. In other words, he assumed that redemption would be a process. The final step would only be secured through the plagues. But the process would begin immediately. Therefore, Moshe was shocked by the deterioration in Bnai Yisrael's condition.

Nachmanides explains Moshe's question differently. Moshe understood that Paroh would only respond to force. He was not surprised that Paroh increased his torment of the Jewish people. But he was shocked that Hashem did not respond and punish Paroh. Moshe expected the plagues to begin immediately. Instead, Hashem was silent. Moshe was puzzled. If the time had come for redemption, let the process begin. If the moment of redemption had not yet arrived, why had he been sent to Egypt? Moshe had spoken to the people of their salvation but not produced any positive results. This could only undermine Moshe's credibility. ■

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A Different View of Mercy

Rabbi Dr. Darrell Ginsberg



Throughout the Torah, we see a shift between two prominent names of God – “Hashem” and “Elokim”. To the secular scholar, this change implies the Torah was not of Divine origin, but the product of different authors. Without a methodology to understand Torah or a firm grasp of the mesora, it is easy to see why this type of conclusion is reached. As Jews, we know it is one of the fundamental tenets of our faith that the Torah indeed was given from God at Har Sinai. We also know that what makes Judaism unique from other religions is our dedication to the empowering of the mind, to constantly furthering our intellectual development. As such, the fact that the change in names takes place requires elucidation. In Parshas Shemos, an example of the switch between names affords us an opportunity to gain a greater insight into the way God manifests Himself to the Jewish people and the world (please note that the objective of this article is NOT to offer a universal formula applicable to all such instances).

During God’s first revelation to Moshe, Moshe hides his faces after the initial communication. The Torah continues (Shemos 3:7):

“Hashem said, “I have indeed seen the suffering of My people that are in Egypt. I have heard how they cry out because [of the harshness] of their slave-masters, and I am aware of their pain.”

The Ramban (ibid) notes that this is the first time in this section that God reveals Himself as “Hashem” (meaning the four letters), rather than as “Elokim”. To understand his question, we need to look at the beginning of this section.

The rise of the new king in Egypt portends a new chapter in the developing plan to redeem the Jews from Egypt (ibid 2: 23-25):

“A long time passed and the king of Egypt died. The B’nei Yisrael moaned because of their enslavement, and they cried. Their plea about their enslavement went up to God (haElokim). Elokim heard their groaning and Elokim remembered His covenant with Avraham, with Yitzchok and with Yaakov. Elokim saw the B’nei Yisrael, and Elokim took knowledge of them.”

We see throughout this description the use of “Elokim” instead of “Hashem” and it is this break in the trend that is being referenced by the Ramban. We must understand what it was at this moment, during the prophecy of Moshe that causes this switch to take place.

There is another subtle but equally important comment offered by Rabbeinu Chananel (ibid). As we know, the name “Elokim” refers to the attribute of Justice as manifested by God, while “Hashem” refers the attribute of Mercy. In general, we tend to view these as distinct ideas without overlap. Therefore, one could assume that in the quoted verses above, the attribute of Justice is the underlying idea behind God’s decision to now initiate the redemption. Interestingly, Rabbeinu Chananel writes that in this case, “Elokim had mercy on them.” He seems to be indicating here that there was some conjoining of these two attributes,

(continued next page)

or that God's Justice was merciful. If this is the case, then the delineation is not as clear as once thought. This is also somewhat problematic according to the Ramban – the specific name of “Hashem” was not used here, but God was still applying some type of mercy. Therefore, the change to “Hashem” would not seem to be as noteworthy. And, more importantly, how do we understand the idea of merciful Justice versus acting Mercifully (or pure mercy)? After all, it would be absurd to maintain that God's Mercy is unjust!

