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Small Country; Big Heart

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Torah's Sequence

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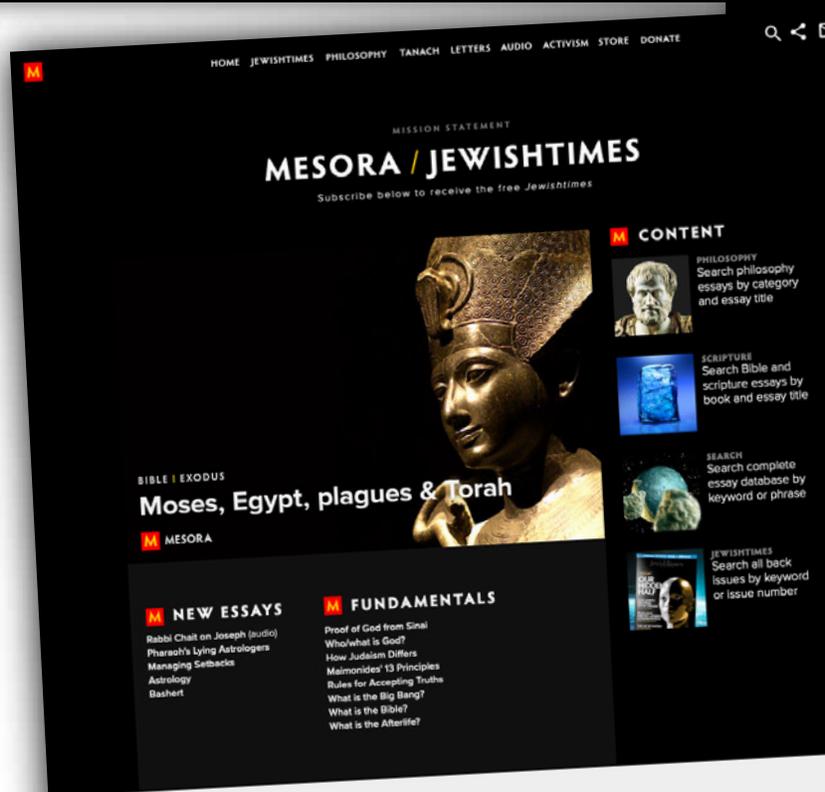
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MORE BELOW

Kindness: As equals, all humans must treat others as we wish to be treated. Charity, kindness and justice demand we rise above personal and selfish emotions and recognize that God made others as He made ourselves. Doing so creates harmony, and earns His kindness.

Racism: A Lie: Man descends from Adam. **Black/white twins** unveil the lie of racism. Bible denounces it: Moses' wife was black, our kings married Egyptians and Messiah descends from Moabites. "Better is the day of death than the day of birth" (Ecc. 7:1). Birth doesn't define us; how we live does.

Insecurity: Man's insecurities can be false, but reality is greater, as it is truth. Man seeks security about his future, accepting fallacies like astrology, amulets, omens, horoscopes and others. God prohibited such practices precisely because they are false. God is more powerful than false notions. Rely on Him alone.

Happiness: Many think wealth and success secure happiness. But Torah teaches happiness stems from study. When pursuing wisdom, one is most happy as Torah offers childlike amazement at every turn. Study offers the daily novelty necessary to retain interest and the depth that offers amazement.

Pleasing Others: Don't seek approval over truth. Torah says, "What can man do to me?" (Psalms 56:5). "Don't fear man" (Deut. 1:7). "Desist from man whose soul is in his nostrils, for what is he considered?" (Isaiah 2:22). Mortal attention is irrelevant. Following God earns all goodness.

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"Research all religions and you will trace back to a date when their fabrication suddenly appeared, while history is bereft of such stories. But Torah details Israel's ancestry, descendants, census, journeys and dates. A chain of unanimous transmission of events validates Torah. Judaism is not traceable to a story, but to real events and mass witnesses."

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Q&As

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

Parental Influence

QUESTION: "And Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was barren; and the Lord responded to him, and his wife Rebecca conceived" (Gen. 25:21).

Rashi comments:

"The Lord responded to him and not to her, because there is no comparison between the prayer of a righteous person who is the son of a righteous person (Isaac) and the prayer of a righteous person the child of a wicked-person (Rebecca). Therefore God allowed Himself to be entreated of him and not of her (Yevamos 64a)."

Question: Does the righteousness or corruption of our ancestors (something we can't control) affect our standing with Hashem?

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RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT: A righteous person whose father is righteous can fulfill his full potential, whereas one whose father is wicked, cannot. This does not discount the great reward one receives whose origins were wicked and battled negative influences to become righteous. However, the righteous person whose father is righteous benefited from the greatest influence throughout his life. All things being equal, the righteous person whose father is righteous will be a greater person. Similarly, King Solomon says in the beginning of his book Koheles that he was “son of David.” He intended to convey that the reader should pay heed to his words because both he and his father were great intellects, and such lineage secures greater teachers.

Isaac was the second in the chain of the Mesora (transmission); a capacity of the greatest importance. In this vital role of molding Jacob who would be the third in this chain of the patriarchs, to create Jacob’s full potential, it was vital that Isaac play the primary role. Thus, his prayer—and not Rebecca’s—was answered.

The role of the Baalei Mesora—transmitters of the Torah—namely the patriarchs, was an infinite mission [all possibilities to cultivate the greatest good for the nation lie ahead]. To bring about the greatest potential in Jacob, a righteous person (Isaac) whose father was righteous, was vital; infinite [optimal] righteousness was demanded from the forerunners of all future generations. Isaac was to train Jacob to bring about infinite possibilities [optimal good for Israel].

Chazal teach that Jacob was the most prized of the patriarchs, “bachir shel Avos,” as he fulfilled his potential. Abraham was the pioneer, but with time, Isaac and Jacob built upon Abraham’s discoveries. Jacob uncovered new areas his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham could not see. ■

Phantom Pleasures

QUESTION: How do we prove that all pleasures we seek as adults are in fact a search for a pleasure from our youths?

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT: Maimonides teaches that for every pleasure [real satisfaction] there must exist novelty, and the desired object. A child never loses the novelty of his

pleasures, so his pleasures endure. This is because the child desires the very thing he pursues. A child enjoys hearing a story repeatedly without his mother veering in anyway from the first read. The child desires the story, so he enjoys it and novelty does not fade.

