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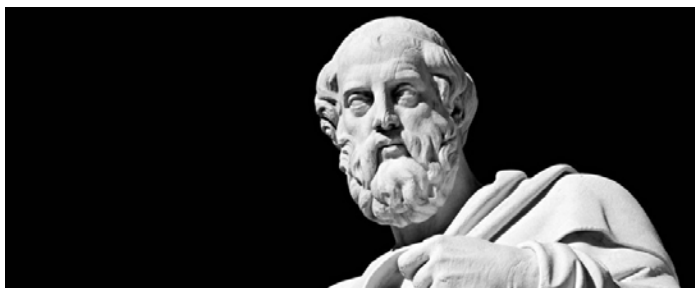
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LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Where is Heaven?

READER: Reader: Geographically, where is heaven? Is it up, is it down? Is it east, is it west? Where is heaven? In the skies?

RABBI: Asking "Where is heaven?" is like asking "Where is happiness?" The afterlife—heaven—is not physical; it has no location. Heaven is the state of the soul unrelated to earthly life. Just as God exists without place, our souls continue on after life, unrelated to anything physical, including location.

The universe is not eternal; it was created, as everything requires creation. Nothing can create itself. Thus, God existed—and exists—unrelated to the universe, without physicality...He exists without place. That is key: prior to God's creation of the physical world, "place" did not exist. Initially, it's a hard concept to grasp, but it is possible to see. We all imagine everything as being "somewhere," occupying some space. However, when we learn the idea of "number" or quantity for example, nothing new enters us. The "idea" is not physical, and takes up no space. To prove that "number" is not physical, think of 2 cars, and 2 buildings. They look nothing alike, yet we say in both that their quantity of 2 is identical. The identity of "2" is an idea, not something seen. It is not physical (Rabbi Roth).

Sounds funny, but we need not grow our bodies larger to allow for the increase of our knowledge. New ideas don't take up space, they have no shape, no weight, no size. Ideas are not physical, but they are very real. This is the world of metaphysics, of ideas and non-physical laws God created to govern the universe and man.

Heaven is the state after death, when our souls attain a higher level of existence, of happiness and reward. It is not a physical existence, but far greater, and heaven has no place. God designed our souls to find great

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satisfaction in heaven in its awareness of God and His wisdom.

Many will initially find this idea of heaven disappointing. Many think of heaven in physical terms, as an experience where all foods, sexual desires, riches and friendships see no tiredness, or end. But this is fantasy.

Maimonides writes in Laws of Repentance 8:2:

The World to Come harbors neither body nor anything of a concrete form, save only the souls of the righteous divested of body as are the ministering angels. Inasmuch as it harbors no concrete forms there is no need there for eating, drinking, or other of the bodily necessities of the sons of man in this world; neither will any of the many things which happen to bodies in this world come to pass there, as, for instance, sitting down, standing up, sleep, death, sadness, mirth or the like. Thus did the ancient sages say, "In the World to Come there is no eating, no drinking, and no family life, save that the righteous are sitting, graced with garlands upon their heads, and indulge in feasting upon the luminousness of the Shekinah" (Brachos 17a). Herefrom, it is clear to you that no body exists there, seeing that there is neither eating nor drinking. That expression of "sitting" herein employed, is figurative, as if saying that they are there without effort or fatigue, and the phrase they employed, saying, "graced with garlands upon their heads," means that they have conscious knowledge of the reason why they have merited to be in the World to Come, and this is their crown of garlands, as, for example, Solomon said, "The crown wherewith his mother hath crowned him" (Songs 3:11). Moreover, it was said, "And everlasting shall joy be upon their heads" (Is. 35:10); now joy is not a body to rest upon one's head, even so the crown spoken of by the sages refers to knowledge. But what is the meaning of the phrase "and indulge in feasting upon the luminousness of the Shechinah"? It is that by which they know and attain part of the Truth of the Holy One, blessed is He! Something they do not know while in the dark, low body.

Avoda Zara 65a:

The reward of the Jewish people will be such that "no eye has seen it, God, aside from You, Who will do for those who await Him" (Isaiah 64:3)

Sanhedrin 99a:

The World-to-Come, "No eye has seen it, God, aside from You, Who will do for those who await Him."

The afterlife is not known to man. But as our souls are not physical—explaining why they can perceive ideas—our souls after life exist in a non-physical state of bliss, but without location. Heaven is not a place, but a state of the soul. ■



Love your Neighbor

READER: Does the verse "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) also apply to non-Jews, or only to Jews? If the latter, what are the implications...that we don't love non-Jews?

RABBI: Minchas Chinuch cites Maimonides (Hil. Dayos chap 6) who says that we are to hate a Jew who sins. Torah also says, "And you shall love the convert" (Deut. 10:19). Thus, love and hate are based on one's character, not one's religion.

"Love your neighbor as yourself" applies to a good Jew or a convert, not a non-Jew. And we hate those who oppose God's Torah: Jew or convert. Just as we don't love a sinning Jew, we don't love others who sin. This includes a non-Jew who opposes God.

But the mitzvah to hate the sinner does not mean we harm people. Rather, that we do not support their actions. And "loving" others does not mean we falsify our feelings. It's impossible to love one whom we do not love. It is like saying one believes in X, when one does not actually believe. Rather, love means—as the Rabbis teach—to "treat" another in words and actions as we wish to be treated. But it does not demand the impossible, to emote when no feelings exist. Hate, then, also means to not support a person who sins. For without hating him or her, we would harm ourselves (via identification) and others by supporting a sinner, be he Jew or gentile.

We return to your question: How are we to treat a gentile who is righteous? He is not subsumed under "Love your neighbor as yourself." Certainly we are to treat him or her with love. We learn human perfection from our patriarchs and matriarchs. Both Abraham and Rebecca did not walk, but ran to help complete strangers, and they both did so with much toil and time. Torah does not include only commands, but the many stories of our fathers and mothers are included as intentional role models. They helped others regardless of their religion. We are to do the same.

