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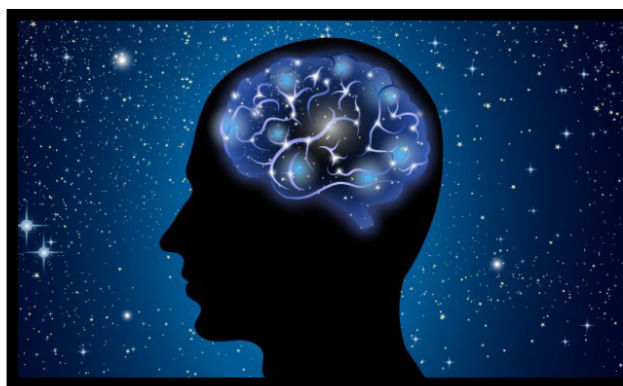
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Torah means "guide," with which God guides us to study our psyches, to manage our emotions and lead perfected lives.

LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Avraham & the Angels

READER: Genesis 18:1 says G-d appeared to Abraham. Genesis 18:2 says, three men. Is one of the men/angels, G-d? Abraham identified one as G-d. 18:1 has G-d speaking with Abraham. Verse 2 is a natural flow of the continuation of the dialogue uninterrupted. After Abraham fed his guests, one of them promises that Sarah will bear a son. Only an all-knowing, omnipresent being could make such a promise. [One of] the three guests are called Adonay, which means master, but can also refer to G-d. When the two guests leave to Sodom, G-d stays with Abraham. If G-d is a separate voice, who is the third angel? A plain reading of the text suggests that G-d is one of them. After wrestling with an angel/man, Jacob calls the place Peniel, meaning the face of G-d. El in Peniel always refers to G-d in Hebrew. How do we square these with Rambam's principle that G-d has no body and is one? Is this a simple anthropomorphism? "The Torah speaks in human language." What are your thoughts?

RABBI: In last week's Jewishtimes I addressed this "encounter" between God, Abraham and the 3 men. God's appearance to Abraham is elucidated in the following verses depicting 3 men. This appearance (prophecy) began with Abraham servicing 3 men, as God wished to show Abraham that due to his kindness, He would then reveals new information of God's methods of justice, unattainable without prophecy. That is, God reveals His methods of kindness, justice and charity to one who embodies His ways, i.e., Abraham. This story did not occur on Earth, but in Abraham's mind, it was a prophetic vision. It appears from Rashi that the 3 men were all angels, each with a distinct mission, not that one was God. Although other explanations can be given that when Abraham spoke to the "leader" of the 3 men, he was addressing God, who is the leader of the angels. That these were angels now answers how they knew about Sarah's pregnancy. But note that God is not pictured in this vision. ■

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Lot & the Angels

Psychological Metaphor

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

How does conflicted man behave? How does he justify his sin? As Rabbi Israel Chait taught, Torah differs from other philosophies by presenting righteous role models, and not by merely identifying truths. We might apply this also to models of sinners. Role models surpass abstract principles, as we are more impacted by peoples' practices: their concrete actions with which we identify. Identification is a great tool to motivate us as our psychological faculties includes a self-image, and we create an acceptable self-image when we copy those whom we admire. Seeing role models in action offers us a most clear personality to copy. Human examples improve us, steering us away from evil and towards goodness, far better than what dry, abstract principles merely describe in text.

The story of Lot and the angels is one such role model presentation. The deeper psychological phenomena and dynamics are cloaked in God's scripted story, with very subtle clues, the details of which teach many nuances of human nature. The purpose of concealing psychological principles is because human emotions and psychological faculties are not "observable" in themselves. Many individuals reject what is not observable; others are not on the level to accept such truths, so God hides the lessons for those who can appreciate psychology and philosophical perfection, and know how to decipher Torah. Let's review this startling Torah story:

The two angels arrived in Sodom in the evening, as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to greet them and, bowing low with his face to the ground, he said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night, and bathe your feet; then you may be on your way early." But they said, "No, we will spend the night in the square." But he pressed them strongly, so they turned his way and entered his house. He prepared a feast for them and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. They had not yet lain down, when the townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old—all the people from everywhere—gathered about the house. And they shouted to Lot and said to him, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them." So Lot went out to them to the entrance, shut the door behind him, and said, "I beg you, my friends, do not commit such a wrong. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please; but do not do anything to these men, since they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they said, "Come here," and one said, "You came here to dwell, and will you now judge [us]? Now we will deal worse with you than with them." And they pressed hard against the person of Lot, and moved forward to break the door. But the angels stretched out their hands and pulled Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And the people who were at the entrance of the house, young and old, they struck with blindness, so that they were helpless to find the entrance. (Gen. 19:1-11)

Maimonides teaches: "We have already shown that the appearance or speech of an angel mentioned in scripture took place in a vision or dream" (Guide, book II, chap. xli). Following Maimonides' understanding that Torah stories including angels must be understood in a non-literal sense [angels are not

physical], I suggest below in this essay the following interpretation. Support for Maimonides' view is found in the following implications:

- Lot offers his daughters' for sexual pleasure—to an entire city—while sheltering complete strangers. This is extremely peculiar, that greater mercy is expressed for strangers than for one's daughters, whom the father treats cruelly as harlots.
- The practically impossible sudden gathering of literally all Sodomites—from “youths to elders”—from “all corners of Sodom” is not credible, if literal. News does not spread that fast, nor do all society's members act identically.
- The Sodomite's relentless search for Lot's door...even after they were blinded.
- The very phenomenon of blinding the Sodomites.
- The angels' initial rejection of Lot's hospitality, when they were in fact in Sodom to save him, is contrary to their goal.