But during maturity, human nature becomes frustrated and is dissatisfied with the childhood pleasures. Man’s energies redirect away from stories and toys, and seek other satisfactions. This is by God’s design, that man can look to wisdom as his new and lasting pleasure. Had man not been frustrated, he would never seek pleasures other than those of his youth. He would never engage wisdom, thereby forfeiting his true purpose. But due to his youthful attachment to sensual pleasures, most adults seek sensual replacements for those childhood pleasures, never entering the world of wisdom. Now, an adult does not truly desire the object he pursues, like a new car. He desires the car as a replacement for some phantom pleasure from youth which he fantasizes the car will provide. Thus, as the car is a replacement and not the true desire, the new car cannot offer endless pleasure. The pleasure fades. However, if an adult’s desire were truly for the new car, the adult too would never lose the novelty of its enjoyment, just like the child. The proof that all adult pleasures are in fact replacements, is derived from the question of why the pleasures fade. ■

Free Will

QUESTION: Why did God only provide hints—the tools for Rebecca’s plan to secure Jacob’s receipt of the birthright—as opposed to God clearly outlining a coherent plan for Rebecca’s success? Through Jacob seizing his brother’s heel at birth, God showed Rebecca that Jacob could contend with his twin Esav. God also provided Esav with a hairy body, for Rebecca would need that as well to hatch her plan. Both, Jacob’s personality and Esav’s bodily features were provided, but the plan was left to Rebecca’s thinking. Why?

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT: God desires man use his free will [his own thinking] when it comes to acts of perfection. Jacob obtaining the birthright was such an act. ■

Mention “religion” or “God” to some people, and they cringe or change the subject. But discuss science, and you evoke no emotional response. Why?

Unfortunately, Bible (Torah) is not viewed as valid and true as science. This is because Bible asks us to conform our beliefs, actions and values; Bible imposes walls that impede the attainment of our desires. Bible feels authoritarian, restrictive and unpleasant, ripping us away from our freedom to chase any pleasure or desire; we can't tolerate losing the “free” part of our freewill. On the other hand, science relates to the physical world and not to how we must think, feel or act. Science is impersonal, evoking no resistance from us, and it's quite tangible and “real.” Scientific fact does not compete with our wishes. It is Bible's opposition to our feelings and its assumed irrelevance to our happiness that generates a resistance to explore Bible and value it. We feel religion is optional, while science is fact. However, our feelings do not accurately assess what's real and what provides happiness. Bible's restrictions are no grounds for viewing it any less valid and beneficial than science. God created both Bible and physical creation; both equally represent what is real and beneficial. Whether a subject matter relates to the physical world like geology and biology, or if the subject governs our practices like justice and philosophy, all subjects are equally God's creations. All subjects are created for man's benefit, as the greatest minds have always taught. We need to get passed our emotional reluctance to Bible's laws, and view it on par with science. To be happy, we follow natural law and don't defy it; leaping from a cliff or injecting poison leads to death. Just as defying nature law has consequences, ignoring God's lessons for attaining happiness too ends in dissatisfaction and unhappiness. King Solomon's book Ecclesiastes (Koheles) is this exact point. He studied human happiness and found that human emotions lead to poor decisions that offers no happiness. While following God's Bible directs man not only to the most harmonious life, but Bible's wisdom is startling and satisfying.

Just as God's physical creation benefits man, His Bible which teaches psychology, philosophy, ethics and human perfection also targets human benefit. But benefit is only one purpose. Physical creation and Bible also bear God's brilliance, both of which man is equally enamored. God designed physical creation and Bible in a

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PARSHA

Bible's Insightful Psychology

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

manner where our exploration uncovers infinite wisdom. Such study offers man the greatest enjoyment. Great thinkers like Maimonides, Rashi and countless sages spent their lives studying Bible and Talmud. They found complete fulfillment in exploring the depth of Torah wisdom. Bearing this in mind will fuel our impetus to uncover brilliance within God's Bible, driving us to be dissatisfied with mediocre and infantile Biblical explanations. Just as we would not accept a theory of "accidental arrangement" to explain the perfectly complimentary systems within the body (circulatory, respiratory, digestive, etc.) we must equally not accept childish, mystical or simple Biblical explanations. Bible and science are not simple, but are precisely designed. I will now give you an example of Bible's astonishing wisdom. It is amazing.

The Red Heifer

Burning the Red Heifer is a "chok" (Biblical statute), which is misunderstood as a law bereft of reason. On the surface, burning a cow of a certain color seems quite odd, and even primitive. Rashi appears to comply with this sentiment that a chok is without reason:

Because Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel saying, "What is this command and what is the reason for it?" Therefore it is written 'chukas': "A decree from before Me (says God) and you have no permission to be suspect about it [to find a flaw]." (Rashi on Num. 19:2)

A simple reading of Rashi would imply not to think into this law. But we must realize that God's plan behind His 2 realities: the natural world and Bible.

His universe reveals brilliance: in material substance itself, in its designs, and mostly in natural law. This indicates God's desire to share His wisdom with beings that can perceive it. All God's acts and creations contain the greatest wisdom. And one of the most astounding creations is the human intellect. Therefore, to suggest that chukim (statutes) are bereft of any wisdom, denies this fundamental that God permeates all with His wisdom, as He desires man to derive great joy by appreciating His wisdom. Both, nature and Bible were designed with the intent that man recognize the Creator's brilliance in both.

Rabbi Israel Chait once distinguished between mitzvah and a chok. Mitzvah is a law which a person would arrive at with his own thinking, such as murder and stealing. But chok is a law that man would not arrive at on his own, such as wearing black boxes (tefillin), resting on Sabbath as a way of recognizing God, or laws of kosher. However, this does not mean that these laws do not share the same brilliance as every other law. Chok is distinguished from mitzvah only in the fact that man would not have innovated such a structure, but not that they are bereft of great wisdom. What then is the reason behind the Red Heifer? Rabbi Israel Chait taught that a human being cannot state with any certainty what the primary goal is of any mitzvah or chok [only God knows for certain], but we can identify its benefits.

What Rashi means by not being "suspicious" about this law, is that one should not view it negatively or emotionally, or make one's understanding the determinant of following it. But certainly one should intelligently investigate every law and seek its profound ideas, just as one seeks wisdom in nature. We learn that King Solomon knew the reasons for all laws—including chukim—except for some element of the Red Heifer. That means that he understood the ideas contained all other chukim. Thus, chok—a statute—has reasons like all other laws.