Finally, let's understand the context. "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen; love your fellow as yourself, I am the Lord" (Lev. 19:18). Why is loving your neighbor grouped with vengeance and grudges? This bears out the above, that love is not defined as emotion, but as action that opposes grudges and vengeance. ■

GOD

WHAT IS HE?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Not even Moses could know what God is, “For man cannot know Me while alive” (Exod. 33:20)—but we can know what God has performed. Our initial morning blessing, “Baruch She’amar” isolates fundamental truths about what God is. We marvel at the prophets and rabbis, whose words form our blessings, as their blessings are formulated with precise wording, and order. This blessing is a fine example of a logical hierarchy of ideas:

Blessed Who spoke, and the world came into being, blessed is He.

Blessed the Maker of the beginning.

Blessed Who says and acts.

Blessed Who decrees and fulfills.

Blessed Who has compassion on Earth.

Blessed Who has compassion on the creatures.

Blessed Who rewards well those who fear Him.

Blessed Who lives forever and exists eternally.

Blessed Who redeems and saves.

Blessed is His Name.

“Blessed Who spoke, and the world came into being, blessed is He.”

“Spoke” is not literal, for no one existed to whom God could talk. “Spoke” means God willed the universe to exist. With His will alone, He created the universe. That is astonishing.

This first statement is followed by “Blessed is He” while all other statements are not. Why? God as the “sole creator” is the most defining truth about who God is. All else that exists requires Him to exist. This truth is most praiseworthy. For man praises that which impresses him most. “Blessed is He” is akin to “I, I, for My own sake, wipe your transgressions away and remember your sins no more” (Isaiah 43:25). Why the repetition of “I, I”? For if the verse said, “I wipe your transgression away,” we would understand the focus to be that, “God forgives.” But by saying, “I, I forgive” the message is different: that God “and no other” can forgive man.

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This first blessing praises God—and no other—as He willed the universe into existence, and for this amazing act, we say Blessed is “He” and no other. This is God’s unity.

“Blessed the Maker of the beginning”

Aitz Yosef says this refers to God’s sustenance of creation. This is a vital point. Many think that once God creates something, that existence now has no further need for God, since existence is thought to be inextricably part of that thing. But this is patently wrong. Without God also sustaining what He creates, creation of a thing does not dictate that it endures: it would come into existence and then vanish into nothingness. It is only with 2 wills from God that creations endure: 1) God wills something to come into existence, and 2) God wills it to continue. “Creating the beginning” implies that creations have a beginning to speak of, but anything with a beginning by definition also has existence past its beginning. I can speak of the beginning of a ruler, at inch #1. It’s end is inch #12. But a mathematical point has no measure; it has no size, but refers to an exact location. It has no beginning or end. We can locate a point only by referring to what is to its left or right. But creations are here after their beginning so man might refer to them “now,” and he may refer to them earlier: at their beginning. Man referring to a creation now, means that creation has endurance, given to it by God. By definition, this also teaches that God created time for all matter to experience a lifespan or a duration.

Therefore, this second blessing praises God for creating time and enabling creations to endure. Time and matter’s duration were created together with God’s will for the universe to emerge.

“Blessed Who says and acts”

There is no consideration unknown to God. What He says (wills) equates exactly to what He does. He is not ignorant of any consideration, so all His plans are fully realized and succeed.

This third blessing praises God’s omniscience.

“Blessed Who decrees and fulfills”

Nothing prevents God’s enactment of His will.

This fourth blessing praises God’s omnipotence.

“Blessed Who has compassion on earth”

Compassion means to help what is in need. Earth is inanimate; compassion or mercy cannot

apply to rocks and soil which have no needs. This compassion must be in terms of how Earth relates to mankind. God’s creation of Earth was designed around mankind: his objective to search out God through His wisdom embedded in Earth and Torah.

This fifth blessing praises God for designing mankind’s habitat in a fashion that enables our objective.

“Blessed Who has compassion on the creatures”

God granted man free will. Through it, man is the only creature who errs and sins, veering from his path towards perfection. God’s compassion is expressed in miracles and interventions as concessions to man’s needs and forgiveness for his sins. God desires man’s ultimate good, so we praise God with this sixth praise for His tolerance and intervention to guide us.

“Blessed Who rewards well those who fear Him”

God designed man with the capacity to enjoy earthly life in Torah study, and earn eternal blissful existence. This is the great good God intends for man and why God created Earth (Rashi on Pirkei Avos 2:8). We cannot praise God enough for offering us such goodness and pleasure.

“Blessed Who lives forever and exists eternally”

This qualifies the eternity of the reward received by righteous men and women. As God is eternal, he can eternally reward good people (Aitz Yosef).

“Blessed Who redeems and saves”

God also is compassionate on those who need redemption to enjoy eternal life. He redeems those with faults and sins and saves them from losing eternal life.

“Blessed is His Name”

As stated at the outset, we cannot know what God is; all we know is His name, His fame. After having described many praises, we must be on guard to remain in check that we do not formulate any notion of God’s essence by projecting human qualities onto Him. Therefore we conclude with our statement of complete ignorance of His essential nature and we bless only His name. ■

PARSHA

Attacked from Within

RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week's Parsha, Korach, describes the revolt against the authority of Moshe that was spearheaded by his cousin, Korach. Ostensibly he was vexed about Moshe's appointment of his brother, Aaron to be the Chief Kohen. After the construction of the Mishkan Moshe assigned its administrators to their positions. They were divided into two groups, Kohanim and Levites.

The former who constituted all male descendants of Aaron performed the main services connected to the sacrifices. The Levites who belonged to the Tribe of Levi but were not offspring of Aaron served in a secondary capacity. They played the musical instruments and sang the songs that accompanied the offerings. They were also responsible for transporting the Mishkan in the Wilderness travels.

Korach was a Levite and as such did have an opportunity to participate in the Temple service though he had to take a back seat to the Kohanim. What was his gripe? He complained that Moshe was guilty of seeking to amass power for himself and his family. After all he was the political, military and judicial ruler. The most exalted religious positions in the nation were those of Kohen and Levite and they were shared by his brother and the rest of his tribe. You have to admit that on the surface it might appear a bit suspicious.