When we take a closer look at the verses, we see that when God “heard their groaning,” He “remembered His covenant with Avraham, with Yitzchok and with Yaakov ...” In other words, it was the covenant, the “guarantee” God made with the avos, that was the impetus for His involvement. The idea of abiding by a covenant is not an idea of mercy, but one of justice – a pretty clear and obvious deduction. In this instance, God saw the covenant in danger of being destroyed, and therefore began the process of the redemption. What about the idea of being merciful alongside the name

“Elokim”? There are two possible threats that can bring about the ideological destruction of Bnai Yisrael, thereby negating the bris. The first comes from within the nation. In Egypt, there was a distinct possibility that the Jewish people would become idolatrous, assimilating into the surrounding environs, accepting upon themselves a religious system anathema to Judaism. Had this been the scenario, there would be no feature of mercy expressed in judgment. The other possibility is an external threat, a force outside the people threatening its very existence. In the case of the Jewish people in Egypt, their bondage had entered a new phase. They were not just suffering from the physical torment of being enslaved. Their very existence as Jews was in danger. We see this idea clearly in the Haggada, as we analyze the Sifrei and recount the different types of suffering encountered by the Jews (Devarim 26:7) – “We prayed to Hashem, God of our forefathers, and Hashem accepted our prayer, and perceived our oppression, and our labor, and the pressure upon us (lachatzeinu).” The Ritva explains that the Egyptians, after failing to decrease the population of the Jews by killing the male children, resorted to a different method --they began to try to assimilate the Jewish people into their own religion. The reality that the danger to the religion was coming from outside the Jewish people could be expressed in the characteristic of “mercy” being applied to “Elokim”. The idea of mercy here is stressing that the danger was not due to the

Jewish people rejecting God, but to having a philosophy which rejects God forced upon them.

At this point, the Ramban's observation would seem to be more difficult to understand – after all, it seems like the same idea could have been conveyed using the formula of Rabbeinu Channanel. We must posit that the change to “Hashem” was a qualitative change, but what did it reflect? The idea of mercy as perceived by the world at large is usually associated with leniency in punishment, assisting the dis-advantaged, and a plethora of other examples. In many instances, the reference to Hashem evokes these very types of actions. However, there is an application of the idea of mercy that may be unfamiliar to some. The Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 1:54) offers a well-known explanation as to Moshe's famous request from God, when engaging God after the sin of the Golden Calf, to “show me Your glory.” Moses's personality was unique in that he was constantly striving for more knowledge, a perpetual yediyas Hashem. Nothing sums this up more than this request. Moses asks God for more knowledge, knowl-

edge of His actions and His essence.

God responds that it is impossible for man to know His essence, but that he will reveal to Moshe the knowledge of His actions. Further explanation is required as to this back and forth, but there is one interesting detail that is pertinent to our topic. In the conversation Moshe has with God, the name “Hashem” is used, connoting Mercy. In other words, the fact that God allows for man the opportunity to know more about Him, to gain in insights, is indeed within the category, if not the paradigm, of Mercy. This could

be the reason for the

switch from “Elokim” to “Hashem”. When describing the overall plan for the redemption of the Jewish people to Moshe (Shemos 3:8), God explains that “I have descended to free them from the hand of Egypt...” Onkelos explains that “descended” means God is revealing Himself in freeing the Jews from Egypt. Within the plan to save the Jews is an element that need not necessarily be present. The redemption could have been the complete annihilation of the Egyptian people, with the Jews simply walking out of Egypt. Instead, God was using the redemption as an opportunity to allow the Jewish people to gain insights into Him. They would see God as Creator of the universe, manifest through his control of nature. They would see God as melech elyon, the one and only King. They would be afforded an opportunity into yediyas Hashem – knowledge of God – and this opportunity is indeed an act of mercy from God. ■



Exodus, 4:1-9: “And Moses answered and said, ‘They (the Jews) will not believe in me and they will not listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘God did not appear to you.’ And God said to him, ‘What is in your hand?’ and he said, ‘A staff.’ And He said, ‘Throw it to the ground’, and he threw it to the ground, and it became a serpent. And Moses fled from before it. And God said to Moses, ‘Send forth your hand and grasp it by its tail’. And he sent forth his hand and he seized it, and it was a staff in his palm. ‘In order that they believe you, that God appeared to you, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And God said to him, ‘Further, bring now your hand into your chest’, and he brought his hand into his chest, and he took it out, and behold his hand was leprous as snow. And He said, ‘Return your hand to your chest’, and he returned his hand to his chest, and he took it out, and behold, it returned to its flesh. ‘And it will be if they do not believe you, and they do not listen to the voice of the first sign, then they will listen to the voice of the second sign. And it will be if they do not listen to also these two signs, and they do not listen to your voice, and you will take from the waters of the Nile, and you will spill it onto the dry land, and it will be that the water that you take from the Nile, and it will be blood on the dry land.’”