As Torah is written with complete precision and no redundancy, where every detail is intended as an lesson, we wonder about the focus 11 times on Lot's “house,” “door,” “roof,” and “entrance.” Of what instruction are these details about Lot's home? And this verse captures our attention: “You came here to dwell, and will you now judge us? Now we will deal worse with you than with them.”

The Metaphor: Lot's Personality

This event is a metaphor. Of course, Lot was literally saved and Sodom was destroyed, as stated later: “Thus it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the plain and annihilated the cities where Lot dwelt, God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval” (Gen. 19:29). However, this highly detailed account of the angels, the Sodomites, and Lot and his “home” are unnecessary, if we are only meant to learn of Lot's salvation and Sodom's destruction. What then do all these details teach?

This entire metaphor depicts Lot's personality. God is once again instructing mankind on how the psyche operates, to guard from poor qualities and cleave to righteousness.

But they said, “No, we will spend the night in the square.” But he pressed them strongly, so they turned his way and entered his house.

Lot must coerce the angels to enter his home means that Lot must “force” proper morality upon himself (the angels represent justice). The angels' reluctance to enter Lot's home refers to Lot's reluctance to incorporate complete justice into his life. Lot chose to live in Sodom, a corrupt society bent on extreme promiscuity; he was attracted to immorality. Nonetheless, Lot followed some morality: he provided hospitality. Why? This was due to his conflict: he craved lusts but learned morality and kindness from Abraham. Lot was conflicted. Lot's solution was to assuage his guilt by performing some token act of kindness [towards these angels]. Support for Lot's resistance to act with full kindness was his meager “feast” (only dry matzos) served to the angels, while Abraham served the angels a lavish feast of meat, milk and cake, not meager matzos.

They had not yet lain down, when the townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old—all the people from everywhere—gathered about the house. And they shouted to Lot and said to him, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them.”

Suddenly after the angels entered—“They had not yet lain down”—the mob surrounded Lot's house—every citizen. As mentioned, this seems highly impractical that the news spread that immediately and that, “all” Sodomites arrived. But metaphorically speaking, this means that as soon as Lot performed some proper act of hospitality, his corrupt emotions (represented by the Sodomites) immediately conflicted with his token act of morality.

So Lot went out to them to the entrance, shut the door behind him

Why must we read 11 times about the “house,” “entrance,” and that he closed the “door”? Here is the key. This refers to Lot's dichotomy. His guilt demanded that he retain some sense of justice, and “closing the door” meant that Lot wished to compartmentalize his small measure of morality, to preserve an acceptable self-image. This required a “compartment” in his mind (his home in this metaphor) that he kept off-limits to immorality. Lot felt justified through some just act (hosting the men), thereby retaining an acceptable self-image. He could even tolerate a separate act of giving his daughters to the Sodomites for heterosexuality, but he would not cross the line of homosexuality with those angels, which secured for him a sense of justice. No. Those angels must not be involved in homosexuality. This explains Lot's words, “But do not do anything to these men, since they have come under the shelter of my roof.” In this metaphor, Lot's home represents a part of himself which he required to remain untainted, so as to view himself in some favorable light.

God refers to Lot's home 11 times! That's excessive, unless God wishes to emphasize the significance of this psychological phenomenon: Lot's home represents a “place” in his mind...a degree of abstinence from sin, through which he justifies all his other lusts. The conflicted man will dichotomize his values and actions to preserve his self-image. Lot forces good angels “into” his home, but prevents entrance by sinners into this compartment of his behavior. In other words, Lot forces some morality into his life. The numerous instances of Lot's home intend to call our attention to the core of the metaphor: a “compartment of his mind.” That compartment is Lot's self-image. Lot's “home” is the compartment of himself engaging morality.

Lot offering his daughters to the Sodomites displays his corrupt dichotomy, his absurd sense of justice...as the following conveys...

Indecision Corrupts

Lot said, “I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please; but do not do anything to these men, since they have come under the shelter of my roof.” The Sodomites replied: “You came here to dwell, and will you now judge [us]? Now we will deal worse with you than with them.”

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

Torah identifies Lot's dichotomy and teaches a primary lesson: indecision corrupts. Lot moves to Sodom, yet he tells the Sodomites to restrain their sin, thereby Lot straddles both sides of the fence: he has not chosen any one lifestyle. A person who cannot choose is more susceptible to corruption, as he has no firm grip on any philosophy. His mind is incapacitated. This uncommitted mind state allows him to accept any corrupt act, for his choices are not rooted in any opinion. "You came here to dwell [you value lusts], and will you now judge us [you also value righteousness]? Now we will deal worse with you than with them" is Torah's method of communicating Lot's precise flaw, and danger. Similarly we read:

Elijah approached all the people and said, "How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; and if it is Baal...follow him!" But the people answered him not a word (I Kings 18:21).