However Moshe did not make these appointments of his own accord but was directed to by Hashem. The matter was exacerbated by the fact that originally the Bechorim (first born) were supposed to offer the sacrifices. When these types of changes are made one can always expect trouble. The "rejected" ones will not take their dismissal lightly nor attribute it to their own shortcomings but to the selfish motives of the leaders.

Indeed the tribe of Reuven played a major

part in the rebellion. Their ancestor was the first born of Yaakov and thus they felt that they were entitled to a special appointment.

However there were two considerations that the conspirators might have kept in mind which cast doubt on their claim that Moshe acted for personal motives.

First of all they should have been humbled as a result of the sin of the Golden Calf. All of the tribes of Israel (except Levi) were involved in this transgression and thereby disqualified from the Temple Service. Instead of feeling upset that they were bypassed they should have humbly acknowledged their role in the Eigel and also recognized that the tribe of Levi, alone, never worshipped idols and in fact executed justice against all those who slipped into idolatry.

In addition their accusation that Moshe was power hungry was wild and unjustified. That is because, in point of fact, Moshe was "more humble than any man on the face of the earth." Not only did he not desire or seek power but he had argued with Hashem not to appoint him as leader of the Jews. Thus the failure of the conspirators to consider the consequences of idolatry as well as their inability to realize how absurd it was to project a lust for power onto Moshe were responsible for their their grievous uprising.

What was the real source of Korach's accusation against Moshe? In a blistering response to Korach's arrogant claims Moshe asked him, if the honor of being selected to do the service of the Levites was not enough for him that, "you also seek the Priesthood?" Korach was a frustrated individual who felt he was cheated out of the honors he imagined he was entitled to. It was he who had a yearning for prestige and when that was thwarted he projected that flaw onto Moshe who was a truly humble person.

The Rabbis divined another dimension to

the story. They depicted Korach as challenging the Halachik authority of Moshe. Accordingly they portrayed Korach and his cohorts as behaving in a shameful manner when they confronted Moshe with certain Halachik shailot (inquiries). For example, they asked, "Does a garment which is fully dyed with techelet (special blue dye used for Tzitzit/fringes) require fringes? Or, if a house if filled with Torah Scrolls does it still require a Mezuzah?"

Moshe responded that these matters must be viewed from that standpoint of Jewish Law. While it may seem that in the instances cited there is no need for fringes or Mezuzah, the issue requires an understanding of how the Halacha functions. The Halacha takes on a life of its own and operates according to its inner logic even when it may seem to deviate from the overall purpose of the Mitzvah. From a Halachik perspective every house of a certain dimension requires a Mezuzah irrespective of what happens to be inside the house. Moshe expressed the Halachik or Torah truth to which the rebels laughed disparagingly. But Moshe had the last word.

The Rabbis thus recognized that the rebellion of Korach was not just against certain appointments of Moshe but also in opposition to the very foundations of the Halachik system by which Torah observance is regulated. This aspect of the Revolt has afflicted the Jews throughout the ages. Reformist movements have constantly arisen to alter Judaism to render it more in conformity with the "spirit of the times."

We are living in an era of massive moral and ethical upheaval. Behaviors, especially in the realm of sexuality which were previously disapproved, are now glorified. This new morality has had an impact on Jewish religious leaders many of whom feel compelled to "rethink" time honored practices and attitudes.

Sadly, it is not only the Reform and Conservative movements that are quick to discard classical Torah principles. Certain elements within the Orthodox Community now seem ready to modify the classical Judaic position on vital areas of Torah morality.

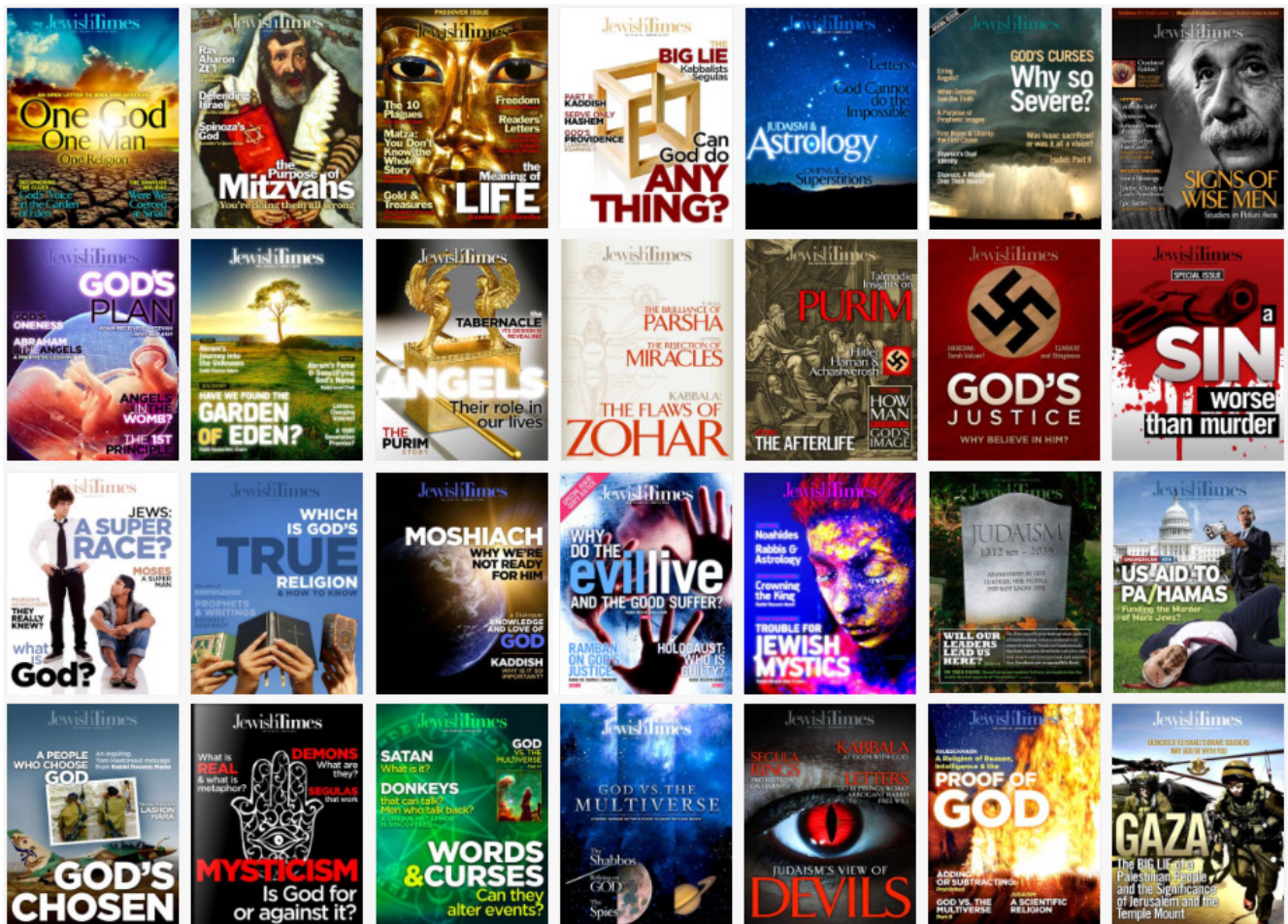
Those of us who believe in and live by the Torah that was bequeathed to us by Moshe must recognize the seriousness of this matter and not be lulled into an acceptance a falsified version of our eternal religion. Like the great Torah leaders of our history we must courageously defend and fight for the authentic Jewish position on all the moral challenges of our time. If we battle with wisdom, courage and faith we will prevail with G-d's help.