MOSES SIGNS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

God instructs Moses on his mission to free the Jews. God then responds to Moses' doubt of the Jews' conviction in his divine appointment, by giving him three signs. These signs will prove God's appearance to him. A number of questions arise. Before reading further, take time to review the verses above, and discuss them with others. Simply reading on will remove your opportunity to engage in the process of learning and the use of your own thought. This process is how we become better Torah students, thereby refining our own thinking for future study. It is also an enjoyable activity. The Torah was purposefully written in a cryptic style so as to engage the mind in this most prized activity of analysis, induction, deduction and thought - our true purpose where the rewards are unmatched, both here, and in the next world. Once you have spent due time reviewing the issues, feel free to read the questions enumerated below, and our possible answers.

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Questions

1. The sign of blood is said to be the ultimate proof of God's directive. How does this sign surpass the others?

2. If blood is more convincing than a staff turning into a serpent, or leprosy, why not instruct Moses to perform the blood sign first? Three signs would then not be necessary!

3. What are the ideas conveyed through each specific sign? Why were these three selected?

4. Why does God give Moses signs easily "duplicated" by the magicians?

5. What is meant by the "voice" of each sign?

6. In both, the transformation of a staff into a serpent and Nile water into blood, neither takes place until both objects reach the ground, as it says, "and he threw it to the ground, and it became a serpent", and "it will be blood on the dry land." What is the reason for this "miracle at a distance"?

7. Why do the first two signs "return" to their original objects? What need does this serve?

8. Why is Moses requested to "conceal" his hand in order for it to become leprous? God could certainly make him leprous without him concealing it.

9. In contrast to the sign of blood where God tells Moses what will happen to the Nile's waters before the sign's performance, why does God not tell Moses what will happen to the staff or his hand before those miracles?

10. What will the Jews learn when they hear Moses referring to God as "the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"?

We must say the following: the reason for three signs is twofold; 1) God wished the viewer to be convinced of His appointment of Moses with minimal, emotional amazement; and 2) God wished this from everyone, as additional signs of less deniability accompany the first. God knows what the most convincing sign is, i.e., blood, but He desired it come last in the sequence. As Rabbi Mann teaches, God desires we use our minds.

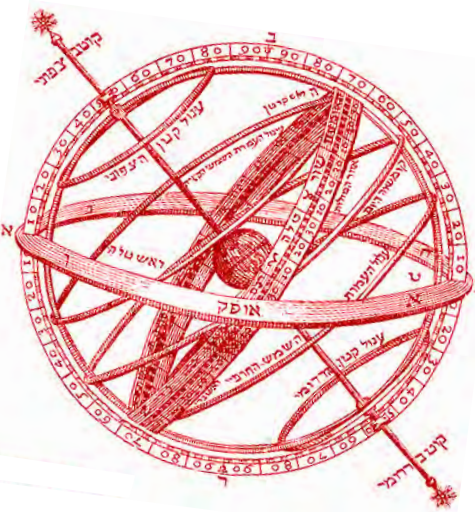
Action at a Distance

It is for this very reason that additional features are found in these signs. I refer here to the fact that both the staff, and the Nile's waters transformed only once on the ground. It is not the ground that is essential here, but the "distance" between Moses' hand and the transformation. All magicians require tactile control of their manipulated objects. Without physical contact, they cannot create illusions through sleight of hand. However, Moses' objects did not transform, while in his hand,

but only once distanced from his control. "Distance" teaches that this was not sleight of hand; his hand was nowhere near the transformation! These signs could only be explained as true miracles, as God's actions.

Magic Does Not Exist

Sforno on Exod. 4:3 cites Talmud Sanhedrin 67b: (Responding to the plague of lice, and their inability to mimic it) "Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'this is the finger of God.' This proves that a magician cannot produce a creature less than a barley corn in size. [Strengthening this first position] Rav Pappa said, 'By God, he cannot produce something even as large as a camel! [So what does it mean that a magician cannot produce a creature less than a barley corn?] [It means] these that are larger than a barley corn, he can collect, and produce the illusion that he has magically created them." This Talmudic portion teaches that the human hand cannot control that which is too small.