It is also notable that the beginning of Rashi where he says that Satan (i.e., man's instincts) and the nations of the world (who are lacking understanding) are the only ones that find fault with the Red Heifer. The deduction is that the intellect and the Jewish nation do not find fault with it. This supports the idea that even a chok reveals God's brilliance. Let's now understand the Red Heifer.

Mitzvahs with Shared Principles Offer Clues

I understand that a person who speaks evil and degrades others (Lashon Hara) has committed a crime. Thus, remedial action is required. But what about fulfilling a mitzvah of burying the dead: why is there a response of sprinkling the ashes of a Red Heifer on one who was in contact with the deceased? Meaning, why should a mitzvah of burial require a remedial act? Remedy for what?

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Additionally, why were the Jews in Egypt who fulfilled the command of the Paschal Lamb required to paint their doorposts and lintels with the lamb's blood? In these two cases, the Jews fulfilled God's command. A remedial act suggest the presence of some flaw in mitzvah. But that is incoherent. Again, Torah has no remedy for one who prays, or makes a blessing, or performs any other mitzvah: the mitzvah is constructive, and what is positive, cannot require a remedy! Remedy only follows a negative or a destructive matter. Yet, one who buries the dead or sacrificed the Paschal Lamb—God's commands—requires some additional act. It's difficult to grasp a remedial need for a mitzvah. As always, God's generous clues are found in all mitzvahs.

When burning the Red Heifer into ashes, the Torah commands us to throw into its flames a cedar branch, a hyssop plant, and a red string. Very unusual. Ibn Ezra writes:

This [the cedar, hyssop and red string] is just like the leper, and there I hinted to a principle (Ibn Ezra, Num. 19:6).

Ibn Ezra is referring to his commentary on Leviticus 14:4:

Behold, the leper, the leprous house, and the defilement by contact with the dead are related...and behold, they too are similar to the form of the Egyptian Exodus.

Just as the cedar branch, hyssop plant, and the red string are remedial for one who was in contact with a dead person (Red Heifer), Leviticus 14:4 commands that the leper—the speaker of evil—in a remedial practice which also include these same three items. Nowhere else in Torah are these found. Quite intriguing! What's the connection between death and evil speech?

Regarding the leper, two birds are taken; one is killed, and the live bird together with the cedar branch, a hyssop plant, and a red string are dipped in the dead bird's blood and the live bird is let loose over a field. Regarding the Exodus, Ibn Ezra refers to the practice of dipping the hyssop in the lamb's blood and painting the doorposts and lintel. Here too the hyssop is used, but we note the omission of the cedar branch and red string.

Ibn Ezra points us to three seemingly unrelated institutions that share identical elements, a cedar branch, a hyssop plant, and a red string. These three are burnt with the Red Heifer, they are bloodied in connection with the leper, but the hyssop alone is used in connection with the Passover Exodus during the plague of the firstborns, as the Torah says:

And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin; and none of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning. For the Lord will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side-posts, the Lord will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you (Exod. 12:22,23).

The Rabbis note that the hyssop is the smallest plant, and the cedar is the largest. What is that clue?

My friend and Torah educator Jessie Fischbein said, "Death creates distortions." I thought about her words and immediately realized she was keying in to the common denominator. All three cases deal with death. The Red Heifer removes ritual impurity from one who was in contact with the dead; the leper's speech was a crime of character assassination (the Rabbis teach evil speech equates to murder), and the lamb's blood saved our firstborns from the Plague of Firstborn Deaths. In all three cases, a person was somehow related to death. The fact that

all three cases require some remedy, indicate that without that rite, man is left in unacceptable conditions. What are those conditions?

Interesting is that once Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, God feared he would eat of the Tree of Life and live forever. Therefore God placed cherubs (childlike figures) and a flaming spinning sword to guard the path to the Tree of Life (Gen. 4:24). Meaning, as soon as man sinned and he received the punishment or death, he immediately desired immortality. But God did not allow man to attain immortality through the Tree of Life. Instead, God struck a balance in man's imagination: he would perceive his youth (cherubs) while also confronting the unapproachable spinning sword which represented his death. God deemed it proper that in place of the extreme which Adam desired—immortality through the Tree of Life—an equilibrium be achieved.

He hath made everything beautiful in its time; also He hath set the world in their heart, so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end (Kohel 3:11).

Ibn Ezra comments, "Everything beautiful in its time" refers to death in old age, while "He hath set the world in their heart" refers to the feeling of immortality. While death is a reality, and man cannot lie to himself that he is immortal, he also cannot face his death daily; it is too morbid. Man requires a sense of permanence if he is to live happily. A balance is again detected in this verse. How does this apply to our three cases?

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Death: The Distortion

Why does a person who performs a mitzvah of burying the dead require the ashes of the Red Heifer be sprinkled on him? He did nothing wrong, and in fact, he had no choice but to follow God's command of burial. Furthermore, what is this strange practice?

It is not only errors or sins that require religious remedial practices, but even positive actions can negatively affect us. Jessie is correct: when one is in contact with the dead, we notice a denial. The tension at funerals evoked by facing one's own death generates powerful denial. People find funerals difficult, and will laugh hard at the smallest drop of humor: a release of powerful negative emotions. Like Adam, funeral attendees "rush for the door" seeking immortality. But that extreme (the immortality fantasy) is as equally unhealthy as harping on our day of death, however true it is. Contact with the dead creates a denial that must be corrected. We are not allowed to deny our mortality. The "ashes" of the Red Heifer signify that a body—human or animal—is but dust or ashes. The body is not the definition of a human being. When confronting the dead, we must immediately correct our denial of our own mortality by embracing the ashes sprinkled on us, to remind us through proxy, that just as the heifer is but dust, we too ultimately pass on. When faced with death, and we rush to deny it, we must strike a balance.

The one who speaks evil destroys others through character assassination. He did not treasure life, similar to one who murders. In his fantasy alone, through evil speech, he thinks he has "set things aright." God does not approve of a person venting his aggression. This extreme requires a fix. The evil talker is smitten with leprosy, which Aaron said is like death (Num. 12:12). He must also shave all his head, eyebrows and all hair. Why? One's identity is very much tied to how he wears his hair, and his personality is expressed with his eyebrows. One would have difficulty distinguishing two people who were both hairless. It is safe to say that God created different hair colors and different hairstyles so people are distinguished. Now, when the leper is shaven and has no more hair just like infants at birth, his identity is lost to a great degree. His disregard of another person through his evil speech, is cured by his experiencing a loss of his own identity. This is compounded by the law that he must move outside of society.