Shabbat Shalom ■

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No Trace

Palestinians: Absent from World History

Alex Po spoke well: “When you make antisemitic comments [Omar], you get to keep your seat on the foreign affairs committee in Congress and be applauded by your fellow Democrats [Pelosi, Tlaib]. But express a factual statement that no country called ‘Palestine’ exists, and you have to lose your seat on the NYC Council’s Immigration Committee?” Kalman Yeger stated fact: Palestine does not exist. This isn’t a news flash, or a declaration of the inequality of Arabs, but historical fact. Today’s “Palestinians” trace their lineage to Arabs: there never was a Palestinian people. A history of the land of Israel’s occupiers is vital knowledge:

2000 BC—1500 BC: Canaanites and Jews
1500 BC—1100 BC: Egyptians and Israelites
1100 BC—700 BC: Jews, Philistines (who were Egyptians)
700 BC—100 BC: Assyrians, Jews, Babylonians, Greeks and Persians
100 BC—400 AD: Jews and Romans
400 AD—700 AD: Jews and Byzantines
700 AD—1500 AD: Jews, Sunny Arab Caliphates, Shia Fatimid Caliphate, Crusaders, Ayyubids and Mameluks
1500 AD—1800 AD: Jews and Ottomans
1800 AD—1948 AD: Jews, British and Arab ethnic groups
PALESTINE AND PALESTINIANS NEVER EXISTED

The left and Arabs attack Jews for stating historical fact, instead of submitting to a truth. They are fooled by the repeated lie of a “Palestine” scripted and promoted by displaced Arabs seeking land. Being fed this story from youth, these Arabs can’t admit they’re wrong, so they support the lie with no evidence. Giving up the lie would equate to abandoning their one dream in life, so they favor a lie over truth. The Bible and archeology constantly reveal evidence of Israel’s ownership of Israel and its ancient language, while history refutes a “Palestine.”

Unlike the biased Arafat, Abbas, Sarsour, Omar, and Tlaib and AOC who’s subjective agenda is to rewrite history for personal motives, an honest person accepts the facts, no matter how disturbing. A “Palestinian people” is a historical myth. These Arabs and US congress members contradict history and unveil their anti-Semitism with each of their succeeding baseless attacks.

But be clear: Judaism preaches human equality. The honest Jew loves

an Arab as he loves another Jew, for we are all God’s children. The Jew is not superior, as we all descend from Adam and Eve. We are all equals. We all possess intellect and emotions. But what we should all equally do, is use our intellects to determine and accept truths, and not follow emotional biases, regardless of upbringing or emotional leanings.

Throughout time, and without provoking our enemies, we have been attacked, tortured and murdered en masse. You ask, “Without provocation? Why then are YOU always attacked?” The answer is not for what “we” did, but for what “God” did. One time in history at Mt. Sinai did God reveal Himself to masses, and give His law, the Bible (Torah). No other people make this claim. In fact, all others accept this historical truth, to the point that Christians form their religion based on our Bible, and Islam too accepts it. Gentiles feel that God favored the Jews, and therefore, attack the Jews. But God did not give us His Bible due to favoritism, but because all people at that time were idolaters, except Abraham and his descendants. Only they would accept God’s monotheism. We now bear the obligation to study the Bible and share it with all peoples, as is God’s wish that all His children follow Him equally. Oddly, the anti-Semite should, truly be angry with God, not with the Jews, for giving us His Bible was His plan, not ours. However, a religious person finds great frustration in this reality, and cannot hate God, so he vents that frustration on God’s chosen people.

There is only one mankind; there can be only one religion. And history teaches this truth, that God never again revealed Himself to man with a religion. If other peoples could rise above the infantile sibling rivalry that fuels anti-Semitism, and learn that we wish to fulfill our obligation to teach God’s Torah to all peoples interested in learning it, that we view all others as equals, and desire the good for all others just as for ourselves, peace will be achieved between all people. If truth is embraced, and people recognize the lie of a “Palestinian” people, and rather, that we are all to share one life of monotheism...if others would study the Bible’s message of equality and its moral codes, anti-Semitism would vanish.