Sleight of hand was known in the times of the Talmud, and in Egypt's times. All magic is illusory. What these Egyptians performed by hand was quicker than the eye, but only when the object was large enough to manipulate. Our Rabbis did not accept that any powers exist outside natural laws. God is the only One capable of altering natural law – only He created it, only He controls it. Saadia Gaon too stated that the Egyptian's blood trick was performed by the use of colored dyes, and the frogs leaped out of the Nile by their use of chemicals that frogs repel. Sforno also states that the Egyptian's snakes had no movement, i.e., they were not real. Moses' staff transformed into a "nachash", not the lifeless "tanin" of the Egyptians. The difference in terms indicates to Sforno, a difference in the two performances.

Blood

Blood is the source of life. When one sees water transformed into blood, one realizes that life itself is in God's hands. This strikes at the core of any person's greatest fear: his death. Additionally, its creation from the Nile disputed the Nile's position of grandeur. But as God wishes we come to know Him by the use of our higher nature - our intellect - He did not order the blood sign first in sequence. God offers a person the chance to rise to a higher level by following his mind. With a minimalist performance, man has the opportunity to exercise his thinking, and derive truths concerning God's will (His appointment of Moses) and His very existence.

Creation: Arrived at Through Reason

I digress to focus your attention on a related and essential idea: God's position as the Creator – the most important concept. Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed", Book II, (end of Chap XXV): "...Owing to the absence of all proof, we reject the theory of the Eternity of the Universe; and it is for this very reason that the noblest minds spent, and will spend their days in research. For if the Creation had been demonstrated by proof, even if only according to the Platonic hypothesis, all arguments of the philosophers against us would be of no avail. If, on the other hand, Aristotle had a proof for his theory, the whole teaching of Scripture would be rejected, and we should be forced to other opinions. I have thus shown that all depends on this question. Note it."

Maimonides teaches, "all depends on this question". What does he mean? I believe him to mean that by design, God wished that our conviction of this most central idea – God as Creator – must be arrived at through thought, and understanding, not through amazement at marvelous feats. In other words, our recognition of God as the Creator 'must' be apprehended through our reasoning. This is the highest form of recognition of God, and the preferred method to knowing Him, and His works. "All depends on this question," means that proof of Creation was purposefully left to the realm of the "philosophical", and not to "emotional" via astonishing, miraculous displays. It is easy to witness a miracle, and be convinced, but in such a case, our mind forfeits the exercise of reasoning - THE mark of man's perfection. It is fitting that man use his crowned capacity in the pursuit

(continued next page)

of this question, of God as the Creator. I now return to our topic.

The Serpent and Leprosy

Before resorting to blood, why did the staff transform into a serpent? On the surface, both the staff and a serpent have similar appearances, they are narrow, elongated shapes. Once transformed into a serpent, the viewer might second-guess what he saw, "Was it in fact a staff before hand, or was it a serpent in some stiffened state?" Control of one's emotions and clear thinking are required so as not to dismiss a miracle. Moses was given these signs for the very reason that the Jews might be bent on disbelief in God's appointment of Moses. Hence, subsequent to a sign, the Jews might seek to explain away the miracle. To say the very minimum about this specific sign, it teaches that God controls life. He can turn a lifeless staff into a living organism. God's control of life would appear to offer the most impact on the Jews. Therefore God's signs were indications of His control of life. But this was yet animal life. More impressive, was Moses' hand becoming leprous. Here, God sought to teach that He controls human life. He does so in the negative (becoming leprous) as well as the positive (healing of Moses' leprosy). The fact that Moses own hand was smitten, may serve to teach again that it was not Moses who created such a feat, as one would not risk self injury. Similarly, one would not create a dangerous serpent.

Another observation of the serpent and leprosy is that the transformation into a serpent displays God's control over the "matter" of creation, while leprosy displays His control of His "laws" of creation. Transforming a staff into a serpent displays God's control over matter itself. Disease has a natural process. Moses' leprous hand displays that God controls "how" things behave. These two, initial signs bear witness to God control of both aspects of Creation: of matter, and laws governing that matter.

Perhaps, in order to minimize the affect of "astonishment", God instructed Moses to first conceal his hand before it became leprous. For if a hand became leprous in plain sight, it would overwhelm the viewer, prohibiting his mind from fully functioning. This feat would startle him. Therefore, God told Moses to hide his hand. God also gave Moses signs easily "duplicated" by

the Egyptians. And as Rabbi Mann taught, this was so the viewer use intelligence to discern true miracles of God, from man's sleight of hand. We may also suggest that the "voice" of each sign refers to the underlying "concept" derived by the mind, as opposed to the feat per se. God wished the viewer to understand each sign's message – their "voice".