Elijah criticized the Jews for this same error, and the people could not respond: their minds were disengaged. Astonishingly, Elijah said that following Baal alone would be preferable to following it together with following God. How so? He meant that at least when following Baal alone, one has made a decision, even though it is wrong. Choosing wrongly is preferable to no choice at all, for at least the mind is engaged, and then can be taught its error. But a disengaged mind cannot learn. So too regarding Lot: "You came here to dwell, and will you now judge [us]? Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Lot's conflicting views rendered him susceptible to great harm.

Rabbi Israel Chait said as follows:

A psychologist once said that when analyzing a person, all parts of the personality must be scrutinized. He gave the following analogy: If the police said they would patrol all places except for one town, surely all the criminals would relocate to that unpatrolled town. The same is true with the human personality. If all but one part of the psyche is scrutinized, that one area is where one will vent all his emotions. (Pirkei Avos, chap. 4, pg 237)

Certainly, as only one part of Lot's mind was scrutinized, all other emotional areas sought satisfaction, expressed by "The townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old—all the people from everywhere—gathered about the house." This is a metaphor for all of Lot's other emotions—"young and old—all the people from everywhere"—which threatened him as he justified himself in one area. When we feel we are righteous with one act, we feel we need not scrutinize any other aspect of our personalities. This gives reign to all the remaining emotions. The Crusades and Nazis could perpetrate so much evil because they justified their religion and warped morality.

Now we will deal worse with you than with them.

Lot justified the rest of his lusts due to acting properly in one area; his overall self-image was thereby validated by offering hospitality. Now his remaining emotions would deal worse with him: "And they pressed hard against the person of Lot, and moved forward to break the door." Notice the identical word: Lot initially "pressed" (vayiftzar) the angels, and then the Sodomites (Lot's other lusts) "pressed" (vayiftzaru) Lot. Meaning, that Lot had to force morality upon himself (morality towards angels), this revealed his lustful leanings: his emotions (Sodomites) bearing down on him to the point that he would become fully corrupted. His instincts were about to "break through the door," to obliterate that small amount of good Lot attempted to keep preserved in his heart, "behind the door." That Lot required force to show hospitality means that his nature strongly opposed it, and flowed towards lusts. The same word is used as Torah describes 2 reactions from the same lustful urges.

But the angels stretched out their hands and pulled Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And the people who were at the entrance of the house, young and old, they struck with blindness, so that they were helpless to find the entrance.

The angels referring to absolute justice, cannot coexist with immorality, so they stretched their hands alone "outside" the door. But they did not intermingle in the same area as the Sodomites (good and evil do not coexist). God saved Lot, expressed as the angels saving him. Lot could not save himself. Perhaps Lot's salvation was not so much due to his level, but due to a stain on Abraham's reputation. Had Abraham's nephew Lot been destroyed, this would tarnish Abraham's identity and success at spreading monotheism. Thus, we read "Thus it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the plain and annihilated the cities where Lot dwelt, God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval" (Gen. 19:29).

That the Sodomites still sought to enter Lot's home after being stricken with blindness further supports this story as being a metaphor.

Summary

This story shares a lesson in psychology: how conflicted man attempts to engage in immorality while retaining some compartment in his mind of a just self-image. But such a compromise eventually fails. "God appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am El Shaddai, walk in My ways and be complete'" (Gen. 17:1). Following God requires "completeness"; partial Torah adherence (Lot) indicates a corruption and leads to failure. It is also notable that this verse (Gen. 17:1) refers to God's command to Abram of circumcision, a moderation of the sexual drive, in contrast to Lot's philosophy of indulging it.

This Torah story leaves us with a deeper appreciation for God, as He shares such detailed psychological knowledge with mankind. Torah means "guide," and to guide us towards perfection, God offers us guidance not only in intellectual matters, but also in studying and managing our emotions through human examples. ■



Although smitten with blindness, the Sodomites still try to gain entrance to Lot's "door."

Prayer

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT



The preamble to prayer is “know before whom you stand.” If one’s ideas concerning the One he is praying to are corrupt his prayers must be equally corrupt. I think it should be made clear that one of the cardinal principles of our faith is that the Creator lacks nothing, needs nothing, and obtains nothing from his creatures. God gains nothing from our worship of Him. We recite this in our prayer of Neila on Yom Kippur “And even if he (man) is righteous what [benefit] does he give you?” This is based on a verse in Job (35:7). Nachmanides expands on this topic in Deuteronomy (22:6) and states, “our words [of praise] and remembrances of his wonders are considered as nothingness and emptiness to Him”. He states unequivocally that all the mitzvos we do are only for our own benefit and give no benefit whatsoever to the Creator, “This is something that is agreed upon by all our Rabbis.”

Similarly Maimonides in his Guide states clearly that no change or emotion can be predicated of God (Guide book 1, chap.55). He further states that the gravest of sins is to have a wrong opinion of God (ibid. chap.36). One must never think that they, through their prayers, can produce some kind of affect in the Creator of the Universe. Such an idea is not only absurd it is blasphemous. He who believes such an idea would, in the words of the Rambam, “unconsciously at least incur the guilt of profanity and blasphemy.”