But as long as those ignorant of how and why the Palestinian lie came about support that lie, Israel and Jews will remain targeted for another lie of “occupation,” and for our role as a chosen people, not as a “better” people. Jews who speak the truth will be scorned, while those peddling a false narrative will hurt everyone by misleading the public from truth, from God’s one religion, the Bible. ■

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What I'm learning about almost dying

Avi Liberman

Some facial paralysis, 32 staples in my skull, and overwhelming concern from loved ones have given all kinds of new meaning to "The show must go on"

I was in a very serious car accident less than two weeks ago that required emergency brain surgery, and, as I am writing this, I have 32 staples in my skull and have partial paralysis on the left side of my face. I was 25 minutes away from dying, but let's start off with the good news!

As a standup comic, that's what I'm supposed to do anyway. Some people thought this is way too early to reflect on what I'm going through, as I was asked to write about it, but it's such a unique time, why not seize it? I can also finally stare at a screen without getting a big headache, so I might as well take advantage. I got a lot of "whenever you are ready" comments, as far as writing about this, all meant with the utmost kindness, but I'm not sure if anyone is ever ready, so no time like the present.

As far as the positives: I can walk. I can see. And my recovery was described as, shall we say, "rare," when it came to the speed of it, in terms of being able to balance, dizziness, and numerous other things they test. I try to exercise regularly and took some small pride when they started taking my vitals (when I was conscious enough to answer) and they kept asking, "Do you run or something? Do you exercise?" Once I was standing, I was doing regular walking laps around the hallways of the hospital and I'd get some looks from the nurses, all positive, and they could not have been nicer in helping me. Emotionally, there were also positives that I would have never imagined.

As I woke up from the surgery (I have no memory of getting hit by the truck), I remember seeing my parents walking in and my friend Rachel on the phone, and her telling a nurse: "Yes, I'm his sister," which she's not, but Rachel is tough as nails, and clearly wasn't going to put up with whatever technical rules they had as far as visitors. While I was in agony, since I had a tube down my throat and was now throwing up from it, the ICU nurse Kate, kept cleaning it up and fought to get it taken out. She called in a doctor and said my oxygen levels were fine and the doctor agreed, and cleared her removing it. She told me she would still have to insert a tube down my nose and into my stomach and it was going to hurt so I should grab the hand of Rachel and squeeze. I did just that and made it through, and Rachel told me she felt better that I had good pressure on her hand so there was some strength there.

My sister (my actual sister, who is a nurse) showed up after flying in from Massachusetts, and my brother was right behind her coming in from LA. They both told me, "You're aware there are a ton of people worried about you and inquiring?" I honestly wasn't, but after realizing, it obviously gave me hope and I was beyond touched. It mattered to me more than anything that people reached out and their phone calls meant the world. They were worried about "bothering" me as far as calls, etc. but my head hurt, so reading messages on a screen online was harder. My siblings were champs in helping me with that, and I felt determined to try to answer everyone and thank them for reaching out. My sister's strength is her calm demeanor and level head (no pun intended with the head reference), and I distinctly remember grabbing her hand when she came in and thinking, "Thank God." My brother's strength is his intensity, and, when it came to gathering records, making sure the necessary medication was being prescribed, and connecting with doctors I would need when I was released, he was all over it and I didn't need to

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worry about it. My parents of course were a whole other level of caring, which I can't even really describe, so I won't.

The friends, and some strangers, they allowed in (the friends would sometimes pose as clergy which I thought was hilarious) were also beyond helpful. My friend Max, who is my neighbor back in LA, showed up out of nowhere, and I still have no idea how he got in, but I felt immediate relief upon seeing him, and he went above and beyond and arranged a Hatzolah Air flight back to Houston for me and my family, on a donated jet, which checked vitals while I was on the flight. They even said they could lower altitude if the pressure on my ear and head was too much. It was amazing how much they cared.

Days before any of that even happened, as a practicing Jew when it came to various religious ceremonies, they all of a sudden took on a special importance to me. As Friday night approached, I got worried. Visitors were not allowed after 8 p.m. and the Sabbath was rolling in right about that time. How was I going to recite or listen to the Kiddush, the blessing over the grape juice? Before I knew it, out of nowhere, two young Chabad Hasidic Jews come walking into my room and took over. "How did you guys even get in here?" "We're officially clergy! We're on the list and Rabbi Klein at the synagogue in Aventura arranged it!" When they started reciting various blessings, I tried to join in, but absolutely broke down. I could barely get through it.

A Chabad Hasid named Mendy Goren passed away a couple years ago, and I wrote an article about him and, and how much he and his family in Miami meant to me. No surprise that they were instrumental in connecting my family to the hospital and letting others know where I was. His image popped right into my head when they started the service as if he was telling me, "Did you really think I'd let you go without this? I have you taken care of, even from this world!" I even successfully took a small sip of the grape juice and felt like the Sabbath mattered more than ever.

I had some other emotional moments where I broke down, where another friend also named Avi came and did the Havdalah closing service of the Sabbath, and he had no call to do so. I also had a

great visit where my friend Achicam, who was also hurt in the accident with me (though he had some broken ribs, thank God, he did not require hospitalization, and is on the full mend) came to visit, and we basically collapsed into each other's arms, happy that we were both alive. His choice of a Volvo basically saved my life and I'll forever be grateful.

While this all may sound inspirational and giant pile of good feelings, what I learned is that every sob, ever interaction is not going to be that, and the image I may have of myself of "being able to beat it" could have been just a mirage to help me cope. Was I even being honest?

When I got back to Houston with my parents and brother, I broke down again, but this time it wasn't a giant pile of hugs and good feelings. I was angry and depressed. Did I even have call to feel that way? After all, I had already bucked some pretty good odds right? Numerous people said I was lucky to be alive, walking, etc. Was I being rational?

I don't remember exactly what triggered my losing it, but it was a general discussion of treatments, expected time of recovery with my face paralysis, and all my parents and brother were trying to do was help. I began walking around the house screaming, "This isn't me!! I'm supposed to make people smile and now I can't even do it myself!! This isn't me!! I'm not some kind of pity case! I don't want to be a professional victim!! I'm the guy who bucks the odds not the other way around!!" I got so angry when they wouldn't agree that maybe I could beat this at some absurd fast rate...I picked up a bottle of water (half full at least so it didn't break open) and threw it on the ground, and actually hurt my arm, I slammed it down so hard. I know they were just trying to avoid disappointed expectations, but I was furious and couldn't calm down.