In Egypt, the Jews sinned through idolatry. Through the Plague of the Firstborns of those Egyptians and Jews who worshipped the lamb, sin generated death, and mitzvah (paschal lamb sacrifice) sustained life. The blood on the doorpost, through which the Destroyer might enter, focussed the dwellers on the truth that worshipping the deity of Egypt caused death, and our mitzvah of the destruction of the deity secured our salvation. The doorpost of the home, through which the Destroyer might enter was the optimal location for all to ponder the absolute truth that the lamb: idolatry is absolutely false.

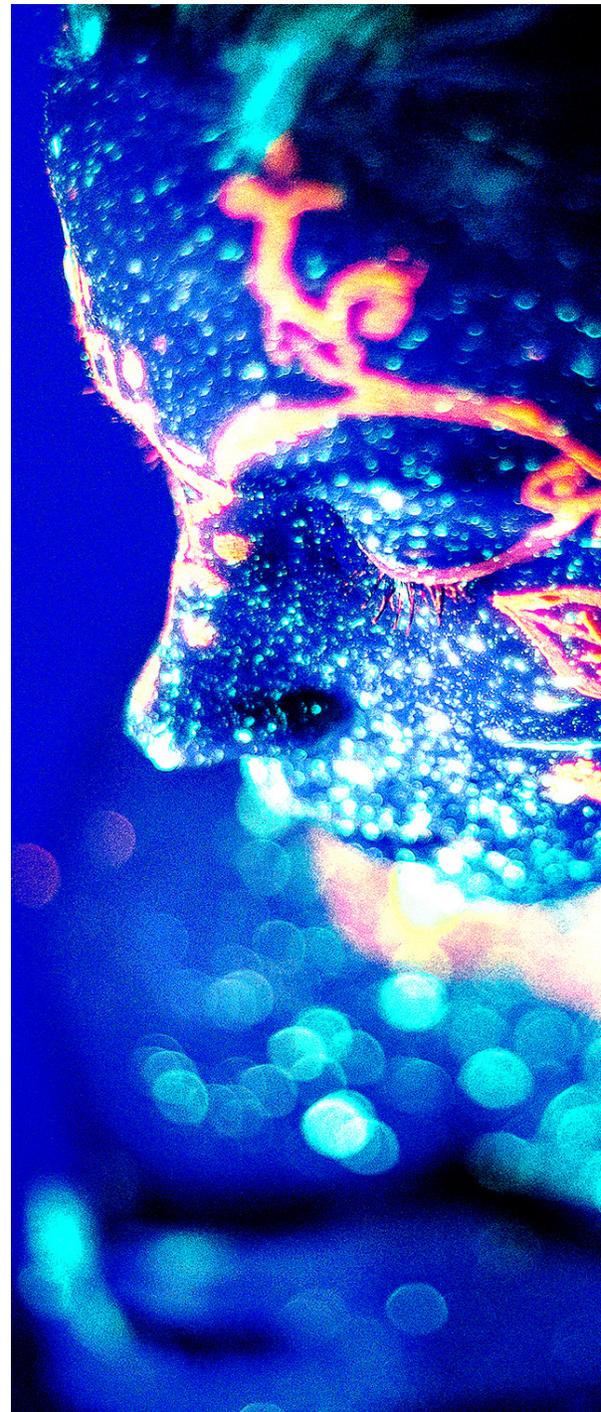
Extremes are Sinful

Death is too morbid to face daily. But immortality too is false. The Rabbis teach the hyssop and the cedar represent two extreme poles of a spectrum: the small and the large in plant life. Sforno teaches the harm of living at the extremes of any attitudinal spectrum is expressed through these two species and the red string that represents sin[1]. (The objects could have been a large and small rock, but something had to be used.) If one is too courageous or too cowardly, he cannot act properly at the appropriate time. A miser and spendthrift, or a sad or an elated person...any extreme is improper. King Solomon teaches that there is a time for every attitude (Koheles 3), meaning there are times not to follow that attitude. Thus, remaining at the pole of any spectrum is harmful.

The Red Heifer teaches that denial of death or embracing death—either extreme—is sinful. The evil talker's carelessness for another person is countered by his reduction of identity. But just as the Red Heifer's ashes are remedial, and not to be focused on as a permanent ends, the evil talker too must regrow his hair. A remedial rite is temporary by nature, just enough medicine to cure the disease and redirect the person back to an equilibrium[2]. We now appreciate how these seemingly out-of-place plants point to a fundamental lesson and remedy.

But why is the hyssop alone used in connection with the Paschal Lamb? This is because there is no extreme in this case from which we must bounce back. Here, the death of the Egyptian deity is an absolute truth: idolatry is absolutely false. Thus, there is no lesson of two harmful extremes, as is so regarding the Red Heifer and the leper. And our fear of death has been calmed by the lesson that sin brings death, whereas mitzvah secures life. The purpose of painting the doorposts with blood has been explained.

Ibn Ezra teaches us that death affects man uniquely, it requires a unique address, and there are a few related Torah cases that share a bond, indicated by the use of the same three species. Proximity to death frightens man, causing him to flee to the opposite pole of immortality, but this extreme is false. Death is also used regarding the leper where he initially



had disregard for life; he must be bent back to the other extreme where “he” loses his identity. But why did God choose the phenomenon of death per se to teach the harm of extremes? I feel this is due to the nature of the immortality fantasy...