Rambam states in the Yad, Laws Concerning the Fundamentals of our Faith, Ch.1 Law 11, “and He does not change, for there is nothing that can cause change in Him. There does not exist in Him... anger or laughter, happiness or sadness...” It is patently clear from the Rambam and Ramban that we cannot say of the Creator that He is at one time sad, at another happy, at one time lonely, at another fulfilled. He, being perfect, does not change - ever. We cannot affect Him or change Him no matter what we do, whether we are righteous or evil, whether we pray or do not pray, whether we give charity or do not give charity, whether we repent or do not repent.

Two questions immediately come to mind: (1) If this is so, how can we pray to G-d and expect Him to change our destiny for the better, as Moses did when he prayed to G-d to forgive the Jews for the sin of the golden calf? (2) How do we understand certain verses in the prophets and certain statements from our Sages which seem to indicate the contrary? Before explaining the answers to the above questions I would like to state something very fundamental. When our Rishonim (early commentaries) teach us a principle of our faith we do not say that they did not know a particular statement of our Sages or verse of the Torah, but that they understood it differently than it appears to us at first sight. We say that they had the correct understanding of these statements and verses and

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that we are deficient in our own understanding of them. We do not derive our own principles from these statements or verses and reject the ideas of our Rishonim. This is what is known as “emunat chachomim,” faith in our Torah scholars. If we abandon the above principle, we are destined to fail. One may ask as follows: “if G-d does not need our prayers, see the Gemara Yoma 38a which states, ‘everything which G-d created was only for His own honor and purpose (Proverbs 16:4).’” If one would hear of someone who had children for the sole purpose of having them praise him when they reached the age of four, what would one think of such a person? Would one not think he is doubly imperfect, because he is overcome by his desire and need for prayer, and because he is moved by the praise of a four year old? How can we ascribe to G-d, Heaven forbid, such imperfection?

Let us take the statement of our Sages “why did G-d make our Patriarchs and Matriarchs childless? Because G-d desires the prayers of the righteous (Yevamos 64a)”. What would we think of someone who tormented another person so that they turn to him for help? Would we not regard him as self-seeking and even vicious? How then can we ascribe such an imperfection, Heaven forbid, to the Creator? Is it not obvious that these words of our Sages are not to be taken literally, but that they are metaphors that contain a hidden idea, a deeper meaning which we must search for?

It is for this reason the author of the Siddur Avodas Halev, states in his introduction, “the agadic statements according to their outward appearances without understanding their deep meaning are prone to cause the blind to go astray on the way and to lead them to darkness and not light (Otzar Hatefillos p.20)”. In this way he explains Rabbi Joshua Ben Levi’s statement in Masechet Sofrim, “Those who write agadic statements have no place in the world to come.” (It should be understood that this was at a time when we were prohibited to write the Oral Law).

Why do we pray if we cannot change G-d or exercise any influence over Him? The answer is that the change that takes place through tefillah is not in G-d, but in ourselves. It is the same changeless G-d who treats the wicked one way and the righteous another way, the person who repents one way and the one who refuses to repent another way, the one who prays one way and the one who does not pray another way. Rambam gives an analogy. The same fire makes one thing black, another white, one thing hard, another soft. The change occurs not because the fire is different but because the objects that come in contact with it are different. Prayer changes man in three ways. First, the change that takes place in man when he realizes that he is standing before the Creator of the universe. This comes under the term Amidah from the verse in Genesis 19:27 regarding Abraham’s prayer. The second is the change that takes place in man when he thinks through and organizes his priorities in life. The word Tefillah comes from the word “peelayle” which means to judge, as the above author in the Otzar Hatefillos says, “to clarify the thoughts that occur in the heart in a confused manner”. This is derived from the second term for Tefillah “sichah” from Genesis 24:63 regarding Issac’s prayer. The third change takes place when man, through his free will and creativity, presents before G-d an alternative life style, a change in his or her plans, as Hannah did when she stated to G-d (Samuel 1:11) “If you will... give to your handmaid a man child then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life.” This is derived from the third term for prayer, “pegiah” from Genesis 28:11 regarding Jacob’s prayer. Tefillah is the great medium, which G-d gave to man by means of which he can change himself. He can then establish a new destiny for himself in life and a new relationship with G-d. It is not the Creator that changes. Man does not influence the Creator as a defendant influences a human judge who has emotions and is subject to change. It is man himself who is changed. Once he has changed the same immutable Creator relates to him in a different way.

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Anyone who thinks that through his prayer he effectuates a change in G-d denies the third principle of our faith, which we recite every day, that G-d is not physical and does not have any physical attributes. This means He is in no way to be equated with any of His creation whether inanimate or animate. The idea that man can cause a change in the Creator is an attempt to project onto G-d human qualities. This is strictly forbidden. As Maimonides quotes in the third principle of faith, "And to whom can you liken Me sayeth the Holy One (Isaiah 40:18,25)". Far be it from G-d to be like His creatures who because of their imperfection are subject to change for better or for worse. Rambam makes it clear that all statements in the Torah that imply otherwise are metaphors used by the Torah to teach us some idea and are not to be taken literally (Yad ibid Law 12).