When I finally did relax, my dad was also crying, but not because he was sad. He simply said he was grateful I was still alive. He viewed it as such a gift that his son was still here and he was actually relieved I had finally broken down in flat out depression. It showed I was human, and of course, he was right.

After calming down even more the next day,

two close friends who are comics, Dan and Ray, group-called me and said they had seen other comics who have had strokes, go on stage, address it briefly and then move on. You only become a victim on stage if you present yourself that way, so... don't.

I was also fortunate enough years ago to do some shows in Iraq and Afghanistan, where I met some elite soldiers, who I've kept in touch with. My buddy Chris called me and he has been through not one, not two, but three traumatic head injuries and he really helped me. He told me to take it easy and that whatever type-A attitude I wanted to display was not the route to take. I was worried I was acting like a big baby, but Chris assured me. "Oh believe me, if you are, we'll let you know!"

I know it's only been a short time, but I'll do the best I can as far as taking stock.

What have I learned so far in going through this and in being right in the middle of it? The obvious answer is of course that I still have a lot to learn. While I'm now embarrassed that I have some shame, in that I can't even post a picture without the obvious facial struggles, maybe that's okay. Crying and getting depressed and constantly questioning scenarios in my life are also okay. Let's be brutally honest. I have a job to do, and aside from spreading joy, love, positivity, whatever you want to call it, part of that job is being a human being, with all the faults that accompany it.

In the end, what has jumped out to me the most is just how much family, friends, and, oddly enough, even total strangers can get you through the hardest times. We have our bad days, no question, but in the end, we can do more than just survive. We can live. Let's start there, and hopefully we can all learn as we go, and live better, struggles and all. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Avi Liberman is a stand-up comic who was born in Israel, raised in Texas and now lives in Los Angeles. Avi founded Comedy for Koby, a bi-annual tour of Israel featuring some of America's top stand-up comedians.



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CONDÉ NAST



the Angel of Death

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

In Parshas Korach (Numbers 17:13) Rashi states an amazing story of how Aaron “seized the Angel of Death against its will.” In order to understand this metaphor, we must first understand the events immediately prior.

God killed Korach and his rebellion. On the morrow, the Jewish people said the following (Numbers, 17:6): “You (Moses and Aaron) have killed the people of God,” referring to Korach and his assembly. Evidently, the Jews could not make such a statement the same day as God’s destruction of the Korach assembly, perhaps because the Jews were too frightened at the moment. But as their terror waned, they mustered the courage to speak their true feelings on the next day.

What they said were actually two accusations: 1) Moses and Aaron are murderers, and 2) those who were murdered were God’s people. The Jews made two errors, and God addressed both.

The method God used to correct their second error was to demonstrate through a miracle that Aaron in fact was following God, and Korach and his group were not: detached wood—the staff—miraculously continued its growth and blossomed almonds. Aaron’s rod blossoming demonstrated whom God favored, and to whom He related, even via a miracle. Now the Jew’s false opinion that Korach followed God was rejected, as it was Aaron’s staff—not Korach’s—which God favored.

But how did Moses correct the people’s false opinion that he and Aaron were murderers? How did the incense, which Moses instructed Aaron to bring correct the problem, and stay off the plague, which God sent to kill the Jews? Moses commanded Aaron to take the incense and stand between the living and the dead during the plague, which only temporarily stopped the plague. It was not until Aaron returned back to Moses that God completely halted the plague. What does Aaron standing there accomplish, that it stopped the plague temporarily? Additionally, what does his return to Moses and God at the Tent of Meeting do? This is where the Rashi comes in:

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

Aaron seized the angel of death against its will. The angel said, "Leave me to do my mission." Aaron said, "Moses commanded me to prevent you." The angel said, "I am the messenger of God, and you are (only) the messenger of Moses." Aaron said, "Moses says nothing on his own accord, rather, (he says matters only) through God. If you do not believe me, behold Moses and God are at the Tent of Meeting, come with me and ask" and this is the meaning of "and Aaron returned to Moses" [Num. 17:15]. (Rashi, Num. 17:13).

Moses knew that the people accused him and Aaron of murder. The Jews saw Moses and God as two opposing sides, i.e., Moses was not working in sync with God, as he apparently killed the "people of God," i.e., Korach and his congregation. The Jews' accusation "You have killed the people of God" displayed the people's belief that God was correct to follow, but Moses opposed God's will. Moses now attempted to correct the Jews, and show that in fact, he and Aaron were not murderers opposing God. Moses sent Aaron to make atonement for the Jews. What was this atonement, and how did it entitle the Jews to be saved from God's current plague?

The Jews saw Aaron with his incense offering, standing at the place where the last Jew dropped down in death; the plague progressed in a domino fashion. And the Jews now saw that no more Jews were dropping down dead, due to Aaron's presence with the incense. They were now perplexed: they accused Aaron and Moses as murderers, but Aaron was now healing—not killing—as they previously accused. This perplexity is what the Rashi described metaphorically as "Aaron seizing the Angel of Death." Aaron was now correcting the "opinion" of the people, which earned them death, as if Aaron seized the cause of their death. The people's opinion was in fact, their own "Angel of Death." This means that the angel is not a real being, but the cause of death is man's own distance from God. And these Jews were distant from God when they imputed murder to Moses and Aaron.

As the Jews were now second guessing their accusation, but not completely abandoning this false view of Aaron and Moses, the plague stopped, but only temporarily, reflecting their temporal suspension of their accusation. We may interpret Aaron as "seizing the angel of death" as his correction the Jews' false accusation of Moses and Aaron. "Seizing the Angel of Death" means Aaron removed the cause of death in the remaining Jews; he corrected their false notions which earned them death.