Immortality: The Most Primary Drive

Rabbi Israel Chait taught that King Solomon’s work, Koheles, is based on this fantasy. Meaning, all of man’s drives depend on the immortality fantasy. Man would not fantasize about any pleasure, plan, or sense any ambition, if he truly felt he was going to die. Under every emotion lies the feeling of immortality. Rabbi Chait wrote as follows:

“One generation passes, and another generation comes; but the Earth abides for ever (Koheles 1:4).” The Rabbis teach, “A person does not die with half of his desires in hand. For he who has a hundred, desires to make of it two hundred.”[3] This means that the fantasy exceeds reality. King Solomon addresses one of the two fantasies that drive people. One fantasy is regarding objects or possessions. The second fantasy deals with man’s feeling of permanence. Man’s fantasies make sense, but only if he’s going to live forever. An idea has two parts: 1) the idea itself, and 2) the emotional effect of the idea. Every person knows the idea that he or she will die. But the emotional effect of death is usually denied. This enables man to believe his fantasy is achievable. It is impossible to live without the fantasy of immortality. It expresses itself one way or another. The meaning behind this verse is that the average person looks at life as the only reality. He cannot perceive himself as a single speck in a chain of billions of people and events, where he plays but a minuscule role, and passes on. Any feeling man has of greatness comes from the feeling of immortality. Immortality never reaches into lusts; only ego. Here, King Solomon places the correct perspective before us. We look at the world as starting with our birth, and as dying with our death. As soon as one sees that his life is nearing its end, he cannot enjoy things anymore. The enjoyment of things is tied to the belief of an endless lifetime in which to enjoy them. Man’s attention is directed primarily toward his well-being. If a life-threatening situation faces man, this is the most devastating experience; everything else doesn’t make that much difference to him. Once a person faces death, all fantasies of

pleasures don’t carry much weight. Rashi says on this verse, “Who are those that exist forever? They are the humble ones that bow down to the ground.” Rashi means there is in fact an eternity: this is for righteous people—tzadikim—expressed as those who humble themselves, “bowing to the ground.” The soul of the tzaddik will endure forever.

As man is most excited about his mortality, and is driven primarily by the immortality fantasy, it is most appropriate that God teaches man not to follow his extreme tendencies in this area.

Summary

Death is disturbing, but we cannot deny it. The Red Heifer’s ashes remind us that our physical life is not permanent: we all return to dust and ashes[4]. We need this reminder when we come in contact with the dead: a traumatic moment in which we deny our own mortality. We also cannot disregard the life of another through evil speech. If we do, we have gone to another harmful extreme of degrading others to raise ourselves, so shaving our hair reduces our identity, temporarily, to help us bounce back to a correct equilibrium. God signaled the sinful nature of extremes using plants of extreme size differences, and including the “red” thread that signifies their sinful extremes. Torah refers to sin as red[5].

We are again awed by the perfection and structure of the Torah, where religious practice is designed to perfect man’s flaws. Whether we sin by evil speech, or are negatively affected by a mitzvah of burial or the Paschal Lamb, God includes remedial acts that guide us on a life of truth. Thank you again Jessie for directing me to this fundamental.

Bible and Science are equally real and valid, offering equal brilliance and fulfillment. ■

Footnotes

[1] On Yom Kippur, the red string represented the Jews’ unforgiven state. And when it turned white, it indicated God’s forgiveness. Torah verses too refer to sin as red: “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool (Isaiah 1:18).”

[2] Maimonides’ Laws of Character Traits addresses this topic.

[3] Koheles Rabbah 1:13

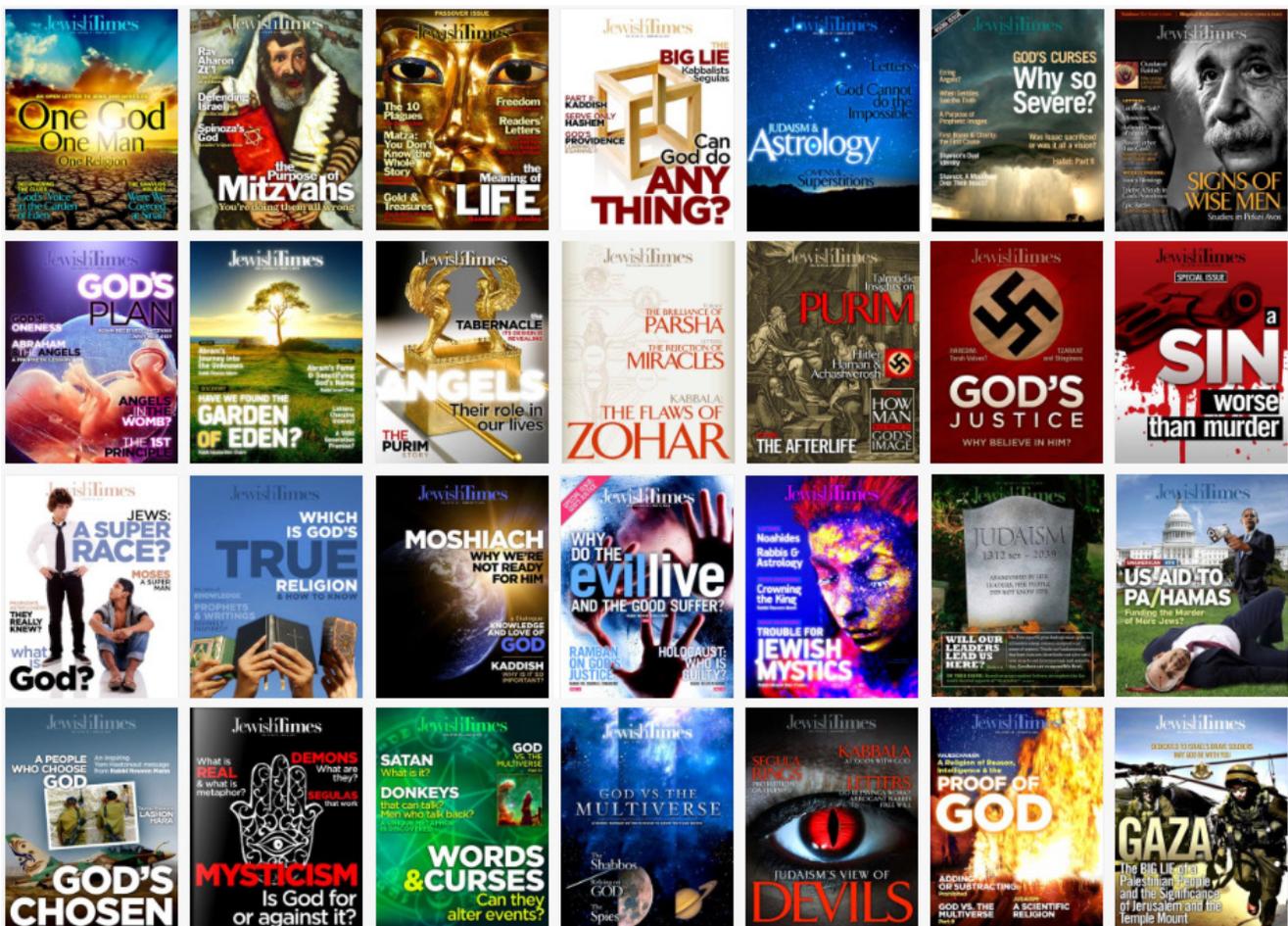
[4] Gen. 18:27

[5] Isaiah 1:18, Rashi on Num 19:22

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PARSHA

Evil Speech & Leprosy

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Torah teaches of the punishment of leprosy, or Tzaraas, which visits a person on account of his or her speaking Lashon Hara, derogatory remarks concerning another. Leprosy visits the person in stages. At first, leprosy attaches itself to the person's home. If the person heeds the warning and repents, it is gone. If not, it excels towards the person's garments. Again, if one repents, it is gone. If God's warning is still ignored, it finally attaches to the person's body.