Why did the first two signs return to their original forms? This may also be a practical issue, that Moses may once again perform these signs.

Why does God not tell Moses what will happen to the staff or his hand before those miracles? Mindful that God enabled these signs as a "response" to Moses' concern that he be validated, perhaps God did not inform Moses of the sign until it happened for good reason: God wished that Moses sense the effects of a these signs, just like the Jews. By experiencing the sign without advance warning, Moses could identify with the perception and emotional impact afforded the Jews through these signs. Thereby, Moses' "first hand" knowledge gave him the security in these signs. God answered his concern in a primary fashion. He now knew how the Jews would react to these signs - that they were impressive. Had God told Moses what was about to happen, his expectation would lessen the emotional impact of these signs.

The Fulfillment of God's Promise

Our final question was, "What will the Jews learn when they hear Moses referring to God as "the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? I believe this may serve to illustrate God's consistent kindness. As Moses was God's emissary for the Redemption, the Jews would be more inclined to accept this news and Moses' role, by recalling how God favored their ancestors, and not just on one occasion, but throughout the lifetimes of many individuals. The Redemption was not a deviation, disbelieved by the Jews, but it was consistent with the manner in which God relates to His people; to His prophets' descendants. We learn from this that God saw it necessary even prior to the act of redemption, that the Jews required a psychological conviction in God's forthcoming salvation. This state of mind was necessary, and God reassured the Jews of His unchanging kindness through this statement. ■

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THE NEW PHARAOH

This week we begin the Book of Shemot which describes the slavery of the Jews and their transformation into a “kingdom of Priests and Holy Nation.” It is difficult to comprehend how the offspring of Jacob and Joseph could be so ill-treated by the Egyptians. Enumerating the factors which led to the enslavement, the verse states, “A new King arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.” It is interesting to note

that not everyone takes this statement literally. A great Talmudic Sage learns that this is a reference to the old Pharaoh who adopted a “new” attitude. At first glance the notion that the Pharaoh whose dreams Joseph had interpreted was the one who initiated the enslavement is mind boggling. Are we to believe that the King who elevated Joseph to the most exalted position in Egypt, and enthusiastically welcomed his father and brothers to reside in the land’s choicest location would seek to crush their descendants in such a cruel manner?

Unfortunately we must answer in the affirmative and seek to learn the lessons contained in this interpretation.

One of the least attractive human character traits is the inability to

appreciate the favors of others. The worst expression of this flaw is when someone repays a kindness with evil. We have all experienced this on some level. Sometimes

we go out of our way and make an enormous sacrifice to benefit someone. A really big favor can spell the end of a friendship. The recipient of our kindness may not just fail to be gracious but may even resent and turn against us.

Jewish history illustrates the popular saying that “no good deed ever goes unpunished.” Many kings invited the Jews into their countries and granted them special privileges in order to profit from their commercial and other talents. Over time the economic prosperity they engendered aroused envy and led to persecution and even expulsion. This pattern was repeated many times. We were banished from England, Spain and other lands which benefitted greatly from the Jewish presence. The most egregious example of this phenomenon is Nazi Germany. Hitler accused the Jews of being a fifth column and “stabbing Germany in the back.” Yet no group was as loyal and contributed more to the economic, scientific and cultural advancement of Germany than the Jews. Will it be different in America? Jews have participated extensively in the civil rights struggles of persecuted groups. As animosity towards Israel increases it will be interesting to see whether they will join us in solidarity toward the Jewish State.

The Rabbi who learned that the “new” King was actually the old Pharaoh formulated a compelling insight into the deeper recesses of the human psyche. He was urging us not to put our faith in man whose vanity and selfishness is boundless. When Pharaoh needed Joseph he gave him great power and opened his land to his family. However, he was incapable of genuine gratitude for he regarded himself as a deity. It was a blow to his pride to be dependent on a Jew for survival. As the calamity of the famine receded he began to downplay the magnitude of Joseph’s achievement. The Jews were a reminder of a dark period in his history which he needed to forget. Engaging in what psychologists call “reaction formation” he viewed the Jews as enemies of the state who must be subdued. There is much we can learn from this as individuals and as a people. Compassion must be practiced with wisdom and restraint. Let us never assume that our good deeds will be appreciated or bring us special favor. Let us perform kindness and righteousness for its own sake with full confidence that the ultimate reward is from Hashem. ■

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