Now let us examine one of the statements of our Sages. "Why were our Patriarchs and Matriarchs childless? Because G-d desires the prayers of the righteous (Yevamos 64a)." Let us first examine the last half of this statement, "G-d desires the prayers of the righteous." Our Sages are teaching that the prayers of the righteous are qualitatively differentiated from the prayers of the ordinary person; that the righteous, because their knowledge of G-d is different and their knowledge of prayer is different, in their act of praying fulfill the potential of man that G-d has given him through prayer. As Rambam says regarding the love of G-d, one's love of G-d cannot exceed his knowledge of G-d (Laws of Repentance, Ch. 10 Law 6). So too in prayer one's potential for prayer cannot be realized in excess of his knowledge and perfection. Thus only the righteous truly fulfill G-d's will concerning prayer. The Rabbis do not mean, Heaven forbid the notion, that G-d, the Creator of the universe, is in want or in a state of loneliness waiting for some kind of satisfaction that he will receive when His creatures praise Him or ask Him for something. How can we think that man could praise G-d in any manner that would be satisfactory to Him, when our teacher Moses, the greatest of our species, was unable to comprehend G-d Himself in any way, even through prophecy, as it is written "because man cannot see Me and live (Exodus 33:20)", and could understand no more than G-d's actions? Even the praise of a four year old of the greatest human being would be closer to reality than our praise of G-d since the four year old at least perceives something about the one he is praising. It is thus patently clear as Ramban states, that all our praise are as "nothingness and emptiness to Him."

The above statement of our Sages was not meant to indicate that G-d is seeking some satisfaction, only that G-d's will, as expressed in His creation is being fulfilled. Whether His creation is fulfilled or not gives no satisfaction or sadness to Him. Its purpose is to provide man with the opportunity to approach G-d. In giving man free will G-d made it possible for him to fulfill his potential, one of the methods being

through the medium of prayer. This is accomplished on the highest level only by the righteous not the ordinary person whose ideas of G-d and prayer are distorted. Our Sages are teaching an important idea, that the ignoramus fails to realize his potential not only in Torah, but in prayer as well.

The first half of this statement of our Sages also teaches us an important concept. Our Sages wonder why our Patriarchs and Matriarchs were childless. Were they not righteous? The answer is that sometimes G-d puts man in a state of want not because he has sinned, but in order that he may have the opportunity to perfect himself. Our Patriarchs and Matriarchs were answered through their prayers. In addition they achieved thereby a higher degree of perfection. This teaches us the great value of prayer since we usually only think of prayer as a means to obtain something we want and do not realize that the greatest benefit may result from the perfection we receive through the act of praying itself.

Now consider how in Tractate Yevamos, our Sages through the medium of a metaphor explained all this in the few short words, "The Holy One blessed be He, longs to hear the prayer of the righteous".

I of course cannot expound on every statement of our Sages in this article, nor do I claim to understand every one of their statements. I only wish to stress how important caution is when approaching a statement of our Sages, and how careful we must be not to grasp at the first idea, which comes to our minds, especially where such an idea contradicts the basic premises of our faith.

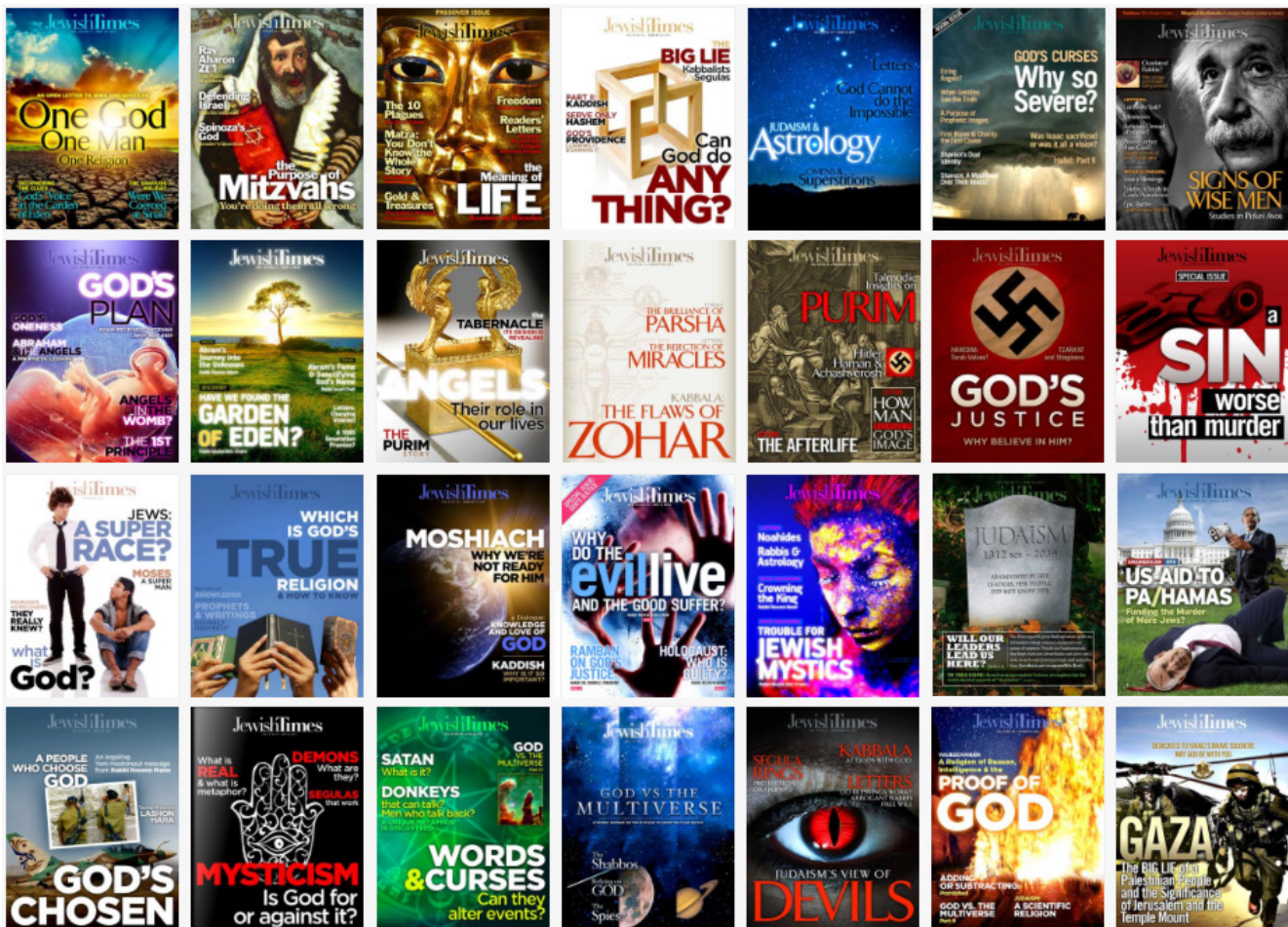
In closing let me explain what is meant by Isaiah 43:7, "And everyone that is called by my name I have created for my Glory." The Radak comments: "Israel, who believes in Me, I have created for my Honor, so that they spread My Glory to all the people." Radak is saying that G-d's compassion and kindness is not limited to the nation of Israel, but includes all of mankind. It is incumbent upon Israel to be concerned about all of humanity as well as themselves, and to teach all of mankind the true ideas of Torah. This is stated in Isaiah 2:2,3 and elsewhere throughout the Prophets. It is G-d's will that all of mankind should have the opportunity to live according to the Torah way of life. This is what the verse is teaching, not that G-d, Heaven forbid the notion, is seeking His own glorification through human recognition.