What is the purpose of this progression, and why these three, specific objects? Additionally, Torah states that for one to be atoned, one must bring two birds: one is slaughtered, and its blood is caught in a bowl. The live bird is dipped therein along with a branch of hyssop, myrtle and a red thread, and the live bloodstained bird is now set free over an open field.

On the surface, this seems barbaric, or at the least, unintelligible. However, as we know God is the Designer of the Torah, and "all its ways are pleasant" (Prov. 3:17), there must be a rational explanation for these practices, and for the objects used in attempting to correct the vicious person.

In order to understand how "mida k'neged mida" (measure for measure) works in this case, we must first understand the crime. Speaking derogatorily has at its source the desire for self-affirmation of one's greatness. An insecure person will usually be found degrading others. In his mind, he now feels higher in comparison to the ridiculed party. However, a secure individual does not seek social approval, as this doesn't affect his self-estimation. He is more concerned with God's approval. Being secure, another person's level has no effect on his status. What then is the remedy for this egomaniacal type of personality? It is to diminish his imagined grandeur. Part of the need to elevate oneself is the desire to be loved by others. When this cannot be, as a leper is banished outside the camp of the Israelites, he must now confront his insignificance.

However, God the merciful seeks to avoid the worst by hinting to the person that he has done wrong. God does not send leprosy to the body first. He initially uses other vehicles with which the person identifies, viz., his home, and his clothing. God commences with the home, as this is furthest removed from the person, but related enough to him so as to awaken him: there is something distasteful in him that he should delve into. If the person is obstinate, God sends the leprosy to a closer object, his garments. This is more closely tied to one's identity, and is more effective. But if not heeded to, God finally delivers leprosy to his body, which is undeniably him. We see from here God's mercy and intelligence in using objects with which we identify.

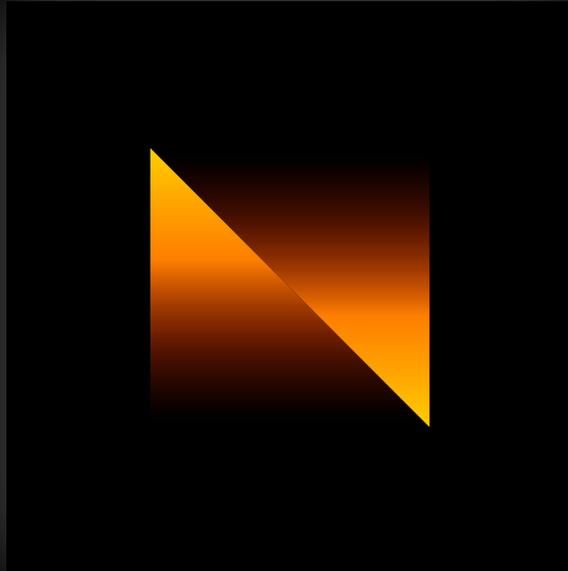
Parenthetically, these three objects—house, clothes and body—correlate exactly to Mezuzah, Tzitzit, and Tefillin. These

are also tied to the idea of identification, but from a different angle: since God desires that one place their trust in Him, and not in their own strength, God created these three commands to redirect where one places their trust. Mezuzah reminds one not to invest too much reliance in his home, as God should be recognized as the true, only Protector. The home is correctly viewed as a haven from the elements. But God desires that we act in line with reality, which means, above natural law: we must trust in His shelter over structural shelters. So we place a reminder on the doorway—the best place to be reminded of God, as a doorway receives all of the traffic of a home. We are urged not to place too much importance on our dress, and therefore are commanded to wear Tzitzit, fringes. Clothing again is an area where people express their identity. But when we gaze at the Tzitzit, we are reminded about investing too much importance in our dress. Lastly, but most closely tied to our self-images, are our bodies. One is most affected when something happens to his body, even if no pain is suffered. We are also more tied to our appearances than to our clothes and homes. We define the body incorrectly as the "real me." This is due to our false definition of what "man" is. Society tells us that man equals his body. The Torah tells us that man equals intellect, perfected values, and ideals. Hence, we are commanded to wear Tefillin: a bodily reminder that we should not invest too much worth here either.

These three—home, clothes, and body—are the three main areas where one identifies, and thus, the three areas where God saw it fit to place reminders that God alone should be the one upon whom we depend. And as these three are where we identify, God uses them again when attempting to focus us on our errors: He sends leprosy to those objects that we deem are "ours", or "ourselves".

Returning to the Parsha, what is the idea behind the two birds? Besides correcting the person's flaw of overestimation, he must also realize the irrevocable harm inflicted on another human being. Rashi states that birds in specific are brought, as they chirp, to make clear that the crime had to do with his "chirping" like a bird. The live bird (resembling the sinner) is dipped in the blood of the other, dead bird (resembling the one humiliated by the speech) and let free over a field. This is to demonstrate that just as this bloodied bird is irretrievable, so too his evil "bloody" speech is irretrievable. As you cannot catch the same bird twice, so also he cannot retract his words which were let loose on the world. The damage is done, the "bird is loose." This will hopefully give recognition to the person who spoke destructively and make clear his crime.

The birds acting as atonement teaches that knowing one's sin is the first step towards forgiveness. ■



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CONDÉ NAST



Small Country Big Heart

Rabbi Reuven Mann



Dear Friends, I was asked by the local Jewish newspaper in Phoenix to write an article describing my experience of living in Israel during the year of Covid-19. I am happy to share it with you.

This past year has been one of hardship, suffering and death for many people across the globe. The COVID 19 pandemic did not discriminate along racial or religious lines or issues of personal background. Having faced the same danger together have we achieved a new sense of respect and tolerance for all people?