When they saw Aaron standing between the living and the dead with incense halting the plague, the Jews were confused. Aaron is Moses' messenger, but the plague was clearly from God. So, how could Aaron and Moses overpower God? This is what Rashi means when metaphorically the Angel of Death tells Aaron, "I am the messenger of God, and you are (only) the messenger of Moses." The Angel in this metaphor personifies the false opinions of the people, which caused death. But with a corrected opinion, God will not kill. So, the Angel talking in this metaphor represents the Jewish people's corrupt opinion, which in fact causes death. (Sometimes, false views can be so wrong that the follower of such a view deserves death.)

Returning to the Rashi, Aaron replies to the Angel one last time, "Moses says nothing on his own accord, rather, (he says matters only) through God. If you do not believe me, behold Moses and God are at the Tent of Meeting, come with me and ask." At this point, the plague was temporarily stopped, as the Jews were entertaining the idea that Moses and Aaron were not murderers, as Aaron was trying to keep them alive. Their perplexity about whether Aaron and Moses were following God had to be removed if they were to live permanently. This is what is meant that when Aaron returned to the tent of meeting (Num. 17:15) and the plague was terminated completely. As the Jews witnessed Aaron, Moses, and God "together" they now understood that Moses and Aaron were in fact followers of God. The metaphor depicts Aaron as "seizing" the corrupt views of the people which demanded their death, allegorized by seizing the "Angel of Death."

This Rashi is yet another of literally thousands of examples where the Rabbis wrote in riddles, as King Solomon taught in Proverbs 1:6. We learn from King Solomon, to whom God gave knowledge miraculously (Kings I, 3:12) that riddles are a means of education. We must continue to look for the hidden meanings in the Rabbis' words, which at first seem bizarre. We must not take amazing stories literally. There are no demons roaming the Earth, no angels of death, no powers of segulas that protect. God is the only power, and He created the Earth and heavens and all they behold, with distinct, limited physical properties and laws. Physical creation cannot exceed its design: a string dyed red does not suddenly get transformed into a device which wards off God's punishments. It is unfortunate that we have become so idolatrous with red bendels.

What is worse, is that children are taught to accept superstitions. They become prime candidates for missionaries. Superstitious rearing teaches children that Christianity is no different.

This new mystical, pop-kabbalistic Judaism blurs the lines between true Torah principles and all other religions. When Jews fail to see the difference between a superstitious Judaism and other religions, they more easily convert. And they are accurate in this equation: there is no difference between a Judaism that preaches segulas, or that parts of God are "inside man," and between Christianity that makes identical claims.

What parents, teachers, and leaders must do is teach our fundamentals. If Jewish children were taught the "What's" and "Whys" about God's unity; that He is not physical since He created all physical things, that He created everything and nothing possesses powers but He alone, that we cannot know what He is and therefore we can't say "part of God is in man," that His Torah is correct (and how it is so), that He rewards and punishes...if students were taught the proofs behind these ideas, then far less students would abandon their observance. Far more students would find profound reasons to remain observant and continue their studies and grow more dedicated to a Torah life. However, the fundamentals are not being taught.

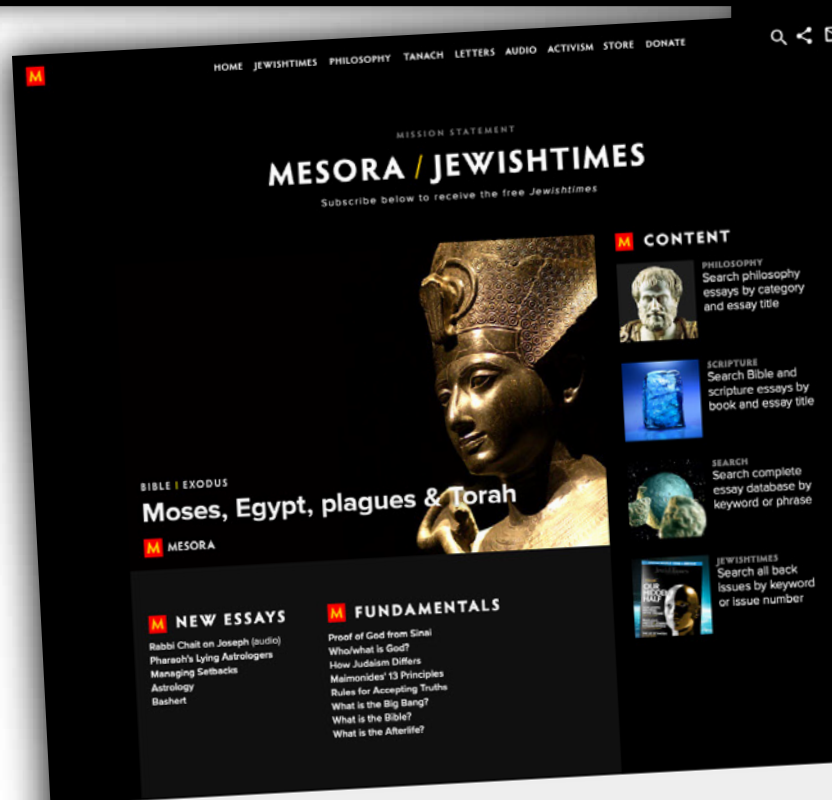
Maimonides formulated his 13 Principles for a reason. Teach them to your children now. ■



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OUR PURPOSE: WISDOM & MORALITY



God created man to live by truths concerning Him, creation, others and ourselves.

We must study God's instruction about what He is, what is idolatrous or fallacy, we must study nature, psychology, philosophy and morality. This draws us closer to God and He to us, and creates societal harmony which fosters greater Torah for all.

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. 1:17). "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.