We should understand Proverbs 16:4 mentioned above in a like manner. It is for our benefit that we recognize G-d's Glory, not for His.

May we live to see the day when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9). (CONT. ON PAGE 13)

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CONDÉ NAST



Addendum I

Due to several requests, I submit the following addendum to my article on prayer:

I did not wish to imply that God does not answer prayers. The purpose of my article was to make it clear that the very essence of prayer is the correct idea of God. "Know before whom you stand," is the preamble to prayer. If one has an erroneous idea of God all his prayers are worthless. If, for instance, one believes God has emotions and that his prayers are affecting these emotions, he is not praying to God. Since God is one He has no emotions. Also since God is perfect He cannot be affected by man. Thus in the above example, the individual is not praying to God but to a figment of his imagination. The fact that God does not change does not mean He doesn't listen to or answer our prayers. God has endowed us with the ability and the right to place our requests before Him. When we turn to God it is we who change and thereby warrant that the unchangeable Creator of the universe hear our prayers since He is one who listens to prayer. This may seem like a mere subtlety but it is of the greatest importance since the wrong idea of God totally invalidates our prayers, indeed, even all our mitzvot. As God's wisdom is not the same as ours we have no way of knowing whether or not He will answer our prayers. Even a person as great as our teacher Moses could not know this. Thus the Talmud says that we should not feel confident that God will answer our prayers. We can only be assured that He listens to our prayers. One should nevertheless turn to God in all his needs. It should be noted that the act of prayer is one of the great mediums through which man rises to a higher level. His fate will thus be changed for the better even if his particular request is not answered. He may indeed reap a far greater reward through prayer itself than he anticipates through the answer to his request.

Addendum II

One may and should pray for another person insofar as one has sincere concern about their well-being. It is nevertheless the prayer of the sick person himself, which is of the greatest value. This is stated in the Torah, Genesis 21:17, "And God listened to the voice of the lad..." Even though Ishmael's mother Hagar prayed for him, God listened to Ishmael's prayer over that of his mother's. Rashi comments: "From here we derive that the prayer of the sick person himself is superior to the prayer of others, and it is prior in terms of being accepted by God."

We must pray for Israel because since Sinai, the fate of each Jew is inextricably bound with that of every other Jew. No Jew can escape this. In praying for Israel, we are ipso facto praying for ourselves. There is a higher level of praying for Israel and concern for Klal Yisroel, but this is only for those few who have been fortunate enough to reach a truly high level of serving God. Nevertheless, we must all aspire to reach that level. ■





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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" (Eccl. 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.

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Lot attempts to deter the Sodomites from their evil

Virtue of Vengeance

Rabbi Reuven Mann

Parshas VaYeira, contains the account of the destruction of the wicked cities of Sodom and Amorah. As the Rambam explains in Hilchot Teshuva, Hashem judges nations as well as individuals, and if their sinfulness reaches a certain extent, they are sentenced for execution.