My wife and I arrived in Israel just prior to the onset of the virus in early March 2020. We managed to celebrate Purim “normally” but the restrictive measures were then put in place. Israel took the crisis very seriously and went into full lockdown mode. This meant that the most public institutions such as businesses, shopping malls, restaurants, schools and even Synagogues were suddenly off limits.

Indeed, one was no longer free to even go out for a long walk as the distance one might traverse from one’s home was severely limited. This impacted me as walking is my prime form of exercise which I take very seriously. I usually walk between 5 and 7 miles a day which in hilly Jerusalem constitutes a significant workout. But this draconian measure was soon modified. A new rule was added saying that those who need to walk for exercise or medical reasons were permitted.

The restrictions had a telling effect on the economy and personal lives of people. As Passover arrived the practical and psychological effects of the new reality were in effect. Put simply this is a time when people expect to celebrate together with family and close friends. Suddenly that privilege which we had always taken for granted was gone. That proved to be a serious hardship especially for the elderly, many of whom lacked a spouse and had

to celebrate the Seder alone. This was a prospect they had never dreamed of.

Israel is a can-do country which thrives on challenges. In addition it has a very heightened sense of responsibility for the well-being of its elderly population. Signs on busses contain Torah quotes such as, “In the presence of an old person you shall rise.” The society has a deep sense of concern for people in need and goes out of its way to facilitate their well-being.

Thus, the Jerusalem Municipality made phone calls to all people over a certain age asking how they were doing and what assistance they could use. They made sure to procure their medicines, food supplies and other basic requirements and have them delivered. This proved to be a great blessing for this population in both a practical and psychological manner.

The virtue of social concern was manifested in other ways. Passover and the other holidays were challenging because of the social isolation. But the Israeli spirit shone forth. Word went out that people were invited to go to their windows at a certain time and join together to sing the Mah Nishtana (Four Questions). At the designated moment we opened our window and joined many neighbors in this chant. It provided a meaningful sense that we were not alone but were together with many others in the celebration of Passover.

The same spirit shone forth in other religious observances. When Synagogues were closed this did not prevent people from having minyan services. Suddenly outdoor ad hoc prayer groups sprung up in courtyards, terraces and on street corners. One could simply walk down the street and (retaining mandatory distancing) participate in prayers. This was extremely important to many people especially those who needed to say Kaddish and observe Yahrzeits. In general outdoor Minyans would be

highly problematical due to the bone chilling Jerusalem winters. But as luck or Divine Providence would have it this turned out to be one of the mildest Jerusalem winters in memory.

The concern for the religious fulfillment of all Jews, even non religious ones, was also present on Rosh Hashana. The primary Mitzvah of that day is to hear the blowing of the Shofar. But what about people who could not make it to a Shul? An appeal was made for all people who could do so to go to their windows and blow the Shofar at 11am. At that moment people walking through the streets paused and fulfilled the Mitzvah. Even many not wearing kippot (skullcaps) stopped and listened respectfully and the nation was united in this special divine service.

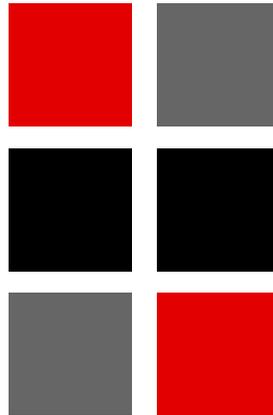
Israel demonstrated its energy and vitality in its manner of distributing the miraculous Covid-19 vaccine which was created in record time. It is especially important that it be distributed in an efficient and widespread manner. Here there was no need for anyone to apply for the shots. Back in December my wife and I were notified by text as to the time and place of our inoculations. We were then called to confirm the appointments. We went at the set time expecting to have a long wait. To my pleasant surprise there was no delay. We were admitted and given the shot immediately.

On a personal note I was able to navigate most of the challenges of the Covid year in stride. We must appreciate and be fully grateful for the benefits that are provided by advanced technology. For me it is a game changer. True togetherness consists of meaningful and intense communication. I have many students across America and Israel and hold classes with them via Skype and Zoom. While this venue may be problematical for young children it is ideal for adults. And due the fact that so many people have been home bound because of Covid more of them are signing up for virtual Torah classes. If a rediscovery of the supreme Jewish value of learning emerges from this gloomy season it will be a positive development.

The matzav (situation) seems to be improving every day here in Israel as the nation hopefully approaches herd immunity. The political indecisiveness still persists and we had the privilege to participate in the fourth Israeli election to be held in two years. Let’s hope a spirit of National unity emerges which allows for the establishment of a strong and stable new government. As we gingerly make our way out of the restrictions imposed by COVID let us hope we emerge with a greater understanding of what truly matters and the wisdom and compassion to make this great country and the world a better place. ■

Organizational Theory

RABBI BERNIE FOX



A person who has on the skin of one's flesh an affliction of tzara'at, and he is brought to Aharon the Priest or to one of his sons – the Priests. (Sefer VaYikra 13:2)

A garment when there is on it an affliction of tzara'at, [whether] a garment of wool or linen. (Sefer VaYikra 13:47)

When you come to the Land of Canaan that I give to you as a possession, and I will place an affliction of tzara'at on the house of the land of your possession. (Sefer VaYikra 14:34)

I. Three forms of tzara'at

The Torah portions of Tazria and Metzora include a discussion of the affliction of tzara'at. This affliction is initially described as a skin disease. It is generally characterized by a white blotch. A person who has a white skin discoloration is brought to a Kohen – a Priest. The Kohen studies the discolored area. Based on criteria outlined in Parshat Tazria, the Kohen determines whether the person has tzara'at. If the person has the affliction, then he or she is declared to be tameh – spiritually defiled. The person is quarantined until the Kohen determines that the affliction has passed.

Later, in Parshat Tazria, the Torah explains that another form of tzara'at can appear on garments, cloth, and leather. This form of tzara'at's has its unique characteristics. It renders the garment tameh and this defilement may be transferred to objects or people. A Kohen evaluates a discoloration to determine whether it is tzara'at. The Torah provides methods for treating the garment and removing its tzara'at. If it cannot be removed, the garment, cloth, or leather is destroyed.

In Parshat Metzora, the third form of tzara'at is described. This appears on the wall of a house. It has its unique characteristics and treatment. It renders the house tameh and this defilement may be transferred to objects or people. Again, the assessment of the discoloration, the response, and treatment are performed by a Kohen. If the measures to remove the tzara'at are unsuccessful, the house must be demolished.