EMAIL

Model of King Solomon's temple, Jerusalem



Replacing the Kohen

Rabbi Eliezer Barany

Then he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, "Come morning, the LORD will make known who is His and who is holy, and will grant him access to Himself; He will grant access to the one He has chosen. (Sefer Bamidbar 16:5)

In this week's Parshah the leadership of Moshe is challenged by Korach. He claims that the entire people of Israel are holy and therefore the priests are not needed to worship Hashem. Each person has the opportunity, and ability, to do so! Moshe directs Korach to provide an incense offering to show who actually relays the word of God. In pushing Korach off to the next day, Moshe says that they should wait until the morning to offer this sacrifice. Rashi explains that this was meant to push him off, so Korach and his followers would reconsider their decision. However, he also quotes a Midrash that picks up on the language of morning as opposed to perhaps saying tomorrow. He quotes:

A Midrashic explanation of the word morning is the following: Moses said to him (Korach): "The Holy One, blessed be He, has assigned bounds in His world; can you, perhaps, change the morning into evening? Just as little, will you be able to make this of no effect, — as indeed it states, (Genesis 1:5) "and it was evening and it was morning...(Genesis 1:4) "and God separated [light from darkness]"; and in the same sense it states, (I Chronicles 23:13) "and Aaron was separated that he should be sanctified (Midrash Tanchuma, Korach 5). (Commentary of Rashi on Sefer Bamidbar 16:5)

The Midrash explains the usage of the term morning. Just as day and night were physically separated, so too Aharon and his descendants were separated from the rest of Klal Yisrael (The Community of Yisrael). The Midrash teaches us that we shouldn't delude ourselves to think that changing the Kehunah (priesthood) would be any different or possible than trying to change the Laws of Nature. As such, Korach has no ground to stand on.

The problem with this Midrash is that it is patently false. We constantly beseech God to alter decisions he has made. While perhaps one might think alternatives exist in our fortune and God's involvement, one may believe that the service of God is unchanging. However, according to Rabbi Ovadya Sforno, the tabernacle was only given due to the Sin of the Golden Calf.

And even more importantly, the Kohanim (priests) were not even originally going to run the Temple! As the verse states:

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

I hereby take the Levites from among the Israelites in place of all the first-born, the first issue of the womb among the Israelites: the Levites shall be Mine. (Sefer Bamidbar 3:12)

The Torah explains that originally the firstborn males were going to work in the Temple, but they were replaced with the Levites after the Sin of the Golden Calf. The Midrash implies that you can't change the selection of the Kohanim who were chosen to serve in the Temple. But God did just that! How is this response a refutation of Korach's approach?

And one who cries out over the past, it is a vain prayer. For example, one whose wife was pregnant and he says: May it be God's will that my wife will give birth to a male child, it is a vain prayer. Or one who was walking on the path home and he heard the sound of a scream in the city, and he says: May it be God's will that this scream will not be from my house, it is a vain prayer. (Mesechet Berachot Perek 9 Mishnah 3)

The Mishnah explains that one who prays to change the past has uttered a useless request. Their Tefilah is meaningless. The Rambam explains that one cannot pray for something which has happened, rather, one needs to pray for the future. I believe that this is the response of Moshe given by the Midrash.

The people who left Egypt did not need the Mishkan, according to the Sforno. The people who left Egypt and then worshipped the Golden Calf needed the Mishkan. Due to something they did, it was impossible to now serve God in a manner without the Mishkan/Temple.

Now, a people who built and worshipped the Golden calf could not be the ones to work in the Temple. The Levites became the emblematic tribe of service of Hashem. Since this event already happened, even if the plan had been that the firstborns were to serve, the non-Levites were now marred with the stain of idolatry. This is similar to a Kohen who previously worshiped a foreign deity. Even if he does Teshuvah, he is unable to work in the Temple anymore. That person is now associated with idolatry.

Aharon on the other hand was associated with the saving of the people. Just like Moshe pushed off Korach to the next day, so too Aharon pushed off the people to the next day to delay working on the golden calf. To help the people. We now have Aharon the Kohen as a reminder of the saving of the entire nation. Korach was looking to change the past. From this point onward, the Kohanim were already separated. This has already happened. Korach was asking God to change the past. It was His will to establish Aharon and his descendants to be

Kohanim. He was the one to save the people from being completely lost in the golden calf.

A pre-golden calf nation merited the firstborns to serve God in the Temple. Now that this nation was different, they had gone through the sin of the golden calf, so God responded by separating the one who saved them – Aharon the Kohen. Korach wanted to reject this reality that Aharon saved the people, the model of the tribe of the Levites. Aharon already separated himself by helping the people, so God acknowledged this separation.

Now, if a person wants to serve in the Temple, it is impossible. There is one tribe associated with the service. This cannot change. So much so, that if a person wants to advance in their Avodat Hashem (service of God), if someone needs to bring a sacrifice as a part of Teshuvah, they are physically unable to connect to God without the aid of the Kohen.

A person shouldn't delude themselves to think that night is day, or that one could offer a sacrifice without a Kohen and a Temple and think they are clinging to the Divine. It is physically impossible. It is not two different approaches in life, it is reality and delusion. That is what the Midrash is teaching us.

We cannot decide how we want to connect to God. There is a reality that exists, and one who ignores that is as disillusioned as one who thinks day is night. So while in the past the firstborns may have merited service in the temple, we, living in a post Golden-Calf world, associate the tribe of Levi as being distanced from this event. If we would see the firstborn serving in the temple we would immediately think of the Golden Calf.

The service in the Temple is separated from the Golden Calf. The two are qualitatively dissimilar. This tribe has a separate identity. To deny that is to deny reality.

Korach wanted to deny this reality of how memories and association work. This is a reality of the human mind just as much as the reality of the physical world. There is no distinction. That is why the Midrash explains there are bounds and contrasts.

The original text of the Midrash supplies contradictions of night and day, light and dark, Israel and the other nations, and Aharon and the rest of Israel. These differences exist. One can't deny them. Similarly, one cannot deny an event that has occurred and has become a reality; just like the Creation of light and dark.

So when we seek to approach a life of service of Hashem, we need to look at what is real. Our past informs our future. God Created man in a certain way and provided our nature with a specific method of reaching Him. If we want to advance we need to look at what was given. We need to look backwards to move forward. We cannot change the past, but we can very much learn from it and alter our present because of it. ■

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