Rambam, proceeds to say, that the manner in which G-d makes His determination of innocence or guilt, are beyond man's capacity to comprehend. Our grasp of the situation is superficial, and only Hashem can see the real nature of humans; and knows how to weigh the good against the evil. Still, it is important to pay careful attention to this Biblical portion, in order to glean whatever insights may emerge from careful study.

In Bereishis 18:20-21, Hashem says,

"Because the outcry of Sodom and Amorah has become great, and because their sin has been very grave. I will descend and see; if they act in accordance with its outcry which has come to me—then destruction! And if not, I will know."

The Gemara in Sanhedrin 109a, discusses the matter. It explains—that the "outcry" of

Sodom, which reached Hashem—was that of a young girl, who committed the "sin" of hiding bread in a pitcher, to secretly give it to a poor hungry stranger. When her "crime" was discovered, she was smeared with honey and placed upon a fence, to suffer a gruesome death, as the bees came and assaulted her. This, they say, was the outcry which Hashem heard.

The cities of Sodom and Amorah, were blessed with vast and abundant resources. However, this did not engender a sense of humbleness and gratitude. Nor any desire, to share their bounty with others. (This should be contrasted with the attitude of Moshe—who in anticipation of the journey to the promised land—beseeched his father-in-law Yitro, to join with the Jews; and partake with them, of the good that Hashem had promised them.)

The inhabitants of Sodom and Amorah, deemed themselves to be superior and were absolutely determined not to allow any strangers to partake of "their" riches. They were fearful that outsiders might be attracted to their territory, and partake of its wealth. They therefore, went to extreme degrees of cruelty, in order to discourage unwanted foreigners.

The Torah depicts Hashem as "descending" to the world, in order to determine if their sinfulness had reached the point of no return. The Rabbis illustrated the nature of the wickedness—with the story of the cruel punishment of a little girl—who out of compassion, had tried to give some bread to a needy stranger. The manner of death inflicted upon her, was especially gruesome and shocking. What does it mean?

Even cruel people, have certain limits. Most people, even fearsome ones, have an innate sympathy for little children and are averse to harming them. However, the sadism of Sodom was so great that it broke down all natural barriers to its expression—even against helpless children. The Sodomites, had uprooted all shreds of mercy from their psyches, and felt fully justified in their actions.

The Sodomites viewed all outsiders as evil, and any action as justified to prevent them from treading on their turf. They developed a belief system—which justified their conduct—and allowed no room for deviation; even for the benefit of an innocent little child. The kid had committed the worst "sin", mercy for an outsider; and there could be no tolerance for this. So too, any German, who extended a helping hand to a Jew—even in

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)



Lot's wife disobeys the angels and becomes a pillar of salt

the most trivial manner—could face death, for he had committed the ultimate crime.

Hashem saw that the wickedness had reach the point, where it was unlimited and fully rationalized; and He knew it was beyond rectification. This helps us to understand the horrible character of the Nazis. They had uprooted any vestige of compassion for Jews, and other imagined enemies—and subjected them to the most horrendous tortures imaginable—which they carried out with abundant glee.

The Nazis, like the Sodomites, had no compunctions about afflicting little children. Rabbi Soloveitchik points out, that they had a particular affinity for violence against Jewish infants. And they were so locked in to their treacherous ideology, that they could not be brought to recognize the corruption of their ways. Even the Nazis who were brought to justice, showed not a scintilla of remorse. They needed to be destroyed.

The Rabbis say, that vengeance is great; because the verse affirms that, “Hashem is a G-d of Nekama” (revenge). This was manifested in Hashem’s “retaliation” against Sodom. As the Torah states, in Bereishis 19:24-25:

“Now, Hashem had caused sulfur and fire to rain upon Sodom and Amorah, from Hashem out of Heaven. He overturned these cities and the entire plain, with all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the soil.”

In the punishment of Sodom, cruelty and mercy operated side-by-side. Compassion was extended to Lot, his wife and his children; all of whom were saved because of his merit. (Lot’s wife became caught up in the evil of Sodom, when she violated the angel’s injunction not to look back.) But the Wrath of G-d was poured out against the wicked cities and their inhabitants.

The prevailing contemporary attitudes toward punishment of the wicked, differ from those of the Torah. The notion of vengeance evokes negative connotations in the contemporary mindset. Indeed, we are commanded by the Torah, to not take revenge against those who offend us.

However, that prohibition applies with regard to personal insults and affronts. In those instances, we should not hate and seek to humiliate the offender, but to confront him in a calm manner and inform him of his trespass. If he acknowledges it and apologizes, we should accept it and forgive him.

However, the case of Sodom and the Nazis, is that of objective evil. When the wicked triumph, great suffering is brought upon untold innocents; and the Name of Hashem is desecrated.

The Torah points out for us, that Hashem intervenes, to bring justice to grievous sinners; who in their arrogance, practice extreme cruelty against innocent victims, including children. Whoever destroys them, effectuates a great salvation for mankind, and emulates the ways of Hashem. May we strive to fight the battle against the wicked individuals and nations, who seek to enslave mankind with their cruel and murderous ideologies. In doing so, we fulfill a significant aspect of the mission of the Jewish People.

Shabbat Shalom. Jewish weakness—when the Jews couldn’t or wouldn’t fight back—is over. This is the time when Jews need to confront their enemies and fight back. This will increase the security and well-being of Jews everywhere, and sanctify the Name of Hashem in the world.