II. Tzara'at of inanimate objects

The tzara'at that afflicts a person is a physical malady. But tzara'at in its broader framework afflicts even inanimate objects – garments and houses. This demonstrates that it is not fundamentally a physical disease. Instead, one of its expressions is as a physical disease but its essential character is not biological. What is its nature and why does it afflict inanimate objects?

All forms of tzara'at are a consequence of sin. The Torah specifically associates tzara'at with lashon ha'ra – speaking negatively about another. It records that Miryam, Moshe's sister, shared with Aharon negative

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

comments about Moshe and she was stricken with the affliction.¹ However, other sins can provoke the punishment.² Because tzara'at is a Divine punishment, it has a miraculous character. It is not strictly a physical malady, limited to human beings. It can afflict inanimate objects – garments, cloth, leather, and even houses. Because tzara'at is a punishment, it is reasonable for it to directly strike a person as a skin affliction. Why does it also strike garments and houses? If a sinner deserves tzara'at why not punish the sinner directly? Why afflict or destroy his or her property?

One reason is that the unique character of tzara'at is evidenced by its expression in inanimate objects. Imagine tzara'at only affected human beings and not their possessions. One stricken by tzara'at would be tempted to interpret the affliction as a naturally occurring physical disease. Rather than evaluating one's behaviors and repenting, the afflicted individual would look toward medical science for a cure. The Torah forewarns against this response by extending the affliction to inanimate objects. This demonstrates that tzara'at is not a purely natural phenomenon. It is a spiritual malady.

III. The stages of tzara'at

Rambam – Maimonides – provides another interpretation. He comments that generally, the three expressions of tzara'at occur sequentially. The sinner's home is stricken first. Hopefully, the person repents. However, if the sinner persists in his or her behavior, then tzara'at progresses and afflicts the person's garments. If the sinner refuses to respond to this punishment, then he or she is afflicted with the skin disorder.³

According to this interpretation, the order in which the forms of tzara'at are presented in the Torah is non-sequential. Tzara'at first afflicts a person's home, then one's garments, and finally one's body. The Torah presents the forms of tzara'at in the opposite order. First, it describes the laws governing the skin affliction of tzara'at. Then, it discusses tzara'at of clothing. Finally, it deals with tzara'at of houses. Why does the Torah not present the forms of tzara'at in the order in which they occur?

And Betzalel, son of Uri, son of Chur, of the tribe of Yehudah did all that Hashem commanded Moshe. (Sefer Shemot 38:22)

IV. Betzalel's insight

This question points to a basic idea about the organization of material in the Torah. Often, the Torah organizes its material based on conceptual considerations. This is clearly demonstrated by an earlier instance. Betzalel was appointed by Hashem to manage the fabrication of the Mishcan – the Tabernacle – and its vessels. These vessels included the Ark, Menorah, the Table on which the Shewbread was placed, the Golden Altar, and Copper Altar. The above passage states that Betzalel accomplished his mission according to the specifications Hashem gave to Moshe. Rashi comments that Betzalel anticipated details that Moshe did not communicate to him. Specifically, in his instructions, Moshe first directed Betzalel to create the vessels and then he directed him to create the structure of the Mishcan and its courtyard. Betzalel reasoned that one first builds a house; then, creates its contents. He proceeded in this order. Moshe acknowledged that Betzalel acted properly and that his order conformed to Hashem's instructions.⁴

V. The commandment to create the Mishcan

There is a difficulty with Rashi's comments. When the commandment to create the Mishcan is presented in the Torah, Hashem first provides Moshe the instructions for the Ahron – the Ark, the Menorah, and the Table. Only after these instructions are communicated, does Hashem command Moshe to create the Mishcan. Why does the commandment not follow the logical order identified by Betzalel? Why did Hashem not first instruct Moshe in the creation of the Mishcan and afterward in the creation of its vessels?

The answer is that Betzalel was correct in his assessment of the order in which the fabrication should take place. The house should be created first. Then, its vessels are created and placed within. However, this order of fabrication does not reflect the conceptual relationship between the elements. The Ahron and the other vessels are the essential components of the institution. The Mishcan is its housing.

Consider a museum. The building may have beautiful architecture, but it is not the essence of the institution. Its contents are its essence. The board of the museum will want to be sure that it has a place to house the valuable artifacts that it plans to acquire before their purchase. But they would acknowledge that these artifacts are the sole reason for the museum's existence.

An important principle emerges from this analysis. Often, the order in which the Torah presents material is dictated by conceptual considerations. It does not present the instructions for the creation of the Mishcan and its vessels in the order in which they were to be fabricated. The elements are presented in the order that communicates their conceptual relationships. (CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

VI. The fundamental form of tzara'at

This principle explains the order in which the laws of tzara'at are presented. The primary form of tzara'at is a skin affliction. The two other forms – in clothing and houses – are preliminary warnings. In other words, if the skin affliction of tzara'at did not exist, then the other two forms would not exist. Because the most fundamental form of tzara'at is a biological malady, it is presented first. Without describing tzara'at of the skin, the other two forms cannot be discussed. They only exist as preliminary stages or warnings intended to prevent a sinner from contracting the skin disease.

VII. The importance of the Torah's organization

The Torah contains many important narratives. It discusses our Avot – the Patriarchs. It describes our suffering in Egypt, our rescue from bondage, Revelation, our travails in the wilderness, and the beginnings of our conquest of the Land of Israel. It includes the six hundred thirteen commandments and some of their details. But the Torah is not only a collection of these narratives and a listing of commandments. It organizes these commandments according to conceptual considerations. The organizational scheme provides insight into underlying principles governing the commandments.

The above discussion illustrates this principle. Tzara'at is a strange phenomenon. It is rendered more bizarre because we do not encounter it in our time. A casual or skeptical reader may dismiss it as myth or superstition. A more careful and thoughtful reader will first consider the material from an objective and non-judgmental perspective. This reader will uncover the conceptual content that fills the Torah's discussion of tzara'at. The above discussion is a single example of this content. When the reader encounters this content, he or she will recognize this is not myth or superstition. Writers of mythology and recorders of superstitions do not incorporate conceptual substrata into their presentations. The conceptual content of the Torah reflects its truth and divinity. ■

Footnotes

1 Sefer BeMidbar 12:1-16.

2 Mesechet Erchin 16a.

3 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Tumat Tzara'at 16:10.

4 Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 38:22.

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