Shabbat Shalom ■

Marriage and Love

Rabbi Reuven Mann

This week's Parsha, Chayei Sara, begins with the death of our first Matriarch. According to the Rabbinic tradition, she played a vital role in the mission of Avraham. Their joint goal, was to wean people from the religion of idolatry—and instruct them in recognition of the true G-d—and the correct way to serve Him.

In this endeavor, say the Rabbis, Avraham influenced the men and Sara was Mekarevet (drew close) the women. Sara made her own significant contributions to the Jewish way of life. She exemplified the virtue of modesty, which is not limited to matters of attire. This virtue also includes, the ideal of being “behind the scenes” and outside of the limelight. The public role was assumed by Avraham. Yet, this private role, in no way deterred Sara from contributing her skills to the Abrahamic movement.

When the messengers of Hashem inquired, where she was; Avraham simply replied, “she is in the tent.” That brief statement, did not just indicate her physical location, but her mode of existence. She performed great deeds—from the standpoint of anonymity—establishing the ideal of serving Hashem out of love, without any need for public recognition.

Sara was not passive, when it came to expressing her opinion on significant matters. It was her idea, to give her handmaiden Hagar, as a wife to Avraham; so that she might bear him a child. When Hagar became haughty—as a result of becoming pregnant—Sara protested, and put her servant in her place.

Later, after the birth of Yitzchak, she noticed that Ishmael displayed a mocking attitude; which posed problems for the future of the Abrahamic movement. Sara insisted, that Ishmael and his mother Hagar, be driven from Avraham's house; to make it clear, that he was not the legitimate spiritual-heir, of Avraham.

Sara's assertion, was very grievous to Avraham, and he did not want to ‘go through with it’. Whereupon, Hashem intervened, and directed Avraham—“to listen to all that Sara tells you”—in this matter. These are just a few examples of the great contributions, that were rendered by Sara Imeinu (our mother).

The rest of Chayei Sara, is devoted to the lengthy account of Eliezer—Eved Avraham's (servant of Avraham's)—search, for a wife for Yitzchak. The question arises, why did Avraham only deal with this matter after the death of Sara? And why is the story of Yitzchak's marriage, included in the same Parsha, which describes the death of Sara?

The Torah tells us, in Bereishis 24:63, that “Yitzchak went into the field to pray before evening, and lifted his eyes and saw, suddenly the camels (of Eliezer's caravan, which bore Rivka) were approaching.” Eliezer, then proceeded to communicate to him, everything that had taken place in his encounter with Rivka and her family.

The Torah, in Bereishis 24:67, then recounts the story of his marriage. “And Yitzchak brought her to the tent of his mother, Sara, and he took Rivkah (in marriage) and she became his wife, and he loved her; and thus was Yitzchak consoled, after his mother.”

This verse raises some questions. First of all, it seems redundant to say, “he took Rivkah (in marriage) and she became his wife”. Moreover, why did he take her into the tent, of his mother Sara? And, why is it necessary to say, “that he loved her”? It seems like this Pasuk conveys a lot of superfluous information.

In my opinion, the Torah is explaining why—it was just at this time—that Avraham initiated the search for a wife for Yitzchak. It was directly connected to the death of Sara, which explains why it is in this Parsha.

We can deduce, that there was an especially close connection, between Yitzchak and his righteous mother. While she was alive, Yitzchak was completely absorbed in learning Torah, and expanding the dimensions of the Abrahamic system; for his soul was completely at peace. It wasn't the right time to interrupt his studies and take a wife.

However, everything changed with the death of Sara; which put him in a state of mourning. Avraham realized—that the dimension of unhappiness Yitzchak now experienced—detracted from his ability, to pour all of his energy into intellectual and spiritual activities.

It was clear to Avraham, that the time had come to find a wife for his son who could fill the void left by the death of Sara. He sent Eliezer, who understood the situation, and knew exactly what kind of woman to look for. With the assistance of Divine Providence, he discovered Rivka, who had the type of Midot (character traits), which reflected the perfection of Sara. Yitzchak brought her, “into the tent of Sara”, to renew the type of Bayit (home) that his mother had established.

It is moreover, not redundant to say, that “he married her and she became his wife”. Marriage creates the legal framework in which the relationship can develop; but one becomes a spouse to another, by virtue of how he interacts with his partner. It is the kindness, sensitivity and concern—that the couple display toward each other—that elevates them to the status of husband and wife.

Additionally, the verse tells us—that it was only after they were married, that he loved her. This goes contrary to contemporary romantic notions, in which love comes first and then marriage. Sadly, that is not true love—only attraction; which doesn't last very long. True love, is based on appreciation of the genuine character and spiritual qualities of the “significant other”. It comes into play, only after the marriage, and is a result of the actual experience of living and growing together.

One should not choose a spouse blindly, but on the basis of a solid assessment. Rather they should seek a prospective mate—who possesses virtues that will be consequential to a harmonious relationship—on every relevant level; and which will enable the union to grow and flourish, and lead to a state of true love. This condition begins to take hold, only after the marriage; when the couple interact in the appropriate manner, and experience the joy of living a meaningful life, together. May we merit to attain it.

Shabbat Shalom. ■

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